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Ex-Con Chaplain Brings
'Renewal' to Florida Prison

By Toby Druin

GAINESVILLE, Fla. (BP) --Austin Brown is a chaplain at Florida State Prison. Make that "chain gang" chaplain.

The "chain gang" title doesn't mean he's chaplain to a chain gang at the prison; they don't have those at the Florida State Prison, near Stark, Fla. Brown earned it because, before he became a chaplain, he was a prisoner.

A man died one night in a drunken labor camp brawl in Dade County and Brown drew 15 years for manslaughter.

He doesn't like to talk about his past--"I don't like to talk about Austin Brown too much; let's talk about Jesus."

But you have to know where and who Austin Brown has been before you can appreciate where he is and who he is now--chaplain to more than 1,100 inmates and one of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's lay renewal associates. If anyone personifies "renewal" it is Austin Brown.

Brown's life is hardly a success story, at least up until about eight years ago. Now 46, he is a native of Chiefland, Fla., but didn't hang around there long, joining the Navy in 1942 in spite of his tender 14 years.

He made it through until the end of World War II, but by then he had acquired a liking for liquor and it got him dishonorably discharged. After a couple of years, he tried the military again, this time the Air Force, only to get a second dishonorable discharge--also for drunkenness.

"I just drifted around after that not doing much of nothing," Brown recalls. "I had a pretty good trade as a professional cook and worked at that, but I was still drinking hard and doing just what came naturally."

"Doing what came naturally" got him into a lot of Florida jails. "It was disorderly conduct, assault, all on account of my drinking," he recalls. The last six and a half years, he confesses, he was no more than a "public wino."

"It wasn't living, it was existing, in one jail and right out, 90 days here, 90 there, six months or whatever.

"One thing I learned, man, is that a person don't want to be a drunk. You start watching people who are living what you think is successfully--going about their business, with families, homes, good jobs--and you wonder 'what happened to me?' Even drunk, you want that.

"But you find that you just can't cut it and go along with it. And, man, I tell you it's just plain hell right here on earth to live that kind of life."

Brown says that his concept of God at the time, taught to him as a child, was of someone "up there" ready to "beat his brains out."

"No one ever walked up to me and told me God loved me," he says. "No one ever said to me God loved me just the way I was and that Jesus Christ had come to die for me. All they could tell me was that I was wrong. Well, I knew I was wrong; I needed to know what was right."

Prisoners at Bell Glade where he was sent to do his time were taken to the chapel for orientation when they arrived. One of the first persons Brown met was Chaplain Max Jones. And the first thing he heard Jones say was, "Do you know Jesus as your own personal Savior?"

"That's the first time I ever heard it in my life--the first day," Brown says. "I just sat there and looked at him and thought he was crazy."

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But he began to watch Jones--"about the jolliest fellow you ever saw"-- and as soon as he got settled into prison life he began to attend the chapel services. And it wasn't long before he made a profession of faith.

"I will never forget it," he recalls. "I told the Lord if he couldn't do anything for me then I would just prefer he would take the life he had given me. I didn't want to go back to what I had left outside that prison."

With Jones's help, Brown began studying what it meant to be a Christian. "It was a crash program for me, Christianity was," he says. "I had to really just reach in and grab--no time to just drag along and enjoy it."

He studied the Bible through many times and began giving his testimony on trips Jones arranged to churches and other gatherings in the area.

One day as he was listening to a former prisoner give his testimony, Brown said he said to the Lord, "When I get out of prison that's what I want to do--tell others what Jesus had done for me."

It wasn't long before he got his parole and went to work for a sugar mill near the prison. He didn't forget his promise and became a prison evangelist, visiting the Florida correctional institutions and sharing his faith.

About a year after he got out of prison, he met Mickey Evans at Dunklin Memorial Camp on Lake Okeechobee. The camp is a spiritual retreat center for alcoholics. Evans "became like a father" to him, Brown says.

Through the ministry of the camp, Brown, a Negro, began sharing his testimony in various churches, almost all of them exclusively white congregations. He believes part of his ministry has been that through his sharing of his testimony some prejudices have been set aside.

Ray Boggs of Niceville, who invited him to participate in a Lay Renewal weekend, introduced him to the Home Mission Board's lay renewal program. He's been active in the program ever since, traveling all over the South to share his faith.

Last year the Florida corrections department began to use ex-felons in their program and Chaplain Jones said the first person he thought of was Brown. He didn't have to ask him twice. Brown joined him as a chaplain at the prison in July, 1974.

Brown now has a two-fold ministry, still participating in the Lay Renewal program, but focusing on ministering to the prisoners, many of whom he knew when he was one of them.

"I used to say I wasted those first 36 years of my life," Brown says, a twinkle in his eye and a broad smile animating his entire face. "But the Lord got to me through those experiences, and I have come to thank him for the pain and misery of it all."

"I couldn't be as effective here today if that hadn't happened to me. God had compassion on me. I know it. I've experienced it. That's not wasted life. The waste is to leave this life without knowing the Lord as your personal Savior."

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Unwelcome Guest
Has Short Visit

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GLORIETA, NM. (BP)--"Bats in the belfry," has a significant new meaning for D. Lewis White, following his most recent conference at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center.

On the second morning of the conference, White, bus consultant from the Sunday School department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, was speaking to conferees about the basics of using buses in a church's evangelistic outreach.

Suddenly, with a flash and a flutter, books flew into the air and all attention was turned from basics and buses to a small black bat, who had "dropped in" for a little bus outreach orientation.

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Several seconds of pandemonium reigned until the newest conferee could be ushered out of the conference.

The unfortunate lad who served as the momentary resting place for the bat soon regained his composure along with his scattered conference materials, and the regularly scheduled conference resumed for 60 shaken bus workers.

White was unable to determine whether the bat had heard enough of his speech to gain any helpful pointers.

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For Whom Does the
Bell Toll, Now?

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By Jack L. Thomas
for Baptist Press

The bell hung in a picturesque wooden tower outside the chapel on Artillery Hill, just another part of the Vietnamese Central Highlands surroundings--or so it seemed.

The drawdown of American forces in Vietnam, on that March day in 1972, was already underway.

As the last American chaplain on Artillery Hill, my job was to close the chapel and transfer its furnishings to the chaplains of the South Vietnamese Army.

While sorting out materials from the files--deciding what to destroy and what to save -- a clipping from a Shreveport, La., newspaper caught my eye. It told the fascinating history of Shreveport's bell.

Artillery Hill was a promontory overlooking the plains, roads and jungles north of Pleiku City. During the height of American involvement in Vietnam it bristled with artillery pieces. The earth trembled when the big cannons roared, and the soul-jarring noise punctuated life day and night.

In 1967, Luther Ray McCullin, a sensitive, young Southern Baptist chaplain from Louisiana, became a part of this thundering environment. He felt a strange unrest about the milieu in which he was expected to perform a ministry.

The hill was noted for the awesome power of its military weaponry. But high up its slopes was a peaceful chapel, and on the highest crest a statue of the Blessed Virgin and the Holy Child stood. (Americans had insisted that this was really a likeness of the "patron saint of all artillerymen," but Vietnamese chaplains said that was strictly an American idea.)

As a member of the 52d Artillery Group, Chaplain McCullin felt the need for a contrasting sound, one which would call the warriors to a place of peace where they could ponder the deepest meanings of life. He began a search for a chapel bell, and he wrote home to his friend Clyde E. Fant for help. Mr. Fant, a Southern Baptist layman, was then the mayor of Shreveport.

Mayor Fant enlisted the aid of the congregation of the Westside Baptist Church of Shreveport, and together they located a large bell which had been used on a river boat. It had been given shape in a St. Louis foundry--truly a product of heartland America.

Shreveport shipped the bell to Vietnam, accompanied by a letter from the mayor voicing a strong desire of the people of Shreveport: "Let us hope and pray that in the near future this bell may toll welcome news of peace to the Vietnamese people." It arrived in Pleiku on Christmas Day of 1967, surely a good omen.

In the spring of 1972 it looked as if Mr. Fant's hopes would be soon realized. We were getting ready to transfer responsibility for the defense of Pleiku City to the Vietnamese people. The war appeared to be drawing to a close.

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Reading the news clipping's account reminded me that a new chapel was to be constructed at Fort Polk, the large military installation in mid-Louisiana. Perhaps John Wakefield, a Southern Baptist and post chaplain at Ft. Polk, could use the bell in the new chapel setting.

It was after midnight in DeRidder, La., when my call from Vietnam awakened him. The connection was poor, and he couldn't understand who was calling. The operator asked him to hang up so we could place the call a second time. He must have expected some dreadful news, and he seemed a bit startled to hear me asking him if he wanted a bell.

But he quickly said, "Yes."

He would build a handsome tower and give the bell a place of prominence. He would mount a plaque on the tower, giving the bell's history and dedicating the structure to all the men and women from Louisiana who had given their lives in Vietnam.

Our final services in the Artillery Hill chapel were held on Easter Sunday, 1972. The peaceful sounds of Shreveport's bell summoned worshippers to special ecumenical experiences-- a Catholic priest participated in Protestant worship, and Protestant chaplains took part in Catholic worship. The two congregations joined in a fellowship meal.

The next day the logistics and supply officer of the 17th Combat Aviation Group came with men and machinery. Gently they lowered the bell to the ground. Several of us gathered around and barely managed to pull and carry it into the chapel office.

For the next three days we took turns polishing its 300-pound hulk. With each stroke of the cleaning cloth, the bell's colors became more visible. It was a brilliant bronze on the outside. The inner surfaces were a satiny scarlet. It was a strong and sound instrument--a thing of beauty.

When we arrived at the Pleiku hold-baggage packing shed, the workmen gazed in astonishment. They had never packed a bell for shipment. Returning American servicemen had sent some strange souvenirs home--odd paintings, porcelain elephants, Montagnard crossbows--but never a chapel bell. However, they packed it carefully, fitted it into a strong wooden crate, and secured it with tight steel bands.

The paperwork was all in order. We consigned the crate and contents to US Air Force personnel at Pleiku Airbase for shipment to Louisiana. The shipping documents were dispatched by registered mail to Chaplain Wakefield and arrived in a few days.

But the bell never arrived!

All our tracing actions failed. We could find no record that the bell ever left Vietnam, nor any clues as to what happened to it. Shreveport's bell was lost.

The bell's disappearance became an obsession with me--my mission had failed; a lot of people in Louisiana were disappointed.

On a deeper level, the loss somehow intermingled with the other personal frustrations during my two tours in Vietnam. There had been so much fear and pain and death, and I could do so little about it.

Now, much later, I can accept the fact that I did my best.

The bell is probably gone forever, but for more than four years it rang on Artillery Hill-- a peaceful sound amidst war's horrible noises. (BP)