Oral History Interview of Dr. Boyd Rist

Date of Interview: June 15, 2011

Location of Interview: Recording Studio of the Student Radio Station, 90.9 The Light

Name of Interviewee: Dr. Boyd Rist

Name of Interviewers: Lowell Walters, Dr. Cline Hall

Interview Length: (1:42:02)

Notes:

Walters: (0:01) Welcome to this interview in the oral history project of the Liberty university archives. This interview is being conducted on June 15, 2011. Today we’re interviewing Dr. Boyd Rist. My name is Lowell Walters and I’ll be conducting the interview today along with Dr. Cline Hall, greetings Dr. Hall.

Hall: (00:21) Good afternoon.

Walters: (0:22) and Greetings Dr. Rist.

Rist: (0:23) Hello, good afternoon to both of you.

Walters: (0:26) Well as we get started here we always like to ask about the general biographical information of the individuals. So could you give us your date of birth and your place of growing up and…?

Rist: (0:38) Yes

Walters: (0:38) your childhood history so to speak

Rist: (0:39) I will do that. I was born on February 7, 1946 in Royal, South Dakota. In fact our home town is Centerville, South Dakota; a small farming community in the southeastern part of the state, population of the town around 1,000. My parents owned a grain farm and they also raised primarily cattle and hogs and therefore my informative years were spent in all the those things associated with the tasks of farming. The community that I grew up that actually my wife Norma Jean and I grew up in, was a close knit community as you can expect, everybody knew everybody. I grew up with lots of Aunts and Uncles around and even more cousins, so it was in many was a very idyllic childhood. In terms of the ethnic background of the community it was primarily German and Scandinavian and by Scandinavian I mean largely Norwegian. It was an area in South Dakota the southeastern part of the state that was really settled in last two decades of the 19th century.
Walters: (1:55) I see. And then were you were you reared a Christian or?

Rist: (1:59) Yes. My little bit about my parents; my father Clifford as I said was a farmer, he was the German part of the my ancestry. My mother Mildred Oakland came from a large Norwegian family. They worked hard they were honest in all their dealings and they did set a strong example for me in terms of moral standards. I did grow up in a Christian home I was also blessed to meet my future wife Norma Jean in our hometown. We were the provable high school sweethearts; she was the daughter of Dr. Miren and Audrey [Cromenga], her father was a large animal veterinarian in our community. Her parents were strong leaders in the community and widely respected and they along with my parents were very powerful personal and spiritual influences. Both my parents were Christians we were members of the verily large and conservative Lutheran church in Centerville, and by lifestyle and by precept they really taught me the truths of the bible. So it was quite natural for me to grow up that I recognized early on my need for a personal savior and to accept that personal savior. I really grew up never struggling with doubt never having that crisis of faith that supposedly lots of people do today that caused me to question the cardinal truths of Christianity, and I’m grateful for that.

Hall: (3:39) In these early years did you have any ambitions about what you wanted to do in your life as a child?

Rist: (3:45) I thought of lots of things I would say initially teaching in a college or university setting didn’t come to mind first. I thought at various times about business I thought about the law but gradually through experiences and undergraduate and then thinking about what I wanted to do after getting my bachelors degree I begin to slowly gravitate towards graduate study and history, and that led ultimately to a career in teaching in the college and a university setting.

Hall: (4:21) Now graduating from high school over there where did you attend college?

Rist: (4:25) As an undergraduate the University of South Dakota in Vermillion, South Dakota about twenty three miles from our hometown; majored in Government as an undergraduate. After earning my bachelors degree and after Norma Jean and I were married in 1968 we moved to the twin cities in Neighboring, Minnesota. I earned my masters degree in history; I made the shift then to history at the graduate level. I was interested particularly in constitutional history, at that point studied under Dr. Paul Murphy who was an imminent constitutional historian at the University of Minnesota. Then after coming to Liberty I began my doctrinal studies at the University of Virginia, again in history. I studied under Dr. Merrill Peterson a noted Jeffersonian scholar and earned my doctorate at the university in 1985.

Walters: (5:28) Well then was Liberty your first appointment then after that?

Rist: (5:33) I taught after earning my masters degree at the University of Virginia, I taught in a community college for a year in Brainerd Minnesota, which is in the late country in the central part of the state. And we were at that time actually before that time we had begun to hear the old
time gospel hour on television, we had begun to hear about this new college that had been established in Lynchburg and we. The more we heard about it the more intrigued we became, and began to think about is this where the Lord would have us.

Hall: (6:10) So you had some knowledge, did you say you was masters degree in Charlottesville of course.

Rist: (6:17) Masters at in the University of Minnesota.

Hall: (6:19) Oh Minnesota, ok excuse me. Your right but.

Rist: (6:21) We began to watch the old time gospel hour on a local station in the twin cities in the early 1970’s. And we liked Dr. Falwell’s preaching we liked the message, and then we began to hear as part of the program about this new college that had been started in 1971, Lynchburg Baptist College at that time. And Dr. Falwell was talking about a Christian liberal arts college that would be regionally accredited and all of those aspects of what was happening; the message he was preaching, the kind of school he talked about and was founding began to draw us closer to a decision. If there’s a position at Liberty we ought to at least explore it.

Walters: (7:15) And so then when did you come to Charlottesville? The school here Liberty was founded in ’71 so then?

Rist: (7:20) ’71. Well we came to Lynchburg we in fact found out there was an opening in history early in 1973. And so we went through the application process, we were invited to come for an interview in the summer of 1973. Had that interview we were offered I was offered a contract to teach in the history department, there were only two of us full time at that point. And after a lot of prayer and a lot of thinking about whether this was where the Lord would have us to come, we made that decision to move to Lynchburg and establish ourselves here. And it was actually after we got here that I began the process of applying for the PhD program at the University of Virginia. And I as recall started work within a couple years of beginning teaching here at Liberty.

Walters: (8:19) Can you expand on your interview situation? Who interviewed you, what sort of things they asked at that time, and what was it?

Rist: (8:23) Well it was in many ways a very, very informal interview. There wasn’t a departmental aspect to it at all, because there really wasn’t a history department and it was also interesting because at the time we came Dr. Towns who had been co-founder of the institution, and he was the person I had largely corresponded with all during the winter and spring months. Was leaving the college and he was going back to his home state of Georgia and planning to work with and even establish another college. So he was actually in the process of leaving when we got here. And Dr. Pierre Guillerm who had helped Dr. Falwell establish the academy in 1967 I believe, was returning to the college as the chief administrative officer so we interacted
with him. Dr. J.G. Henry had become vice president for academic affairs, we interviewed with him and that was about the extent of it really. And shortly after we returned to Minnesota, we got the letter offering us a contract and it wasn’t long after that we were packing and getting ready to move to Virginia.

Walters: (9:49) Now it sounds like you were proactive on your side of sending resumes and letters or vitas or did they post the position and you applied quickly?

Rist: (9:58) No posted position in fact it was Norma Jean who suggested to me you know you really ought to wait you know we’ve been thinking about this for awhile you ought to see if there’s any positions. So initially I just sent a letter of inquiry as to whether there was a position, and when the answer to that was positive we saw that as a sign that we then needed to take the next step. Then things followed in pretty orderly and in a logical progression.

Hall: (10:28) So you came basically of course came on faculty, was at the very beginning was you chairmen of the Social Science division?

Rist: (10:36) Very shortly after I was appointed initially just as an assistant professor of history, then there was a need for administrative leadership. Liberty at the time was organized in academic divisions. We really didn’t have departments and such but they were gradually added over the next several years. And Dr. Henry and I hit it off, in fact one of the very first things he asked me to do when we got to Lynchburg this was a month or six weeks before classes began. He was in the process of evaluating transcripts of applicants for the university, students the college at that time. And so he asked me to come in would I help him with transcript evaluation, and so I did that for really two or three weeks, a pretty intense activity and that was very much on the job training but it was a good learning experience. Taught me a lot about the kinds of students we were attracting at the time and just how to look at a transcript and someone who had previous college credit and what we could accept and what we couldn’t accept and so on.

Hall: (11:53) Now the division of Social Science. What are the other divisions? Can you recall?

Rist: (11:59) Well we had the division of Religion of course, we had a division of Natural Science’s, we had a division of Music, a division of Education, and I think that was about it, at least initially.

Hall: (12:17) Now what all encompassed the Social Sciences?

Rist: (12:20) Social Sciences initially was verily limited, we had the history major, we had a major in psychology, we offered a few courses in sociology. Within a couple of years we established a government major, and that pretty much was it as far as the Social Sciences division for a good length of time.

Hall: (12:45) And how many faculty was involved in that?
Rist: (12:49) In that entire division?

Hall: (12:50) Yeah. In the division

Rist: (12:51) Probably at the most nine or ten. Because when we came the entire full time faculty of the college was about thirty.

Hall: (13:01) But in the history area you say there were two is that right?

Rist: (13:04) I mean counting myself. The other one was Dr. Douglas John; he had his doctorate, he was a European historian. I was the American historian, and of course at that time I just had my master’s degree.

Walters: (13:19) And then what was your faculty teaching load like?

Rist: (13:22) Liberty has always emphasized that it was a teaching institution, so our teaching load has historically and it was at that time larger than most colleges and universities. I taught fifteen hours every semester, five three hour courses. In fact I like to tell people that during my first two years at Liberty I taught fifteen separate preparations in history, which was a bit crazy but we did it. There were some value in being a generalist in those days, you had to be. So I taught all the surveys and American history, western civ. [civilizations] almost all of the upper level courses in American history and I even taught some of the upper level European history courses that Dr. John for one reason or another was unable to teach.

Hall: (14:21) So when was the next influx of history teachers and I say after this original two?

Rist: (14:31) Well really the I would date the and I’ve said this in other context, I would date the creation of a full blown history department from some key hires that we made in 1977 and 1978. And I know that Dr. Hall will remember this very clearly because he was one of those hires. We also hired Dr. Mark Steinhoff at that time and we hired, a year later, Dr. Bill Matheny whose PhD was in history. Initially we didn’t get him a great deal because he was doing much teaching for missions in the division of Religion but gradually he came over to the department. And that was really the first time we were able to offer a full blown array of courses we revamped the curriculum in significant ways and then gradually we were able to add faculty over the years but 1977, ’78 was a major turning point for the history department.

Walters: (15:36) And so then church history was always on the religion side?

Rist: (15:40) Church history was taught in two places. There was a undergraduate level course taught in the division of religion, and then there were in the seminary various church history type courses. And I know people sometimes ask well why wasn’t all the history taught in the history department, you know is there something like church history and secular history. And I don’t quite see things that way. In many respects I think the teaching of church history particularly in the seminary was taught in that venue because it was not uncommon for seminary’s to have a
division of church history, and we had Dr. Carl Diemer, a person with that particular specialization. And so it made good sense for those courses to be taught there, and the other part of it it seems to me is that all though we sometimes call the other history secular history the truth of the matter is that whether you’re teaching the reformation or the civil war or the revolution, our faculty teach history from a Christian perspective a Christian orientation and so there isn’t that sharp demarcation that you would find in some colleges and universities between secular and sacred history.

**Walters:** (17:11) So the worldview is already throughout the construction.

**Rist:** (17:15) Right, it’s across the curriculum

**Walters:** (17:18) You were you said you had come here with a masters degree and then you went to UVA (University of Virginia), that brings up how was professional development and continuing education dealt with in those days? Was that surely out of your own pocket or did the university just give you time off?

**Rist:** (17:36) Well, largely. If you wanted to stay involved and engaged professionally either by being a part of a professional organization in your discipline or by attending professional meetings the support of the university was minimal. So if you were serious about it you understood that most of the cost of attending meetings, travel, etcetera would be out of your own pocket. There was minimal and I do mean very minimal support for professional development for quite a number of years, not just in the history department but across the university. Same would be true for things like scholarly research, if you wanted to do academic research to take again our discipline history that involved the travel to an archive someplace and extended time away from the university. There really was not institutional support for that, you had to do that on your own and that was just understood. We always had a number of faculty who wrote and published in areas that didn’t require really physically leaving the campus and doing study and research in an archive or a university library setting. It would be on topics of practical or applied Christianity and those folks of course published on a regular basis, but academic publishing verses that kind of publishing are two very different things.

**Walters:** (19:19) Now how has that evolved over the years? I mean this is one of those questions where we’ll get into how you’re position evolved, but since we’re on the topic how has that evolved over the years?

**Rist:** (19:29) Well there’s a great deal more of financial support for professional development today. You could of course poll the faculty and I’m sure you would find that it’s never enough, but I’ve got a little bit of a different historical perspective and people like Dr. Hall, who has been here for a long time would share that perspective. We have come a long way, we now can support most faculty who want to go to professional meetings have professional memberships to a significant degree, to attend those meetings. We also find that faculty and departments frequently will trade off. This year we’ll support this faculty member to go to a particular
meeting and next year we’ll support another one, so that most of the people, who really have a desire to stay engaged in that way, now have an opportunity not only to do so but have a significant portion of that expense met by the university.

**Walters:** (20:35) And did that come about by the general prosperity and growth of the university?

**Rist:** (20:41) I think so. I think as the university grew and prospered, more money was allocated. As we went through the budget process year after year we made a case for why that was important, and gradually that case was recognized and it was recognized in a tangible way through the budget process.

**Hall:** (21:02) Since you were here from the very beginning, philosophically was there any college that Liberty sort of patterned themselves after? I’m thinking in terms of Bob Jones, or Tennessee Temple, or is there any connection you see there philosophically?

**Rist:** (21:17) Well of course there’s always the famous statement Dr. Falwell made repeatedly that we wanted to become for evangelical young people what Brigham Young was for Mormons and Norte Dame was for Roman Catholics and that was a great aspiration and I think it was sincerely stated. In terms of the early years I think we tended to follow in terms of a lot of the curriculum that was created and the programs that were emphasized, a model of several of the more fundamentalist unaccredited Christian institutions. You mentioned one of them, Bob Jones University; I could add Tennessee Temple. Baptist Bible College, which was Dr. Falwell’s alma mater that they were kind of models in a sense there was also a little bit of tension in taking on some of those institutions as role models. I think particularly Bob Jones, there was sort of a on again off again relationship with that institution, I think in part because we were competing for a similar slice of the recruitment pie so to speak and also because I know Bob Jones for many many years took a strong stand that regional accreditation would require theological compromise and would destroy the foundational mission of the institution and they would never they were always convinced that Dr. Falwell had made a serious error in pursuing that program.

**Hall:** (23:08) Well was Liberty at that point often referred to as a bible college?

**Rist:** (23:12) I don’t know that it that the official designation of course was a Christian liberal arts college. But in my estimation looking back on it and reflecting on it, I think when we came to Liberty then Lynchburg Baptist College in 1973 we were in essence a bible college with aspirations to become a Christian liberal arts college. It took a number of years before that reality actually was accomplished. I think by the late 1970’s with the addition of programs, with the addition of faculty with a larger student body and a more diverse student body we had begun to turn the corner, and we really legitimately at that point late ‘70’s early ‘80’s could call ourselves a Christian liberal arts college.

**Hall:** (24:12) Now also in line with that of course the school was Liberty Baptist College.
Rist: (24:20) Actually it was Lynchburg Baptist

Hall: (24:21) Lynchburg Baptist

Rist: (24:20) And then it became Liberty Baptist College around 1976

Hall: (24:24) Ultimately the Baptist is dropped and so the word Baptist is dropped from the college as well as later the seminary. I remember one occasion in which I’ll mention something about this about being a Baptist school to you and do you your response was no we are not a Baptist institution we are an evangelical Christian institution. At what point do you find that change from being known as Baptist to of course we have many people on the faculty from various denominations as well as in the student body, and probably are not known as a I don’t know whether we are or not, Baptist institution. Is there any particular time that sort of changed over?

Rist: (25:15) Difficult to say but I would say certainly in the 1980’s we were repositioning ourselves, in the first half of the decade of the 1980’s to being more broadly evangelical institution. Certainly our foundations our roots, the connection with the local church gave it a strong Baptist continuing strong Baptist orientation in flavor. But there was a desire to reach out and become something broader without compromising the historical mission of the institution. So I would without putting a specific year I would put more of a time frame the early to mid 1980’s.

Walters: (26:03) Before we go too much further into the questions, let me just ask you for the record here what have your positions been here? You’ve been here over thirty thirty five years or more now.

Rist: (26:17) Finished thirty eight this year.

Walters: (26:18) Yes. Could you give us the your vita?

Rist: (26:21) Oh ok.

Walters: (26:22) Your verbal vita here, of what you’ve done here? And that will give us more…

Rist: (26:27) Sure, sure.

Walters: (26:29) context for the other questions too.

Rist: (26:30) And in fact I may just have to refer to a couple of notes I made here so I don’t over look anything. Well when I came to the university, the college then, I was initially appointed purely as a faculty member, teaching history. Really within a few months my first administrative appointment was chair of the then division of social sciences, and I held that position from 1973 to roughly 1987. That’s when we made the transition to university and the school was reorganized into separate colleges and schools. From 1970 to 1990 I was associate dean of the
college of arts and sciences, from 1990 to 1995 dean of the college of arts and sciences. For a brief period, 1995 to ’96 I was dean of the faculty, vice president of academic affairs 1996 to 2004, and then most recently provost and vice president for academic affairs 2005-2010.

Walters: (27:45) So you’ve had a number of different administrative

Rist: (27:47) I have.

Walters: (27:48) and faculty roles here. So as we go forward in these other questions that’ll give us some context. Feel free to give us the evolution of your experience as the school evolved as well.

Hall: (27:59) In that time there, what ’85 or whenever we

Rist: (28:04) Became an university?

Hall: (28:05) Became an university, is that when the departments came into existence?

Rist: (28:08) We had departments before that, under the division umbrella but of course a number of departments grew as colleges and schools were established. But we actually had functioning academic departments under the divisional structure before that.

Hall: (28:27) Okay

Walters: (28:28) Over the years as you’ve hired faculty and dealt with new faculty and the folks retiring and moving on. As you hired new faculty into things, what were looked for? Like for instance in the science there’s a specific that you have to have a creationist Christian standpoint of view that’s looked for there. Is there a Christian point of view for history and was that important for faculty to have? How was that called out of with applicants and what other things have been looked for over the years and how has that evolved?

Rist: (29:05) Well you’re very correct in saying that faculty hiring is absolutely critical and central to maintaining the biblical and theological integrity of the institution. So I also took that responsibility very seriously and I know my colleagues involved in hiring whether they were the dean or at the department lever, felt the same thing about it. We did our very best in the pre interview process to ascertain whether the individual was what he or she said he or she was on paper. And that involved dialogue and at some times involved getting other people talking to the person before they were even brought to campus. During the formal interview process we would probe all of that a little bit deeper. For a long time now we’ve had a what we call a faculty interview committee that’s beyond the college, beyond the department. And that committees focus and responsibility is to look at the biblical and theological views of candidates. A worldview issues, things related to family and those sorts of things to find out if there’s a true fit. And so we do the very best we can through all of that; the pre interview and the interview process. To make sure that we are hiring people who are compatible with the institution. Now it
is true that even after you go through all of that you will occasionally hire a person who you later find out is for one reason or another out of sync with the mission of the institution. Our first response to that is too attempt to rescue the situation and the individual, because we have invested time and resources and they’ve made a big decision in coming to join us. So if that kind of a situation arose we always aim first to try to reconcile the individual through counseling, through talking to colleagues often in the bible and theology areas, to see if there was some way to rescue the person for lack of a better term. Occasionally that was not possible, I would say it happened rarely but it did happen. And in those instances where there was just that fundamental incompatibility then we would have to make the decision for the overall good of the university; not to renew that individual.

Walters: (32:02) Sure. Do you remember well do you remember anything about the controversy in the 1980’s? About education graduates in particular, being challenged for teaching creationist viewpoint.

Rist: (32:18) Yes, yes.

Walters: (32:19) Looking more at the product here

Rist: (32:20) Right, right, right.

Walters: (32:21) You know and how that affects it?

Rist: (32:23) I remember it very well, and it arose largely in the context of teacher’s certification. And the question was a school that had a strong stand and that in fact taught biblical creationism. How could graduates who were going into teaching truly teach the curriculum in a fair and balanced way? The way that was ultimately overcome is by the fact that our graduates were able to prove through testing and through their performance on the job, that they could do the job. That they not only knew and understood and believed the biblical kind of creation but they also understood what was and remains largely scientific orthodoxy, namely some version of the evolutionary origins of man. And so as our graduates proved themselves in the classroom, as they were able to pass licensor exams. As our graduates in the sciences went out and began to earn their graduate degrees, medical degrees, doctorates in the sciences that was overcome. And while there were people who would still not agree with the stance of the institution on biblical creation. That is largely a non issue today.

Hall: (34:01) During this processes Dr. Terry Weaver in biology, was involved directly in the middle of all this because I think creation was taught in the biology classes.

Rist: (34:12) Right

Hall: (34:13) Did, were you dean at this point
**Rist:** (34:16) No, no. I was I would have been chair of the division of social sciences, and there was a division of natural sciences at that point that was separate. So I really was not involved in an intimate day to day way with the with what was going on with the curriculum in the sciences. It was only with creation of the college of arts and sciences after 1987 that all of the sciences programs came together with many of the liberal arts programs of the university.

**Walters:** (34:48) And then how did the division of social sciences and then the college of arts and sciences, how did that interact with like the education department the school of education and such? Were most of your folks who studied history, like myself at that time, were they studying to be secondary teachers? And how did that work?

**Rist:** (35:09) Well we interacted with education primarily because of the teacher licenser issue. So if a history major for example wanted to teach history in a high school setting the history major had to do several things. First they had to meet all the requirements of the history major, same requirements that someone who is not planning to teach had to meet. Then they had to meet all of the requirements of teacher education that is the formal curricula requirements. And beyond that they of course had to pass the teacher licenser exam. One of the other ways in which the division and later the college of arts and sciences interacted with teacher education was that it was primarily our faculty who taught the methods courses in preparation for student teaching. So there would be a methods course for math for teaching science for teaching history. And they were taught by subject matter experts. Now you asked the question of did most of the history majors or many of them that we had in those days were they actually people who were preparing to…

**Walters:** (36:33) Teach

**Rist:** (36:34) teach in a school setting. And I don’t know that I can definitively answer that in terms of the number or percentage. But I would say we’ve always had a fairly large percentage of our undergraduate students who have been preparing to teach. We’ve had a much smaller number who have been looking to go on to do graduate work in history. And a number of them have done that and done so successfully. In fact we have a few of them on the faculty here today. We have a member of the history department Donna Donald who was an undergraduate and is now completing her doctrinal work at George Mason University. Danny Mckeeney who was an undergraduate history major is now involved in academic support associated with the college of education. Lowell Walters we know you very well as an undergraduate history major, and now you’re a professional librarian and involved in the administration of the library. So, we like all of you graduates, and we’re proud of your accomplishments.

**Walters:** (37:47) Tell us about the founding of the university honors societies. Now when I was a student here I interacted with Dr. Holm Phi Alpha Theta. Did you found, well found but bring it, initiated this chapter?
**Rist:** (38:01) Yes, I mean I can’t take sole credit for it. I think a number of us in the department by the early 80’s have come to the conclusion that we would like to have some kind of a vehicle that would recognize superior academic accomplishment, among our undergraduate majors and that would tie them to their peers at other colleges and universities across the country. And one of the ways to do that was through these honor societies, and the specific honor society for history is Phi Alpha Theta. We made applications for membership in Phi Alpha Theta it was reviewed, our chapter was established in 1982. It’s always been a strong chapter, good involvement of students, strong faculty support. Dr. Mark Steinhoff was faculty sponsor for many years. The society did a number of things, put socials together, we sent students to present papers at state and regional competitions, we had annual banquets at which awards were given. And it’s just a strong chapter and about the same time we were doing this I think a number of the other departments and divisions of the school you know had a similar realization. So they began to go through the process of establishing honor societies unique to their disciplines, and so we today have not just Phi Alpha Theta but honor societies across many, many, of the disciplines of the university.

**Walters:** (39:52) I remember for my induction we had the holocaust survivors speak for that. Did you, as going clear back to the division of social sciences and such did were how did departments bring special speakers or did they sponsor political events or any activities like that? Could you expand on that, how individual departments had opportunity or not in doing those sorts of things?

**Rist:** (40:24) It was done on a limited basis. In the early years it’s much more common occurrences, occurrences these days again partly largely because schools departments have budgets that they didn’t have to accomplish that. We would sometimes draw on friendships and associations we had either with graduate professors or some other connection to entice someone to come to speak for nominal honorarium. I know I was able to while working on my doctorate at the University of Virginia to get two or three of my professors to come down and speak to our history students and others did that kind of thing through the years. And you know gradually we were able to do more and more of that sort of thing, and have actual money solicited in our budgets to do that on a regular basis, and have lectures series. I think you also asked the question about whether departments directly sponsored political type activities, sort of during moral majority days in the 1980’s. And I think generally speaking the answer to that is no, but those kinds of things when they were done were done on a university wide basis, under the leadership of the chancellor’s office a number of our faculty did become involved politically and politically active but that was done on their own time and on their own initiative outside of their roles as members of the faculty and then the larger undertakings. When we would have major speaker events here on campus, I think when Senator Edward Kennedy was here, when Representative Kemp was here. When we had Baptist fundamentalism in Washington D.C. and I think 1984, those were university wide undertakings rather than things under the offices of a particular department or school.
Lowell: (42:34) We’ve asked several other interviewees about the 1984 event that you mentioned Baptist what was it called?

Rist: (42:40) I think it was called am I right, Dr. Hall?

Hall: (42:43) Baptist fundamentalist.


Lowell: (42:47) And what was your experience with that? Did you go up to D.C?

Rist: (42:52) I did not attend the entire conference. As I recall I took a couple students up for a day, I think that it was the day that President Regan addressed the conference. And you know it was a big event with lots of pomp and pageantry and Dr. Falwell was at the prime of his influence politically at that time and you know was able to get the president of the United States to come and address the groups so.

Lowell: (43:19) What was life like in the Lynchburg community at that time? You and your wife were members of the community. Tell us about Lynchburg in general. We’ll take a break here from the academic side.

Rist: (43:29) Okay.

Hall: (43:30) Well at that point as you said a lot of this was sponsored by the university.

Rist: (43:35) Um hum.

Hall: (43:37) But right what about ’85 or so the political science people were split off from the history people and went to a different

Rist: (43:45) That was exactly at the point at which the university organized into colleges and schools. And what had been a department of government under the division of social sciences was moved into a school of business and government. That was done in part, I don’t know if exclusively but I think a large part because of the dean of the school who was the first appointed dean, Dr. Jerry Combee. His terminal degree was in political science and to make that entity work together those two areas which are it’s a kind of unusual arrangement as colleges and universities go but it worked for a long period of time and then of course as I think we all know, in recent years government itself became a separate school a named school, the Helms School of government.

Hall: (44:51) My impression was that Harvard had a business and government school. Was there any conscious effort about not naming it that, but using it as a model?

Rist: (45:05) I didn’t hear that specifically

Hall: (45:08) Okay
**Rist:** (45:09) brought up but I it could have been part of the background discussion certainly.

**Walters:** (45:14) Well we have been talking about the chronologically if we look at these questions we’re kind of about at the Regan Presidency here somewhat. Tell us about life in Lynchburg as you came here in ’73 and as the school started to get involved with growth, and Liberty Mountain. When you came in ’73 we weren’t located on Liberty Mountain, correct?

**Rist:** (45:38) That’s right.

**Walters:** (45:39) So tell us about all that.

**Rist:** (45:41) Of course when we came all of the classes were taught in the facilities of Thomas Road Baptist Church. So I had unique classrooms during those early years. I taught a history class in one of the baptismal robbing rooms at the church, I taught a large survey section of American history in the choir room, behind the main sanctuary of Thomas Road. We used the spaces just off the balcony the kind of ante rooms of the balconies for class rooms; we used all sorts of places. Our original library was a shared library with the academy, so.

**Hall:** (46:32) And that was located where?

**Rist:** (46:32) That was located in the academy

**Hall:** (46:36) Oh

**Rist:** (46:37) In the academy building

**Lowell:** (46:38) And then, it did move downtown at some point?

**Rist:** (46:40) It did move downtown at some point. For a period of time it was downtown and then it was brought up to the campus. It was put actually a part of the library was a part of the library was for a period of time at least the stacks were in this area where were doing the interview.

**Walters:** (47:00) Huh

**Rist:** (47:01) And then eventually of course when the DeMoss building was constructed first as a one story building, the library got space in that building and then of course in recent years as the second third and fourth floors were added you’ve benefitted with a couple of additional floors of space.

**Hall:** (47:22) Tell us about other physical facilities. Where was your office, first office?

**Walters:** (47:26) First office was in just across the courtyard from where we’re taping this interview. It’s in the building that is the science hall. Most of the social science faculty as well as the science faculty shared a suite of offices in the space now occupied by the science faculty.

**Hall:** (47:49) And before that, while at the church?
Rist: (47:51) Before that a couple of locations. My very first office was in a little house across from Thomas Road. The church owned a number of small houses, and the house that I had my office in, and that actually was the kitchen of that house. I used the kitchen cupboards for my bookcases. I shared that office space with a couple of psychology professors. One Dr. Charles Snell, who had come from Houghton College and Dr. Bill Murphy was the other person in that particular office space. Then we acquired over the years high schools and middle schools that had been abandoned by the Lynchburg school system or the county school system. The former of Brookville High School was a classroom space that we had for a period of time. I had an office there, and then when we moved the college to this location in 1977, as we’ve already said my first office was in the science hall. I’ve been lots of different places since then.

Walters: (49:05) Tell us about your relationship with the students in the ‘70’s and then the ‘80’s and ‘90’s. How has that was did you act like parents somewhat in the ‘70’s more so then you? What opportunities did you have there?

Rist: (49:21) Yeah well of course we were much smaller, and so we got to know the students much more intimately, and yes we were able to interact with the students in an out of the classroom more frequently then now, and it was a different time and there was a there was more of an attitude that the college had to play almost kind a parental role in supervising and guiding in the not just the spiritual but the social and behavioral development of people who were really away from home and outside of mom and dad’s direct influence for the first time.

Hall: (50:06) Another thing that’s greatly changed over the years is the dress code.

Rist: (50:10) Yes

Hall: (50:11) When we were here in the early days everybody men had shirts and ties

Rist: (50:14) That’s right.

Hall: (50:15) And women all dresses

Rist: (50:18) Yeah.

Hall: (50:19) Now as we visit other campuses I don’t see too much difference between the dress code of other campuses then Liberty. You care to express any opinion about that?

Rist: (50:31) Well it certainly is different, it’s certainly more relaxed, it’s a different we do live whatever we may think of it we do live in a bit different society in terms of how students want to dress and so on, then what they were willing to at least tolerate base on what the college said and what their parents said in the ‘70’s and ‘80’s. And I suppose you know you lose a little bit of something and you gain a little bit of something else. And I think it’s you know it’s probably a very, very difficult task for the people that have to enforce even the dress code we have today, to enforce the modern dress codes consistently then the one that we had in the early years which
was much, much more prescriptive. And I mean if you weren’t wearing a tie that was clearly evident and if you weren’t wearing a skirt of a certain length that was clearly evident.

Hall: (51:43) Over the years whose who has set the dress code, to determine what it would be?

Rist: (51:46) Well I think the general tone in terms of dress code was set by the chancellor, he had in mind a certain dress code and a dress style that he believed should characterize our students. In terms of the actual writing of the code, and the implantation of the code that became the task of student development, Dr. Mark Hine’s area. And that was of course written down in a in a student guide called the Liberty way. And that’s changed over the years, but that’s still it. And of course any changes that were made were made after a good deal of thinking and looking not only at what was happening out at a broader community of higher education. But even within other Christian colleges and universities, any of those kinds of changes are ultimately would be approved and were approved by senior administration.

Lowell: (52:56) And we’ve been asking you more of the taking more of the slant with administrative questions here. When did you begin working more as an administrator than an instructor and did you continue to teach as you made that move and was that a difficult transition, would you have rather stayed in the classroom or did you just go wherever God told you to go and make it work?

Rist: (53:21) Well the change was a gradual one. I would say that through the 1970’s and well into the 1980’s I continued to teach a significant number of classes each semester. As I moved into roles like an associate dean and a dean of college it became evident that the responsibilities were getting larger and that I just could not do justice to the kind of teaching load that I had once carried. So by the time I was a dean I was basically teaching one course a semester and it was typically an upper level course in history. When I became vice president for academic affairs I still tried to teach and generally did teach one course a year in the history department. But then when I had added to my responsibilities everything related to the accreditation issues of the university. It became clear to me that really it would not be fair either to myself or the students for me to teach, and so at that point I reluctantly gave up teaching on a regular schedule on a regular basis, that’s about three or four years ago. I have to say that the title of all the titles that I’ve been allowed to temporarily hold at this university the one that I think that I value the highest is still that of teacher or professor of history.

Walters: (54:59) So tell us about the progression of accreditation here at Liberty. How did you get involved in TRACS as well? And what’s our relationship with SACS been like over the years?

Rist: (55:10) Okay. Let me first talk about regional accreditation, Southern Association. Universities and colleges are accredited by a division of SACS called the commission on colleges. Dr. Falwell had made it clear early on that he wanted Liberty to be a regionally accredited institution, so through the 1970’s we made preparation. First you have to become a
candidate institution before you can become fully accredited, we went through that process. In 1980 we got our initial accreditation from the commission on colleges. I played very much a supporting role in that first round of accreditation; I was not intimately involved with the details of it at all. When we were reaffirmed in 1985 then again in 1995 and most recently in 2005, each time my role grew progressively larger. I came to understand everything that was involved in accreditation; I learned very early on that it was important to read carefully what are now called the principles of accreditation. SACS has a unique vocabulary, you have to read every word carefully, and you have to make sure that you’re not only reading what’s on the page but what is implied. So, that took a bit of time to learn and to understand SACS language, accreditation language. I had really totaled over all of administrative responsibility for our most recent accreditation, in 2005. And was very heavily involved in the one in 1995, which extended because the university was put on probation and really until 1997, the importance of regional accreditation is something you’ve got to be every vigilant about. As a liaison to SACS I had to make sure that I was aware of any changes in the principals, that we submitted all reports on time, that we were very much cognizance not only of general trends in higher education but what the issues were that were kind of fermenting under the surface within Southern Association. And the best way to find that out was to go to the annual meetings of the commission and I’ve done that sort of for the last decade. It’s a very, very valuable place to kind of get the pulse of higher education accreditation and so it’s been a great learning experience, and it’s been frustrating at times. But when ultimately you succeed and do get that reaffirmation it’s a very rewarding experience.

Walters: (58:41) And what are the main benefits of that affirmation?

Rist: (58:44) Well it

Walters: (58:45) Practically speaking

Rist: (58:46) Practically speaking a student for example who wishes to transfer to another institution for whatever reason is assured that most of his or her credits will transfer to that other institution if it’s regionally accredited. To go to do graduate work you have a much better chance or opportunity to be accepted into a quality graduate program if you are a graduate of a regionally accredited institution. It’s just a kind of stamp of approval by your peers and higher education that you’ve met the basic standards of excellence that your financially stable, that you have adequate faculty to and qualified faculty to do the job of delivering your educational program that you have the library resources that are necessary and on and on through all of this standards, it’s just it’s for lack of a better term it’s almost a consumer protection element in higher education that tells parents and perspective students that this is an institution that’s serious about higher education, that is Christian higher education. But as Dr. Falwell used to say, “If it’s Christian it does needs to be better.”
**Walters:** (1:00:14) Now the probation of ’95 is definitely behind us. Can you speak to that issue and how that was resolved, and what the issues were? Those were rough days financially for the institution, correct?

**Rist:** (1:00:26) They were difficult days for the institution I would say that we had when we were placed on probation we had a large number of recommendations that we had to satisfy. In fact we had over one hundred recommendations that SACS said for one reason or another we did not measure up to the standard. Some of them were relatively minor, but a number of them were major, and a lot of them revolved around the financial stability of the institution, and that then bubbled over into areas were you exhibited weaknesses. You were not able to have the number of faculty that you needed to have in certain areas that you maybe were not keeping up in the area of library’s resources the way you should, and so on. This was also the time when Dr. John Borek came to be president of the university and Dr. Borek initial contact with Liberty was as a consultant, to help us particularly on the financial side but as he worked more closely with Dr. Falwell and Jerry Falwell Jr. they saw a potential that given his not only his SACS experience but his financial background he might be the kind of person we needed at this particular point in our history. So he was appointed president and I really got much of my early education in the criteria for accreditation working with Dr. Borek on getting rid of all those probation recommendations and I think as you know we were we had a subsequent visit and the one hundred plus recommendations were reduced to seven; that in and of itself was amazing. Then we wrote a report addressing the seven remaining issues, they were reviewed by the commission in December of 2007 and our reaffirmation was then granted. So, that was a day for great rejoicing and celebration.

**Hall:** (1:02:52) Do you mind telling us what those seven were and what was the most difficult one to meet as far as Liberty is concerned?

**Rist:** (1:02:58) I’m not going to remember them in detail, but they still revolved around issues related to the adequacy of finances. But by that time a number of things had been done including a number of donors coming forward with major gifts, primarily to reduce debts within acceptable limits whereby financial experts with SACS would look at it, and say our debt level is now at a level that you can manage and still fulfill your educational mission. So it was when we were able to show real progress, not that we’re going to do things but that we had actually accomplished and done things. The thing you must always be careful with when you address a recommendation with SACS is that you do not put the recommendation in the future tense, we are going to do this or we are going to do that. They’re interested in what you have actually done, and what you have actually accomplished, and can you document that. And if you do that you’ve answered the question and you’ve answered the concern.

**Walters:** (1:04:13) Now in ’85 we didn’t have those issues, just for the record you don’t think that SACS had an axe to grind or sense that Liberty was wounded and televangelism and then came and tried to shut us down or? Can you speak to that?
Rist: (1:04:31) There are people you know there are people who have made that decision, I would have no way of proving that one way or another. There to give you an example some would argue that the person who chaired the reaffirmation committee in 2005 came from a moderate southern Baptist institution that was out of sync with direction the larger convention had taken and that individual came with a particular mission. He may or may not have, I don’t know.

Walters: (1:05:17) That was in ‘95

Rist: (1:05:19) ‘05, 2005

Walters: (1:05:21) 2005, oh ok.

Rist: (1:05:21) No I’m sorry ’95. If I said 2005 I misspoken.

Walters: (1:05:25) Yeah

Rist: (1:05:26) ‘95

Walters: (1:05:26) The year we were on the hundred items year.

Rist: (1:05:28) That’s the year of the hundred plus recommendations. Yes, which maybe a record with SACS by the way, if not it’s close to it. But other than the fact that you could argue some of the recommendations were rather picky, they were a minor issues. They were largely right on the big items, and so the things that we had to address for our own good and for our own stability and our own future needed to be addressed sooner rather than later. So, on balance I think SACS did us a service; it was a painful lesson I think that if there was ever a time that the university’s future as an accredited institution hung in the balance it was kind of in those critical years from ‘95 to’97. We’re good citizens as far as SACS is concerned today within the higher education community, and we not only have a record now of submitting reports on time, submitting thorough reports, accurate reports, submitting our substantive change request when they’re due. These are the kinds of things that build confidence between the accreditor and the individual institution, and we have now over a decade of solid accomplishment in that regard.

Walters: (1:07:08) Now you mentioned Dr. Borek coming as the president. Did those rough years just wear out Dr. Guillermin, or what was his presidency like or how did that transition in?

Rist: (1:07:17) Well I of course I’ve worked with different chief administrative officers. Most of my time at Liberty was with Dr. Guillermin, he was president from the ‘70’s to the mid 1990’s when we had our significant accreditation issues. He was the president during the years where our resources were scarce when we were still we were growing but we were not growing at the kind of rate we’ve experienced in the last decade, he was a firm leader but I would also say on the major strategic issues related to the university he did defer to Dr. Falwell there’s no question about that as chancellor. When Dr. Borek came he of course brought the SACS expertise and he
served us as president until 2004, 2005 period. Brought us help with many other people through that crisis period and then I would say the individual who I worked for among those that I’ve already mentioned that probably we were temperamentally most alike and philosophically most alike was when Dave Young was appointed chief operating officer. He came from a military background as I think you know and he was a general in the Air Force and so everything he did was based on careful analysis, careful planning. He was always very mindful of including me as chief academic officer in the planning process. Every major planning meeting I was in whether it related directly or indirectly to academics, and I think just in terms of the fit in terms of style and temperament between the chief administer of the university and the chief academic officer, probably it was closest during those years which were not all that many before he moved on to other things.

Walters: (1:09:44) Or he went back up in the air here

Rist: (1:09:45) Yeah he went back up in the air, and became the Dean of Aeronautics

Walters: (1:09:47) Sure.

Hall: (1:09:49) Dr. Borek, would you attribute his leadership about the reaccreditation, the fact that we were re accredited at that point, cause of his experience with SACS?

Rist: (1:10:02) Well certainly he focused us on how serious the problem was, he focused us on being very, very careful how you read the recommendation and how you respond to the recommendation, because he had served on committee after committee after committee with SACS and so you know he knew firsthand how committees operate and what they look for and where if there’s a weakness, how they’ll quickly find it, and if your being less than candid and less than truthful that quickly comes to the surface as well. So he was very instrumental in all those regards. At the same time it was definitely not a one person show. There were a lot of individuals who put in long, long hours in the process; writing the recommendations, gathering the documentation, assembling everything that you need to assemble to present a strong and persuasive case to SACS. But in terms of focusing us and helping us understand the gravity of the situation, he’s very, very important to the process.

Hall: (1:11:23) Since we’re talking about accreditation what about TRACS (Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools)?

Rist: (1:11:27) TRACS.

Hall: (1:11:28) We were involved with them

Rist: (1:11:29) Yes

Hall: (1:11:30) For a number of years
Rist: (1:11:31) Uh hum. Liberty had dual accreditation for many years in that we were accredited as an institution by both the commission on colleges through SACS and by TRACS which is the Transnational association of Christian Colleges and Schools. This was an organization that was founded in the early 1980’s, one of the leading lights in its founding was Dr. Henry Morris, who was very involved in creationist or scientific creationism circles and was involved with the institute for creation research. And he felt very strongly that there needed to be an accrediting body specifically for Christian Colleges. It would have standards that looked in many ways very much like the standards one had to meet for regional accreditation, it had those same things. Financial stability, adequate faculty library, etcetera. But up front before all of those standards was a strong biblical foundation standard, and any school that wanted to be a member of TRACS had to be able to demonstrate through its purpose and aim statements and through its practices that it was in tune with that biblical foundation statement. Liberty was one of the early schools to associate with TRACS. There’s also a history of our former chief academic officers being in leadership in TRACS. Dr. Henry who was the first academic vice president I worked with was the executive secretary at TRACS for a number of years. He was succeeded by Dr. Earl Mills who was also our provost and chief academic officer and then he in turn was succeeded by Dr. Russ Fitzgerald. Who was our chief academic officer, and it was really through Dr. Fitzgerald that I became closely involved with TRACS. In 1997 Dr. Fitzgerald asked if I would consider becoming a member of the accreditation commission of TRACS. And I said I’d be glad to in fact I very much value that kind of experience. So I was elected to the accreditation commission in 1997, two years later I was elected as chair of the accreditation commission and that too was a great experience. Not only were the institutions of TRACS really institutions very similar to Liberty philosophically but just a lot of wonderful people that you came to know who shared your faith as well as a commitment to excellence in Christian higher education. Liberty I always felt had a kind of special obligation within TRACS in this sense we were far in a way the largest institution in the TRACS membership. Most of the institutions that were members of TRACS were five hundred or fewer in total enrollment. So we were in some ways a kind of role model to the other institutions, and what we did or what we failed to do was noticed quickly. And I always tried to keep Liberty in the best possible light in TRACS and a positive role model. Now we did choose a few years ago not to continue our membership in TRACS. It had really nothing to do with any sort of falling out or philosophical disagreement with TRACS, it really had much more to do with a very heavy workload mainly on our own office of institutional effectiveness in keeping up with all the reporting requirements of two accrediting agencies. It was just it had just become very burdensome, and in terms of the one that really long term was most important to the institution. The regional accreditation trumped TRACS we still consider ourselves today very much a friend of TRACS and its member institutions we hope and pray that it would succeed and flourish, we still provide financial support on an annual basis to TRACS and so even though we’re not a formal member we’re still very much on friendly terms with it as an organization and its member institutions.
Walters: (1:16:42) Now through an administrative angel here, tell us about the development of the faculty senate. Was that in part due to accreditation? How did that work as far as governments and things like that?

Rist: (1:16:53) Okay. Really it did not have anything to do with accreditation, there’s no standard that talks explicitly about the kind of government structure. There is a lot of discussion within the principles of accreditation about faculty involvement in the development of curriculum and so on. But really I think that impetus for the senate came from the fact that by the mid 1980’s we had grown to the point in terms of number of faculty, number of programs, number of departments. Just the overall size of the institution, that it was very difficult to conduct the business of the faculty in just a large faculty meeting. So I think there came a kind of meeting of the minds between administration and a number on the faculty that we needed some kind of a representative body that would work on behalf the interest of the entire faculty, but could in a more focused way do the academic business of the faculty. And it was all of that thought process that lead to the creation of the faculty senate. It happened about the same time we moved to a university status and it happened about the same time as we moved to the college university structure of academic organization. In I think it was 1987 a senate constitution was drafted I was actually on that committee that drafted the constitution, and quite literally we looked at other faculty senates at other colleges and universities Christian as well as secular. We borrowed ideas that we thought would fit the Liberty setting from this one or that one and out of it we drafted a faculty senate constitution. We submitted it to the administration first and there were strong support. Dr. Falwell I’m sure the idea of the faculty senate in one sense was a novel notion, to Dr. Falwell. But at the same time I have to say that he always gave it his consistent support and I always felt he and the office of the president listened very carefully to the recommendations of the senate. So it was launched in 1987 and is still alive and well, although there’s been changes here and there throughout the years but it’s still much of a very much a functioning institution and it deals with the business of the faculty, it deals with issues related to curriculum approval, it deals with issues related to faculty benefits and welfare. At least for a long time it dealt with the issue of allocation of library resources, how much money the college of arts and sciences would get compared to the school of religion and compared to the school of education. And I know you and the library worked out some pretty elaborate formulas for the figuring out how to do that. And all of that has worked reasonably well, and I think one key point to note and one of the reasons the senate has worked is it is conceived and the language is explicit in the constitution; that it is a policy recommending body it’s not a policy making body, it can recommend policy to the administration. It’s not a body that can pass so to speak a law and confront the administration in it’s us versus them. It’s very much a collaborative give and take relationship, and I think it’s endured because of that sort of camaraderie and give and take between administration and faculty. And the fact that generally speaking higher administration has taken the recommendations seriously.
Walters: (1:21:27) Tenure is always a hot topic at other institutions. Did it ever come up here and how was that ever dealt with?

Rist: (1:21:33) It’s come up from time to time, but I would have to say in all candor that it’s always been a nonnegotiable at Liberty University. By Dr. Falwell’s personal conviction and by action of the board of trustees, tenure has been viewed as creating more problems for an institution then benefits. And people can argue that both ways.

Walters: (1:22:05) And that goes back to your points earlier about protecting the integrity and the

Rist: (1:22:08) The integrity

Walters: (1:22:09) The intentions

Rist: (1:22:10) The integrity because in point in fact if you ultimately get to the point where a faculty member is just fundamentally incompatible with the institution you’ve tried every effort every remediation, and the only option left to you is nonrenewal, it’s much easier to do, it’s much less bureaucratic to do with a system other then tenure. Now having said that I think what we have tried to do through the years is to enact for lack of a better term. Some of the benefits of tenure without having a tenure system, with that I mean providing a better salary structure for faculty members, providing enhanced benefits for faculty, providing greater degrees of academic freedom and protection for academic freedom in our faculty handbook and our other formal documents. So we’ve tried to do that in ways that are not as inflexible as a tenure system often comes.

Walters: (1:23:37) We’ve talked about the earlier days in the ‘70’s when Tennessee Temple and Bob Jones and those institutions were kind of seen as peers.

Rist: (1:23:46) uh huh

Walters: (1:23:48) Seemed like when I was a student in the ‘80’s there were lots of fellow students here that came in from Word of Life and it seemed I seem to recall the president of Cedarville speaking in convocation, back then we called it chapel in the multipurpose center which is now Schilling. Can you speak to our relationships with those two institutions in particular over the years, and how those peers have changed and who our peers are now? Just speak to that in general.

Rist: (1:24:18) Sure. Well let me take Word of Life first, and I can only speak as an observer. I think the relationship with Word of Life was carved out of a personal friendship between Dr. Falwell and Jack Wyrtzen, the founder of Word of Life. They became early on friends, they both had a passion for youth ministry, I think they both had a passion for Christian higher education. Dr. Falwell would invite Jack Wyrtzen to speak at Thomas Road even before there was a Liberty University, and then through the years he would come and speak both at the church and at the
university almost on an annual basis. Dr. Falwell in turn would go to Word of Life and address their students and other leaders in the university would go to Word of Life, and so the bonds between the institutions the two institutions were formed out of initially that personal friendship between Dr. Falwell and Jack Wyrtzen. And over time I think a part of our recruitment strategy as we sought more students and where can we find other students, Christian students in particular, well one place is Word of Life. They earned a two year degree many of them would like to finish a four year baccalaureate degree, can we work out an arrangement where a number of their credits would transfer to Liberty University and they can earn that four year degree in two and half years. And over time we were able to work it out, articulation agreements between Word of Life and Liberty that allowed a number of their graduates to come to us on a regular basis and finish their degrees and some of them would go on and pursue a graduate program here or go to seminary. So it was a and I think still is a healthy relationship.

Walters: (1:26:35) And they had an accredited four year degree then?

Rist: (1:26:38) They had an accredited four year degree. Now of course later on Word of Life became an accredited institution of TRACS. So as such Word of Life is recognized by the US office of education just as a regional accreditors are. Their degree even their two year degree increased in values too in terms of the broader college community.

Walters: (1:27:06) What about Cedarville?

Rist: (1:27:07) Cedarville. Cedarville is a member at I believe it’s a member of the coalition of Christian colleges and universities and there have been times in our history where faculty and others have said Liberty ought to join that that there are a lot of institutions in that organization Cedarville being one of them who share a lot of the same kinds of commitments as we do. For one reason or another that’s never happened, again we have friendly relationships with a number of those schools including Cedarville and as you said Lowell, one of the manifestations of that is the president of the institution has come here to speak and I know Dr. Falwell went at least once and probably more than once on a return visit to Cedarville. We did for quite a few years compete to some degree with Cedarville for faculty. In fact there was a period of time when we had our financial difficulties where we lost a few key faculty to Cedarville and of course we didn’t like to see that happen but we were at least glad that they went to a sister institution and of similar faith commitment.

Walters: (1:28:31) Who else would you say would be our sister institutions like that or is that getting too controversial?

Rist: (1:28:37) Well, no but I’d say that circle has expanded; I mean it certainly is no longer the institutions that we more closely affiliated with in the 1970’s. The fact that we became an accredited institution put us in contact with other Christian colleges within the SACS region that were regionally accredited and we began to form at least informal associations with some of those schools; when Thomas Road Baptist church became a church of the Southern Baptist
Convention that also put us to some degree, into a loose association with some of the more conservative southern Baptist institutions. In more recent years really the circle is about as wide as higher education is. I mean we you know regularly now model ourselves and see our competitor’s not just Christian colleges and universities but a lot of the regional public state universities, and the other group in recent years that has become important to us in terms of association is with our large online program. We do a lot of consulting back and forth with not just for profit but not for profit online institutions, simply to stay conversant with what best practices are in our online education. So I mean you take the whole realm of higher education there not too many institutions that we don’t look for look to for one reason or another for advice, assistance, guidance, role models in certain areas. But of course in terms of Christian mission our focus still is on that larger evangelical circle of institutions.

Walters: (1:30:56) You bring up the whole we haven’t spoken much about the distance learning and how that developed over the years with back originally with LUSSEL [Liberty University School of Life- Long Learning], and then video tape technology, and now it’s all online. Tell us about your interactions or intersections with that development and that evolution of that side of things.

Rist: (1:31:21) Well my very first interaction with it was purely as a professor. I taped on those famous video tapes one of the early courses that they put in that format. I did the first half of the survey of American history in fact there’s a funny story. It wasn’t funny at the time but looking back on it I’ll say it was funny. I did all I think it was twenty four video tapes for then LUSSEL. And so I was all done and I was pleased you know going into the studio and doing that takes a good deal of time a great deal of preparation and energy. And Tom Diggs, who was the overall administrative head of LUSSEL, came to me with a rather sheepish look on his face a few weeks after I had finished and he said that I’ve got something terrible that I have to relate to you. And he said for some reason we don’t know why, all of the tapes we did of you are green and there’s nothing we can do to fix it. And so I swallowed hard and I said you’re telling me I’m going to have to do all of these over again? And he shook his head and he said I’m afraid so. And you know I gave it that stiff upper lip went back in the studio and did all twenty four again. So long story to say that my initial involvement was with distance education as a professor. Then gradually of course it became more and more an administrative thing. In 1995 when we had our reaffirmation with Southern Association, distance ed. was still young enough that SACS really didn’t have any well developed standards to evaluate, and so we sort of got a pass that time. I remember taking the SACS representative into our studios and she looked around she said well this looks very good. And that was it. I mean that was the end of it, we didn’t say much about it in our written reports, there was never a question raised about it. And then of course in the next decade online distance education just blossomed all over and all of the accreditors had to develop specific standards to measure quality and accountability in distance education and to show comparability between what was being delivered online and what was being done in your residential program. And then that gets you into all of this area of institutional assessment, which
is you know again a verily recent development in higher education. But is so much of a driver of what we do in terms of the accrediting agency today, so I would say my involvement with online especially over the last decade is to make sure that as we grow and we have certainly grown dramatically especially over the last six to eight years. That we are putting the resources that are required and appropriate to manage the growth that we can measure the effectiveness of what we’re doing and that we can show comparability with the residential program, and as long as you can do those to a certain satisfactory degree you’re okay, but if you begin to slip in any of those areas you could quickly get into trouble. So I would say so far so good in terms of how things are going, but it requires constant vigilance and constant attention and I know all of you folks in the library have great experience with the distance population and how you have to deliver library materials to students who aren’t physically here.

**Walters:** (1:35:40) And that’s mostly done through digital resourcing now.

**Hall:** (1:35:43) Is the fact that we are becoming I don’t know what over fifty thousand students online or whatever the number is. Are we becoming an institution, online institution?

**Rist:** (1:35:57) Well we’re certainly an online institution; we’re not exclusively an online institution. When we say we have fifty thousand students that is a true number most of those students however are not full time in the same sense that a student who is here on campus pursuing a traditional degree would be taking twelve to fifteen hours a semester so if you actually would do the math and do full time equivalent students in the online program the number would be much smaller. I don’t know what that exact number is, but it would be at least half the number of full time equivalence. So and probably greater than that so the disparity between the two in that sense and by that measure isn’t as greater as it would seem in sheer numbers. But it’s still a large number and consumes a lot of the attention and energy and planning time that university never questions about that.

**Hall:** (1:37:05) A related question to that, I heard some students express the opinion that they feel that Liberty is more and more an online institution and that their degree their residential degree would be somewhat devalued in the eyes of the academic world.

**Rist:** (1:37:25) Well I’m sure that there are some students who would feel that way, I don’t know that I don’t really see an objective basis for drawing that conclusion. If we were to find for example that our enrollment was dropping and the overall quality of the students who were applying and being admitted was dropping significantly and we were further able to probe that and find out that one of the reasons that was happening was because of a perception. Whether it was true or not, that we had become largely an online institution and the value of the traditional degree wasn’t what it once had been, that would be something we would need to look at.

**Hall:** (1:38:15) I guess the concern was that are we becoming another University of Phoenix?
**Rist:** (1:38:18) I don’t think so. We have looked for example and I’ve been involved very recently in working on a fifth year report for SACS. Where we have to look at all sorts of measurements of our success and our effectiveness and one of the things that we’ve been looking at are things like graduation rates at Liberty compared to traditional institutions and online institutions and so on. And we are far, far superior to the large university of Phoenix type institution in terms of things like our graduation rates, our course completion rates, those kinds of things. So there are objective measures we can look at and I think at least at the present time effectively providing answers to students who might have that kind of concern.

**Walters:** (1:39:22) Did you were you the person responsible for establishing the office of institutional effectiveness with Dr. Barb Boothe or was that in existence before you?

**Rist:** (1:39:32) Well no, I can’t take credit for that there was a small office, it didn’t have the current name and I frankly cannot remember what its predecessor was. It was a small office that did institutional effectiveness type things going back into the late ‘80’s and early ’90’s simply because that was becoming a one of the criterions for being accredited. So we had to have people who looked at those issues on a regular full time basis. The place where institutional effectiveness begin to play a very, very large role in the life of the university was in the reaffirmation of 1995 to ’97. It was there that that office really began to establish the benchmarks for the determining of whether we were effectively delivering equality educational product. And that office was created directly as a presidential initiative. First by Dr. Guillermin it was then expanded by Dr. Borek. Now when I became provost and vice president for academic affairs I did see the need to further expand that office, simply because the growth of online and the growth of the residential program and just the overall growth of programs. We could not manage all the kinds of reporting and testing that needed to be done. As a consequence we had to beef up the human resources of that department and so today we have a verily large and robust office of institution effectiveness, and it’s just grown over the years as the needs of the institution have grown as the institutions size has grown and as the demands of external evaluators proved that you were effective have become more intense.

**Walters:** (1:41:50) And with that we’ll conclude today’s interview with Dr. Boyd Rist. This interview has been conducting as part of the oral history project of the Liberty University archives.

*[End of Interview]*