



# THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

January 21, 2025

## 2024-2025 Board Members

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## *Rhett Mabry, The Duke Endowment*

by Elly Clary

The \$5 billion, Charlotte-based Duke Endowment focuses philanthropy tightly in four areas. Its president, Rhett Mabry, explained what they are and why.

“James Buchanan Duke was very specific about where he wanted to give his money and how he wanted to give it,” said Greensboro native Mabry, with the Duke Endowment since 1992 and president since 2016.

Duke targeted four Carolinas institutions of higher learning and three other areas: child and family well-being, health care, and rural Methodist churches. He wanted to give back to Carolinas communities that helped him amass his fortune, Mabry explained.

Duke built impressive wealth with tobacco and hydroelectric power. He founded the American Tobacco Company and what is now Duke Energy.

He created the Duke Endowment in 1924 with \$40 million. When he died a year later, his estate contributed another \$67 million. In December, his eponymous endowment celebrated its 100th anniversary. To date, it's given away about \$5 billion with an inflation-adjusted value of \$11.6 billion.

Institutions of higher learning recipients include the former Trinity College which changed its name to Duke University after Duke's father,

Washington Duke. The other three are Davidson College, Johnson C. Smith University, and Furman University.

Duke “had a heart for children without their parents,” Mabry said. “We try to help children and parents who are involved with the child welfare system or have risk factors for injury.”

Another Duke mandate is health care. “We’re trying to encourage our hospitals to put more resources into communities to address social determinates of health,” Mabry said, “so we can keep people well.”

Since the Methodist Church was the impetus for the family’s altruism, Mabry said, Duke wanted to help those Tar Heel Methodist congregations in rural communities of 1,500 or fewer people. “Today, there are about 600 United Methodist churches that are eligible to approach us,” Mabry said.

Explaining how the Endowment currently works, Mabry said, “We take our donor’s intent seriously. At the same time, we know we have to make adaptations and changes to be relevant.”

An emphasis on early childhood dates to 2017. The Endowment seeks ways to help children and families develop healthier habits and to get churches involved. It also emphasizes elementary reading and math proficiency.

Dealing with issues of race and poverty is important, Mabry said. “We believe if we can get children and families off to a better start, that is a great (way) of ensuring everyone has an equal opportunity to live into their potential.”

The Endowment is adaptive, seeks strategic clarity, and is data-driven, Mabry said. Then he offered a caveat.

“None of this works without our grantees who are on the ground in the communities. They’re the ones who really deserve the credit. Our ethos of listening, of traveling to meet with our grantees, to see them in their communities, it’s the fountain of knowledge and wisdom that comes to us. It’s helped us become more effective to the extent we have been.”

A recording of the meeting can be found here:

With Slides: <https://vimeo.com/1049526960>

Without Slides: <https://vimeo.com/1049527547>

The presenter’s introduction begins at approximately 18 minutes and 50 seconds.