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It's never too late to reconnect with alma mater

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It's never too late to reconnect with alma mater

IT HAD BEEN A LIFETIME since his last visit.

Robert H. Ayers, a 1939 Furman graduate, had stayed away from alma mater for 71 years because of an incident during his junior year involving the dismissal of his favorite professor, Herbert Gezork.

In 1938 Gezork, a religion professor, and several other faculty members were asked to leave the university because of concerns among members of the board of trustees about supposedly “heretical” comments they had made in class. This questioning of professors’ religious teachings had happened at Furman before; just two years earlier, Edwin McNeill Poteat, one of the school’s former presidents who had returned to the faculty in 1934, faced similar attacks from influential South Carolina Baptists, who at the time elected the members of the board.

Young Ayers believed that the treatment of the professors was unjust. He says Gezork was known for “letting the students make proclamations. Instead of indoctrinating us with his ideas, he would pose a question back to us. He hardly ever told us what he thought. He wasn’t teaching us dogma, he was just teaching. He was a wonderful professor.”

Ayers protested the firings, to the point that he was threatened with expulsion if he did not stop. He says he didn’t stop, but he wasn’t expelled and was allowed to complete his degree. The incident left a sour taste, however, and he chose to stay away from Furman after his graduation.

He went on to Yale University Divinity School, earned a Master of Divinity degree, and became an ordained American Baptist minister. His ordination sermon was preached by H. Richard Niebuhr, the brother of noted theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, one of Ayers’ theological idols.

After a few years in full-time ministry, Ayers was contacted by B. David Napier,

chair of the religion department at the University of Georgia, and invited to join the school’s religion faculty. Ayers accepted and soon became chair of the department. He went on to earn a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University, to chair both the religion and philosophy departments at Georgia, and to serve as the university’s chaplain. He remained at Georgia until 1990, when he retired as professor emeritus of religion and philosophy.

Still, even though he wound up living just 90 miles from Greenville and Furman, Ayers had never returned to the Furman campus. But after *Furman* magazine published a story about the Gezork incident in 2003, Ayers wrote a lengthy note that included vivid recollections about what he called the “dark days.”

The note also revealed that even though he had not been on campus since his graduation, he had always kept a watchful eye on alma mater. “I must say that I am pleased that for many years Furman has had excellent leadership and has fully recovered from those early dark days,” he wrote. “I am happy that it is independent, possesses such a superb faculty and student body, and enjoys such an outstanding reputation in the academic world.”

Yet he continued to maintain his distance — until last year. In September, he received the religion department’s newsletter that included faculty and student updates, alumni news, and information on programs and endowments. Suddenly he realized he wanted to see for himself how things had changed and progressed on campus.

He called Tom Triplitt, director of the Alumni Association, to say he wanted to attend President Smolla’s inauguration in October and



to stick around for Homecoming. Triplitt and his staff made arrangements for Ayers to have his own golf cart to use on campus. In the end, Ayers was so impressed with what he saw and with the people he met that he decided it was time to forgive the university for its transgressions.

He did so in a most generous way. He has donated \$150,000 to endow a lecture series in philosophy and theology, which will be named for him and his late wife, Mary Frances Cooley Ayers '43.

Talk to Robert Ayers today and you’d never know he’d taken a 71-year break from Furman. Proudly sporting a Bell Tower lapel pin and displaying two Furman decals on the back of his car, the 93-year-old says he is happy to claim his well-earned status as a proud graduate of the “Harvard of the South.”

— STEPHANIE SPOTTSWOOD SCURLOCK

The author, a 2000 graduate, is a development officer at Furman.