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CAUTION
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religion in prison



WARDEN AND N.O.B.T.S. PRESIDENT (center), WITH FIRST FOUR-YEAR GRADUATING CLASS

A Leap of Faith

By Steven Quatrevingt

In 1999, the Louisiana legislature passed a bill that enacted Louisiana Revised Statute 15:828.2, entitled "Faith-based programs for inmates; development; monitoring." The purpose of the article was to declare "that faith-based programs offered in state and private correctional institutions and facilities has the potential to facilitate inmate institutional adjustment, to help inmates assume personal responsibility, and to reduce recidivism. . . ." It also called for state and privately operated prisons to ensure the availability and development of such

programs, to measure recidivism rates for inmates who participate, to increase the number of volunteers ministering in correctional facilities, and to "develop community linkages with churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith-based institutions to assist in the release of participants back into the community."

Four-and-a-half years ago, Louisiana State Penitentiary (LSP) Warden Burl Cain got a head start on his counterparts when he decided to transform the old plasma building in the Main Prison complex into classrooms for a Bible College.

“Dr. George Roundtree and Reverend T.W. Terral, right after I came here as warden, the three of us were talking about the religious program,” said Cain, “and brother Terral said, ‘You know, I think we could set a college up here. I think they’d really come.’ I said, ‘You gotta be kidding! They wouldn’t come up here, the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary at Angola. Have you lost your mind?’ He said, ‘No, I believe they might.’ I said, ‘Well, good. Let’s see if we can do it.’ He said, ‘You think you can get some students?’ I said, ‘I know we have students. We have people here who have changed and want to change their lives, and I know they’re here. You just see if they’ll come.’”

Dr. Chuck Kelley, president of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS), was contacted, and he took an interest in the project. However, bringing the idea to fruition would take the cooperation of many people from different organizations. A likely place to seek assistance was the Louisiana Baptist Convention, which had recently provided books for an “Experiencing God” course offered to Angola’s inmate religious leaders. A partnership soon formed between NOBTS, the Louisiana Baptist Convention and the Judson Baptist Association.

Since the building was already in place, and with three major sponsors on board, things moved quickly. LSP crews repaired and modified the inside of the structure. Dorothy White, LSP’s special services coordinator, located tables and chairs for the classrooms. One of the last problems to arise, but which was quickly solved, was textbooks. Many prospective inmate students could not afford to buy the expensive textbooks needed for the courses.

“Several years ago, brother T.W. Terral called to say there was a seminary extension program starting, and they needed money to buy textbooks,” said Nelda Seal, Women’s Mission and Ministry director for the Louisiana Baptist Convention. “We at the Women’s Missionary Union, with help from the Georgia Barnett State Mission Offering, which all Louisiana Baptists contribute to, have been able to help out with the textbooks.”

On August 19, 1995, after months of planning and long hours of hard work, the Angola Extension Center of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary opened with 40 students. In January 1998, the Angola extension center held its first commencement ceremony, with 15 inmates receiving Associate degrees in Pastoral Ministries and one receiving a Diploma in Pastoral Ministries.

In January 2000, those same inmates, with a few additions, gathered with family members, friends, NOBTS staff and faculty, and LSP administrators, to become the first four-year Bachelor degree graduates from the Angola Extension Center. Three two-year Associate Degrees in Pastoral Ministries were also conferred.

Terral, who serves as director of Missions for the Judson Baptist Association, offered the invocation to open the commencement ceremony. “We thank You for these men and for the institutions that have banded together to bring us to this wonderful holy day,” prayed Terral. “And we pray that Your spirit shall preside over every heart and over this wonderful occasion.”

“Welcome to this place,” said Dr. John Robson, director of the Angola and Baton Rouge Extension Centers, as he extended a warm welcome to the guests. “It is an historic occasion and, on behalf of our entire student body and our graduating seniors, let me welcome you who are our guests, our very special guests. We are grateful this day and we welcome you as you come to share, to commemorate, to congratulate. It is a day for which these men have waited years. It is a day which they never dreamed, in some cases, would come to pass. Even within the community there was skepticism, but God has called them as he has called us. And we who serve these men serve with them in partnership and collaboration. Welcome to this place of worship in this hour.”

Seal and Reverend Michael Canaday, strategy coordinator-director for the Louisiana Baptist Convention, were present to represent the Convention’s executive office. They offered greetings to all attending and congratulations to



ROBSON: "AN HISTORIC OCCASION"



STEVENSON: THANKING ALL RESPONSIBLE

the graduates. They also expressed the joy and pride the Convention felt as a result of being involved "in this partnership with the New Orleans Seminary and the Judson Association."

With pride in his voice, Cain told the graduates how he felt about the program. "There are a lot of things I could say today, a lot of things go through my mind," he said. "It's really a dream come true. I think back to my mom—I know she's up there looking down at us—she told me one time, 'When you become a warden, there's a lot of things you can do for a lot of people.' And, she said, 'Don't miss your chance.' This is one of those things she would be especially proud of, because we didn't miss our chance.

"I say to you," continued Cain, "that Peter and Paul were in prison too, and you're in prison. The challenge is before you, because you're going to meet great obstacles, you're going to see people block the gates, you're going to meet the Devil and he's going to be working on you. He's going to try to say it won't work in prison. They're not going to let you do your thing. They're not going to let you start new churches. You're going to have security people that are going to turn against you, that are going to talk to you bad and going to treat you bad, but it's really going to be to see, too, if you can turn the other cheek. It's really going to be the challenge to see if you can do it."

After a scriptural reading by Rev. Milton Coats, from Psalm 19:7-14, inmate religious leader Joe Stevenson spoke on behalf of the graduates. Addressing all those involved in the creation and continuing operation of the extension center, Stevenson thanked them for all their hard work and dedication to the program. Comparing them to Barnabas, who helped

the Apostle Paul overcome skeptics and built his ministry after his conversion, Stevenson said, "Thank you for your faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ, who through your work adds academic integrity and doctrinal reliability to our proclamation of the Gospel. Thank you for listening to Jesus Christ, who through you makes us skillful expositors of His good news. The Lord is using you to perfect our faith and message."

In his charge to the graduates, Dr. Chuck Kelley spoke of the history of NOBTS, and said, "That seminary was not established and put there to serve a great big old base of big old Baptist churches. It was put there to tell people about Jesus and to go to people who were hurting, and people who needed help, and do everything we could in the name of Jesus to help folks. And that's why we're here at Angola prison. God said that He loved you. We could do no less. And we are so proud of you men and the work you have done and are doing."

"When we had our December graduation," he continued, speaking of the on-campus graduation, "we paused in the midst of the graduation and read the names of every one of you men who are graduating today, read your names as graduating in absentia, and told everybody what you are doing here. We got interrupted by a thunderous standing ovation from the crowd there."

Kelley went on to remind the graduates that "it was from the prisons of the Roman Empire that Paul the Apostle changed the course of history. He did it by writing letters to the outside, and those letters became a big portion of the Bible we have today. He did it by witnessing to the correctional officers and leading them to Christ. Paul, for the first half of

his ministry, traveled the world as a church planner. For most of the last half of his ministry, he was confined to a cell. When did he do the work of the Kingdom that really stood the longest test of time? It was while he was there in prison.

"So, men, I'm not here today simply to confer a degree upon you and to recognize the culmination of a long process and a lot of hard work," Kelley said in conclusion. "I'm not here just to say, 'You did good. We're proud of you, way to go!' and all of that. You know what I'm here to do? I am here to look you in the face and tell you the reason we have come here and trained you is that the church needs your work in ministry. We need you! The greatest hero of the Christian faith was a man just like you, a man who did his greatest work as a prisoner of the Roman version of Angola. You're not finishing a degree; you're starting a ministry. And only history is going to tell what God is going to do through your life and ministry. So, gentlemen, I'm not here to say congratulations on finishing, I'm here to say, 'Let's go get the world, and let's stay after it until all the world hears about Jesus.' Whatever opportunity you have, 'Let's go for it.'"

Kelley was joined by NOBTS Provost, Dr. Steve Lemke, for the presentation of the gradu-



KELLEY CONFERS DEGREE ON ARTHUR RHODES

100 YEARS OF DREAMS

After a century of dreams by Baptist religious leaders in the deep South, the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary was organized by vote of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1917. The idea of a school for training Baptist preachers and missionaries in the South was first proposed by Cornelius Paulding in 1817. In 1849, Dr. Basil Manly Sr., said the idea of locating such a school in New Orleans was "very rational, feasible, and eligible." However, it wasn't until 1914, when Dr. P.I. Lipsey raised the issue in an editorial in the *Baptist Record*, a Mississippi paper, that real action was taken. After three years of planning, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to create the school. The first theological institution created by the Southern Baptist Convention, it bore the name Baptist Bible Institute until 1946.

The Convention instructed the Home Mission Board and Sunday School Board to cooperate with the Louisiana and Mississippi State Baptist Conventions in establishing the school. In 1918, a piece of property at 1220 Washington Avenue in the New Orleans Garden District was purchased from H. Sophie Newcomb College. The Baptist Bible Institute opened for its first session in October 1918 under the leadership of Dr. Byron Hoover DeMent.

In 1925, the Southern Baptist Convention formally took over ownership and control of the school. On May 17, 1946, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to change the name to the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. A year later, a site for a new campus at 3939 Gentilly Boulevard was purchased, and construction began in 1948. The new facility, dedicated on September 3, 1953, has since had nearly \$21 million in renovations and improvements. The campus, made up of 112 French Colonial-style build-

ings spread out over 86 acres, is said to be both beautiful and functional.

Soon after the move to the new campus, the Seminary's School of Theology was voted full accreditation in the American Association of Theological Schools, joining the School of Religious Education which had been a fully accredited member of the American Association of Schools of Religious Education since 1948. The two Associations merged in 1965, retaining the name of the former. On November 21, 1966, the School of Church Music was elected to the National Association of Schools of Music, and offers both a Master of Music degree and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree.

The Seminary is also accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to offer associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. All degreed courses include concentrations in biblical studies, Christian education, music, or general education, with the exception of the Associate degree, which replaces the general studies concentration with pastoral ministry.

Today, the Seminary is one of the premier theological schools in the United States, with its New Orleans campus and 14 extension centers across the South and in Puerto Rico. It provides training for pastors, ministers and missionaries for approximately 40,000 Southern Baptist churches across the country. With a curricula designed to aid in developing spiritually mature Christian leaders who are intellectually informed, vocationally skilled, and compassionately committed for evangelical Christian ministries in the modern world, the Seminary is training those who will shape Southern Baptist doctrine for years to come in the 21st century.

ates and conferral of the degrees. The graduates also received leather-bound copies of the New American Standard translation of the Bible, donated by the Lockman Foundation.

Kelley left the graduates with a final thought, "Southern Baptist Convention has about 40,000 Churches spread out over the 50 states of the United States," he said. "In most of those state conventions only about 50 percent of the pastors and others who serve on church staffs have any form of theological training. You, right now, have stepped up to be more trained than many people who are serving as pastors of churches. What that means is, you got the goods to do the stuff."

After the commencement program, family members and friends expressed their pride in the

graduates. "I certainly was proud of all the guys," said Rick Ledeaux, whose Cowboys for Christ Ministry has been coming to Angola for several years. "I think it's such a commitment that the guys have made to go to school and get their degree. God's going to use them, some of them here and some when they get out, but I think God is going to do a tremendous work here at Angola."

Dr. John Robson, who teaches Wisdom Literature and Christian Doctrine at the extension center, said of the program: "Texas has a correspondence program which offers the opportunity for inmates to take a foundational series of faith-based education. We want to go a step further. We want our guys to be first-rate taught, and we want our graduates to teach others. We want to ship them all over the state, throughout the prison

system. Secondly, we want them to start new churches within the prisons. We want them to just jack up everything that can be done to enhance the Christian environment throughout the whole prison system.

“I can’t see the program going anywhere but up from here,” he continued. “It started out as a two-year Associate degree course, but the men weren’t satisfied. So it was extended to a four-year Baccalaureate program. We have the Center to full capacity now, with about 112 students.”

Robert Sheehan, father of inmate graduate John Sheehan, echoed Ledeaux’s words. “I am so proud of John,” he said. “He has taught me so much about life since he’s been here. To make the best of these circumstances, and to make a commitment to change his life for the better, shows that he has really matured.”

John Sheehan summed up the emotions expressed by many of the graduates, “This is an answer to prayers that have come true. It’s helped me to grow more inside of Christ. The future is going to be working inside the prison to help more people grow stronger in God.” Several of the graduates have already brought life to Sheehan’s words, moving into positions working closely with Angola’s chaplains and ministering in the cellblocks and on the yards.

As for the effect of Louisiana’s new legislation on faith-based education, “We just need to work toward getting the Louisiana pardon and parole boards to recognize this as a positive move in rehabilitation,” said Robson. “Although we are not here to help these guys get out of prison—we’re here to help them become better ministers of the word while they are here—if this does help them to get out, all the better.”



THE SHEEHANS: PROUD FATHER EMBRACES SON (right)

N.O.B.T.S. GRADUATES

BACHELOR OF ARTS

Jesse J. Deters

BACHELOR OF GENERAL STUDIES

- | | |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Robert Earl Bishop | Wilfred L. Cain |
| Steven Ray Dominique | Raymond Leo Flank |
| Ray Lee Henry | Dwayne Jewel Hill |
| Leo Jackson Jr. | Eric Dion Matthews |
| Edward Charles Murphy Sr. | Carl A. Quijano |
| Arthur Rhodes | John Anthony Sheehan |
| Tony Curtis Smith | Joseph L. Stevenson |
| Willie S. Thomas Sr. | Charles E. Varnado |
| Willie Williams Jr. | |

ASSOCIATE IN PASTORAL MINISTRIES

- David Frederick Crowell Jr.
 Jerome Derricks
 Vernell Edward Richardson Sr.