

## ANGOLA PRISON

(Condensed from an article in the Baptist Press by Dennis Shere)

Once called the bloodiest prison in America, the Louisiana State Prison at Angola now has a new reputation as a place of hope for more than 5,000 inmates who live out their life sentences without parole. Many inmates know they'll leave the prison walls only when they die, yet despite their circumstances, there is joy in their hearts. Credit for this unprecedented transformation is given to warden Burl Cain, who governs the massive prison on the Mississippi River delta with an iron fist and an even stronger love for Jesus. "I truly believe these men can rebuild their lives -- lives that have been shattered by awful crimes -- if they embrace a genuine change of heart," he explains. Cain wants the outside world to see that many inmates are being genuinely rehabilitated, and that perhaps a few could be released someday.

Cain knew three things for certain: society considers prisoners to be non-persons, a despairing prisoner with no hope is a dangerous one, but no one is beyond God's love, forgiveness and redemption -- not even hardened criminals. Unless something changes in an inmate's heart, he was likely to remain angry and bitter at the world that rejected him, Cain realized. He wondered how to reach those bitter, discarded human fragments.

Cain knew there was only one answer, one way to reach the offenders and convert them into men who genuinely wanted to make something of themselves in prison. He knew there must be a true conversion deep inside, touching an inmate's very soul in that secret place where no man could fool himself. Cain believed moral rehabilitation had to occur in order for an inmate to lift himself beyond the jungle atmosphere that too often smothers a prison. The only way for true change was Jesus. Cain and his team worked tirelessly to create a new prison, a better prison, a place where men sentenced to life imprisonment could choose to make lives and homes for themselves within the prison walls. Cain wanted an environment that was safer for the inmates and employees alike. He was determined to add value and moral responsibility to inmates' lives. Cain invited New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to launch a rigorous four-year college extension course for inmates who desired a college degree. The program is funded largely by private donations.

Every weekday, more than 100 men crowd into classrooms in a prison building to study the Bible and to take courses toward a college degree, accredited the same as one from Louisiana State University. Cain also began a certificate program for faith-based education, aimed at inmates who didn't have a high school diploma or its GED equivalent. More than 100 inmates earned their certificate in 2006. Graduates who feel called to the ministry are transferred with no special favors to other Louisiana prisons to serve as missionaries. In one year alone, they baptized more than 150 prisoners and averaged more than 15,000 evangelistic contacts a month throughout the state's correctional system.

Angola is still very much a prison, and rules are rigidly enforced. When critics express their concern about the separation of church and state the remarkable transformation of the prison causes their criticism to fade away. The violent death rate has declined significantly, along with rapes, drug use and assaults on guards. Inmates can now be found holding prayer services in the yards, in their dormitories and on the work sites. Praise and worship services are now "normal".

The truth is, Jesus is in this place and hearts are changing. Hope is alive, the prison is peaceful, and inmates can prepare for heaven even if they will never get out of Angola prison alive.