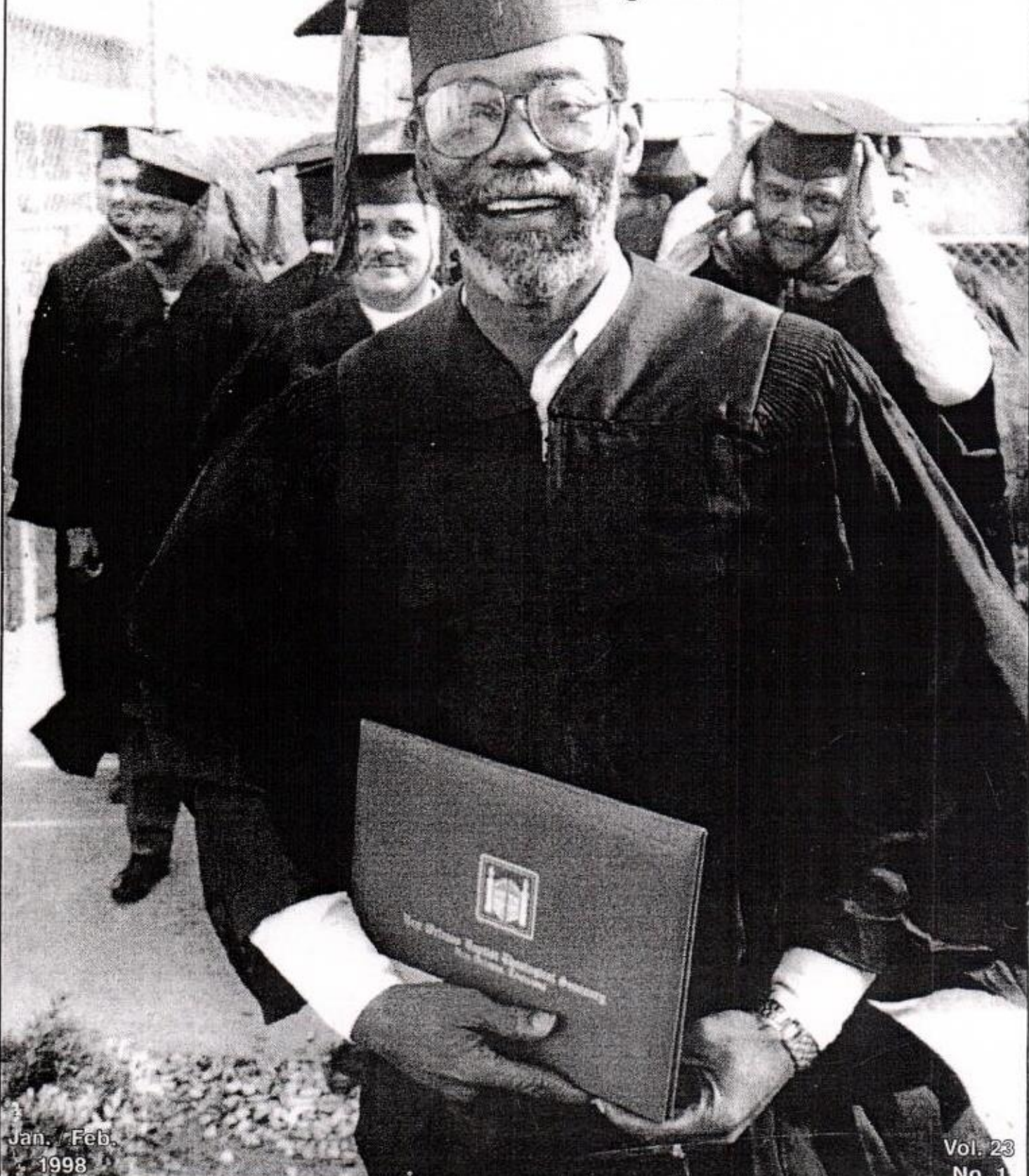


# THE ANGOLITE

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# Graduation Day

By STEVE ACHORD &amp; DEBBIE MOORE

Sixteen men incarcerated at Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola stepped forward to do something no other prisoner likely has ever done—receive a degree from an accredited theological institution, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS).

The commencement service in January also was a first for New Orleans Seminary, one of six seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention, in that the 16 students who completed the associate in pastoral ministries degree were the first group to graduate from the seminary's two-year-old extension center at the penitentiary.

"There is no life God cannot redeem," NOBTS President Chuck Kelley told the graduates, family members and prison officials attending the graduation ceremony, held within the prison's multiple locked gates, razor-wire fences and iron bars.

As tears of joy came down the faces of the prisoners and their families during the commencement service, Kelley declared the day's events to be a time of celebration and redemption for the graduates. "God is willing to exchange our evil for his good," Kelley said.

Referring to the biblical account of Joseph and his brothers, Kelley said when circumstances seem hopeless, "never give up because God has something better for you.

"Today we celebrate because you have earned a degree. But all of you also have received something you did not earn—redemption," Kelley continued. "God redeems our sin and exchanges it for righteousness."

The Angola extension center, one of NOBTS's 14 extension center campuses across the Southeast, now has a capacity of 50 students, with many more on a waiting list. The center was started in 1995 at the invitation of Warden Burl Cain after hundreds of prisoners had completed the "Experiencing God" discipleship study and wanted more education to prepare for ministry—whether inside the prison or out. Currently, nearly 20 congregations are functioning inside the prison.



KELLEY

"You could not go to seminary," Kelley said in his sermon. "So God brought the seminary to you.

"The work does not end here. You have an opportunity to be ministers of God's redemption."

For these ministers, the mission field will be on the grounds of the vast 18,000-acre prison farm because most of the men are serving life prison terms.

Angola is home to 5,000 maximum security adult male inmates. Of this number, 84 percent are violent offenders—convicted of murder, aggravated rape or armed robbery. Eighty-three percent of the inmates will never be released from prison.

With these statistics, Warden Cain said hope is essential to reach the men for Christ. Many ministers—such as the ones in the NOBTS associate degree program—are needed to reach their fellow inmates. "God meant for you to be here today," Cain said during the service. "Set the right standard. Be God's torchbearer. Keep the faith and set an example for the other incarcerated men."





**KELLEY GIVES DIPLOMA TO DWAYNE HILL**



**CAIN PRESENTS PLAQUE TO DUKES**

The opening of the seminary extension center has provided inmates the opportunity not only to participate in higher education but also to become better equipped for pastoral ministry. Warden Cain's belief that "true rehabilitation comes from within an individual" was a strong force behind the extension center's opening on August 19, 1995.

"Even if I were an atheist, I would want a strong religious program in prison," Cain said.

"During the first six months of my assignment at Louisiana State Penitentiary, I experienced three suicides, one murder and relatively high violence.

"After implementing a strong religious program, of which (New Orleans Seminary) is a part, there have been no inmate deaths due to violence. Statistics prove that religious programs reduce violence."

In order to enroll in the seminary program, inmates must have demonstrated a level of commitment within one of the prison congregations.

Graduates Wilfred Cain and Willie Thomas echoed the thoughts of others when they said the commencement service was, for many of the men, one of their very few successful experiences following years of bad choices and unsuccessful attempts to do something positive.

"I am grateful for those who have helped make this possible," Thomas said. "This is a present for my grandchildren because I want to set the right example for them."

As the men walked across the platform to receive their diplomas, their classmates were there to congratulate them on their achievement, something Cain feels will help motivate them to complete the program.

"This is not just a certificate, but a goal-setter, a goal which other prisoners can work toward," Cain said.

#### **DIPLOMA IN PASTORAL MINISTRIES**

Dwayne Jewell Hill

#### **ASSOCIATE IN PASTORAL MINISTRIES**

Robert E. Bishop

Edward C. Murphy Sr.

Wilfred L. Cain

Carl A. Quijano

Jesse J. Deters

Arthur Rhodes

Steven R. Dominique

John A. Sheehan

Raymond L. Flank

Tony C. Smith

Ray L. Henry

Joseph L. Stevenson

Eric D. Matthews

Willie S. Thomas Sr.

Charles E. Varnado





FIRST ANGOLA GRADUATING CLASS

"God provided," was how student Leander Gallet chose to express his feelings about NOBTS's degree program available at the prison. "This is a reality because of God's hand and not man's, and because God has allowed me to be in this program, he has something for me to do with my life."

During the December 19 commencement on the main campus, each graduate received a leather New American Standard Bible, donated by the Lockman Foundation, as well as a second Bible, donated by the Baptist Book Store located on the seminary campus, both presented by Jimmy W. Dukes, NOBTS dean of the undergraduate faculty and dean of the extension center system.

Dukes, who helped steer the program from its inception, told the graduates to remember "this happened because God wanted it to happen." Following the service, Dukes said, "Many of these men have never finished anything in their lives, but now they are strengthened because they have God's call on their lives. They now have purpose."

After receiving his degree, one of the graduates tearfully told Dukes, "Finally, I know what God wants me to do with my life."



**STEVE ACHORD** (left) is director of food services at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary as well as a freelance writer. Writing ranks as his deepest passion with traveling throughout the world, second. He has a B.A. in Communications Arts from Nichols State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana and a M.A. in Christian Education from New Orleans Baptist Seminary.

**DEBBIE MOORE** (right) is director of public relations for New Orleans Baptist Seminary, where she also serves as a supplementary teacher in classical literature, grammar and composition. The Massachusetts native has an M.A. of Education in English from Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina.