

## Bill Brewer: A Profile in Integrity



In 1987, Bill Brewer became the first fulltime NLBM instructor and volunteer chaplain. Bill was a graduate of Sunset International Bible Institute (SIBI). Wes Whitt, recruited Bill and his wife, Alice, to work out of the Christ Prison Fellowship (CPF) office, at Turnpike Church of Christ. They assisted Wes, Shirley, and Todd Whitt with the Prison Bus Ministry. His internship with CPF provided Bill with the working structure of the ministry Wes built. It also provided Bill with the opportunity to travel, meet, and interact with many people involved in the work. Bill and Alice moved to Palestine, Texas in February 1988. They began coordinating the bus ministry and teaching NLB courses. They established church programs inside the prisons to which they had access.

Never had I met a couple so dedicated to serving others in the name of God. To me, integrity means doing your job with high standards. Without a salary and no guaranteed income, Bill volunteered his time, talent, and energy. From 1987 to 1993, Bill (a full-time volunteer), served under the direction of Chaplain Jerry Groom. Chaplain Groom put Bill in the role of an intern. Bill assisted Jerry in counseling inmates and handling office details. Bill took care of just about every type of inmate problem. To Bill, this was a big deal and laid the groundwork for interns coming later. It marked the beginning of a career, beyond his dreams, of ministering to hurting souls. In September of 1987, Chaplain Groom moved from the Coffield Unit to the newly constructed Michael facility and took Bill with him as one an aide.

In essence, Bill had been promoted from an intern to a chaplain and continued his growth as a competent chaplain under the supervision of Chaplain Groom. Since Bill was a *volunteer* (not a state-paid employee), he could work as many hours as needed to execute their plan. This impressed the Michael staff, which led them to consider Bill as a regular chaplain. Heretofore, volunteers were few. Bill was considered a chaplain, but his salary was from a *non-state* source.

In time, legal issues arose making it necessary for specific rules and regulations to be adopted by the state for volunteers. Bill and Chaplain Groom paved the way for a new wave of volunteer chaplains. Little did they know how innovative their plan was. As a result, they learned that a volunteer chaplain (properly trained with the right attitude toward inmates), could perform many functions for a state chaplain. This provided state chaplains freedom and time to create more helpful and innovative programs.

Even though Bill had moved to the Michael Unit, he continued preaching at Coffield and added preaching at the Michael Unit. It was at this time that Bill began teaching NLB courses. During this time, Chaplain Groom and Bill talked at length about how to use CPF and NLB courses to best benefit the offender population in the Michael Unit. It was here that Bill wrote an overview of what he and Chaplain Groom had created for their

inmates. It encompassed a worship program, Bible studies, mentoring, family-day events, use of volunteers, visitation room ministry, and other related items.

After reviews and modification, Chaplain Groom changed the title of what they had developed. It became known as the *Life Skills Academy*. In 1991-1992, Chaplain Groom became the Director over all State Chaplains in Texas and moved to Huntsville to fulfill these duties. Jerry Groom worked countless hours with Bill discussing and developing the plan used to approve volunteer chaplains in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Bill's work and relationship with Jerry helped state chaplains see the value of volunteer chaplains. According to Bill, "Chaplain Groom's unique style of ministry and his positive relationship with wardens, allowed him to use me in areas where volunteers had not been used. Then, as the Director of Chaplaincy, he influenced how volunteers would be used throughout all Texas prisons."

It became Bill's responsibility to raise funds for the programs and find volunteers. He helped outline qualifications for offenders involved, based on approval by Chaplain Groom and the Unit warden. Bill said, "being involved in this process helped me see the value of family involvement, especially as the men made parole. I saw the importance for the marriage and parenting programs we would be offering."

From November 1991 to March 1993, Bill set up five family-day programs. Selected inmates received four-hour visiting sessions with their families. These were of great value to the inmates and their families. The inmate families are often left out in the "cold" by the system. No one can transform a person's behavior like a family. In October 1993, Bill became a TDCJ employee as a Unit Chaplain at the Gurney Unit.

One of my students was so close to his wife and two children, that they left their Dallas home, school, employment, and moved as close to the prison as they could get. The family visited with their father and husband every weekend. When this inmate was released, we never heard from him again. In this case, it was a good sign.

Many families are shattered by the husband and father going to prison. Bill's emphasis on strong Christian families, led us to develop curriculum around that concept. Course II, A Sense of Family and Course III, Parenting Matters by Dr. George Creach were written to help families. Alan and Shirley Sowders helped us immensely by writing Course V: Christian Marriage Skills. Kim Pendergraft and her team wrote a course that truly opened the eyes of our male and female inmates. When we taught the course, The Christian Woman, we discovered that there were men and women who had never met a "Christian Woman." What we realized later was that non-prison related families also benefitted from these courses.

The Hutchins State Jail opened just south of Dallas. With Bill's help, we offered as many as 13 classes at a time. Brad Davis and several co-workers set up NLB classes there. I received permission to set up a Saturday program that continued for 10+ years. We called it Family Net. We asked the Warden to select 12 men, out of our 13 classes who

would agree to invite their wives and elementary school age children for a two-hour meeting for 12 Saturdays.

It was more successful than we dreamed. The women came with their children at 10:00 a.m. We ushered them into a large room where they saw their fathers and husbands waiting. Immediately the children broke loose from their mothers and ran to jump into the arms of their fathers. We quickly saw we had a winning program. From this experience, we learned that children love parents, regardless.

After 15 minutes for the inmate to hug and talk with family members, the children went to a classroom where they studied the same lesson as their parents, but written on their level. A special education teacher and her mother, Laverle Mathis had rewritten the adult lessons for the children. The husband and wife went to a room where they studied a lesson from course I, A Sense of Self. (See the Saturn Road Church of Christ Profile for more information on this.)

Following an hour of study, the inmate and family enjoyed lunch together in the cafeteria. They had the entire room by themselves for 45 minutes to eat and visit. Then they returned to the classrooms for another hour of study.

We dedicated the second hour to discussing husband and wife issues from a Christian point of view. Then all the parents and children came together for a time of singing, praying, and Bible reading. It was during this time that inmates and or family members were invited to speak to the entire group. The children seldom made comments. The fathers and mothers without hesitation gave testimonials as to the value of such programs as NLB.

On the last Saturday meeting, we encouraged the wives to bring their parents, her husband's parents, and any other family member they wished to bring. We also agreed that if any couple should want to restate their marriage vows, they could do so. During that meeting we also gave certificates to the children and adults for their attendance and participation. We served a barbecue lunch with chocolate cake.

Evaluations encouraged us to continue offering this type of family-related program. Even the in-laws felt better about their daughters coming to the prison to study with their husbands. They became friendlier with incarcerated sons-in-law. Lines of communication, often frozen, began to thaw.

Bill was helpful in another program that has had a long and deep impact. In May 1994, Bill invited Melvin Chappell, Minister at the Mountain View Church of Christ, to come preach to his inmates. Bill ask Melvin to bring a group of his men to be in the audience. The response to Melvin's sermon was fantastic. Seventy wanted to be baptized. The meeting so inspired the men from the congregation, led by George Sanders and Al Golston, that they continued going for the next 24 years.

Bill and Alice reared and educated two sons, Michael and Daniel. Today they have productive careers. Bill and Alice are waiting for grandchildren to love. They offered to

adopt children that were being reared in drug and alcohol families. The state, seeing Bill's financial income was pitifully low, did not qualify them to be adoptive parents.

Bill was close to Chaplain Perry Barnes. In a letter to Bill dated August 17, 1999, Perry (retired at this time), wrote, "Bill, very likely, you are the most talented chaplain that TDCJ has today. I know you are the most spiritually minded chaplain that we have."

Three days later, I received an exciting letter from Bill. He wrote, "I wanted to share with you and the group the exciting way the Holy Spirit is moving through the Michael Unit. We have had a baptism class and a N.T. Christianity class to supplement the NLB class for several months. There has been a steady attendance of 5-7 men in the baptism class (a five-week series). This Thursday we have 23 lay-ins! (Men signed up for the class.) The NT Christianity Class (a five week series) has gone from 14 to 33 men in the last four weeks! Also, on Thursday, I am starting a second NLB class to pick up the overflow of 15 students! Just when we thought this was as good as it could get, we had 201 guys at the Sunday service! (We had been averaging 75-90). Sorry to ramble but I just couldn't wait till the next month's newsletter. (Joshua 24:15)."

Bill served as Chaplain at the Coffield, Michael, and Gurney units. While at the Gurney unit, Bill invited Melvin Chappell, a second time to come and conduct services. On the first night that Melvin preached, 109 prisoners responded and were baptized. In the first four years, Bill's program produced 5,000 conversions to Christ. He would have had comparable baptism numbers at other prisons had the TDCJ policy been more compatible. Until Bill retired in 2008 for medical reasons, his program averaged approximately 1,000 baptisms per year.

I would like to note Bill's dismay at not being able to disciple all those that he baptized. Gurney served as an induction facility. Offenders came into Gurney from all over North Texas. As soon as the state processed them, they moved to permanent units. The short duration of time with Chaplain Brewer made it impossible to give the men all their needed attention and counseling.

Bill would be classified as a sensitive person who could have been a great psychologist. He studied and worried deeply about his students, especially those who "graduated" from his program. They promised him that they would never return to a life of crime. Some broke Bill's heart. There were a few who failed to stay away from crime and returned to Bill's prison. Bill questioned them as to why they came back. Bill wrote me explaining that they all would say, "We did not take the Lord with us."

Bill was close to his men. This is visible in a paragraph dated December 29, 2001. "One Sunday afternoon, one of my more versed students asked a question about the churches of Christ. A question I first attempted to defend, but later realized my defense bordered on a dogmatic answer. My mistake was my defending the traditional church of Christ, not the church Jesus died for. I was attempting to defend things done out of tradition and not out of our relationship with the Lord and His Word."

The next paragraph shares what this student experienced in his last 8 years in prison. He said, "just about every volunteer who preached, presented lessons with little spiritual meat." When Bill asked him to explain, he said for the last 8 years he had heard the message, "...hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized, how this is wrong and this is right, do this and don't do that, almost every Sunday." What he did not hear was how to face 25 years behind prison walls with God's help and how the Bible could be his guide during this time of suffering and separation. He closed by saying, "Does *your church* preach any other message, like hope, and how to deal with life in prison?"

Bill helped me to see why we often turn people away. With his insights to those with problems, Bill wrote: "Once an offender finds a church that presents the message that deals with their innermost struggles, they will be more than ready to respond to it and be receptive to that church and its gospel message."

Bill was always helpful in promoting the *NewLife Behavior Ministry*. He taught it, helped write lessons on anger, and was always ready to promote it to chaplains. In the early years before Buck led NLBM and I began going overseas, Bill and I were very close. He had a room in his house marked "Hillary's Room." His sons, Daniel and Michael and I played games on the carpet when they were in elementary school. One of the honors NLBM received came February 7, 1997. It was the Governor George Bush Award for the Best State Jail program. Without Bill Brewer, Brad Davis, and Glenn Byers, NLBM would not have received that award.

As Bill approached age 50, health became a major challenge. In 2004, he started taking opiate pain medication. He felt his first back surgery in 2005 was a success. But in 2006, he had a second back surgery. By 2009, the pain medication became a daily crutch. Yet, according to Bill, he did not want to admit it. From 2004 until the end of 2012, Bill followed the medical advice of pain management doctors but said it resulted in an increased dependence on opiate drugs. According to the doctor, his back was in such deteriorated condition that surgery was not an option. In pain, Bill retired on medical disability in 2009 from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

At the doctor's advice, a spinal cord stimulator was implanted in January 2013 to ease the pain. With a daily dose of Advil, the stimulator made life a little easier. By the end of 2015, the pain became unbearable again. By January 2016, Bill's doctor inserted a morphine pump. The pump controlled and stabilized the amount of morphine entering his spine. The pump inserted a small microscopic drop of morphine, 1/300<sup>th</sup> of the normal amount, on the location of the damaged disks. This procedure did not eliminate the pain, but in Bill's words, "Life became more livable." Bill also added, "On the good days, I thank God. On the bad days, I thank God for an understanding wife who puts up with me." Recently, Bill and I exchanged some notes about his work and health. Bill wrote that, "Because of my damaged back, my physical activity is close to nothing." As anyone would, Bill, growing up as an active hunter, golfer, and fisherman, found this restrictive lifestyle very challenging.

Yet Bill makes it to his free world congregation's services and even teaches a Bible class. He makes it to the Coffield Unit on Sundays to preach. While there he can listen to and encourage men on a one-on-one basis. When Bill's energy is strong enough and his pain reduced enough, he will also make it to the Michael Unit to preach, hug, and coach his team in the Christian warfare. He can visit with unit chaplains and volunteers. As he leaves, he sees what he helped start. He feels his contribution has been used and even improved. Bill drives home with a powerful sense of personal satisfaction and achievement.

Thank you, Bill, for 29 years of blessings. You and Alice have been wonderful servants of the Lord.