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**Making a difference**

**Chaplain: Roscoe Barnes III had his first experience in prison ministry at 17, and, at 41, has returned to it full time at the Baltimore County jail.**

March 05, 2002|By Sandy Alexander | SUN STAFF

When he was 17 years old, Roscoe Barnes III volunteered for prison ministry work at the Mississippi State Penitentiary in Parchman. A recently reformed troublemaker, he was driven by a newfound faith in God.

Now 41, Barnes has returned to prison ministry as the first full-time chaplain at the Baltimore County Detention Center in Towson. He says that now, "even more, I have a desire to give something, to make a difference."

In between, Barnes has followed his talents and his heart in many directions: Army chaplain, theology student, journalist, author and artist, among other titles.





"I tell people I suffer from the Benjamin Franklin complex," says Barnes of his numerous pursuits. "I am driven by the belief that it is important to use what we have in our short amount of time."

Barnes, whose position is funded by the nonprofit Good News Jail and Prison Ministry of Richmond, Va., plans to draw on his experience to offer spiritual guidance and counseling to inmates and staff members. He will lead religious services and Bible study and coordinate the activities of volunteers from many faiths.

For some inmates, religion "becomes a major part of their lives behind bars," says Sharon Tyler, a county corrections official. "It's not only the message, it's also the mechanics that we need."

Barnes says that while growing up in a "poor but happy" family of nine children in Indianola, Miss., he was kicked out of school twice for fighting. His parents considered sending him to reform school. But all that changed when a young evangelist came to town in 1976.

"I was not brought up in the church," says Barnes. "The only thing I knew about God is what I saw in The Ten Commandments."

But, he says, after listening to the evangelist "my life took a dramatic change. In fact it was so dramatic, my parents thought I was on drugs. ... I was a brand-new person."

Barnes was driven to share his faith. At 17, he started traveling around Mississippi preaching. Soon he was leading a new branch of the Church of God, based in Cleveland, Tenn., in his hometown. He taught himself about Christianity through television preachers, books and interviews with any minister in the telephone book who would talk to him.

His background influences him even today as he works with people in trouble. "Having been there, I'm able to see people as people," he says, "and I know that if it were not for the grace of God, I could be where they are."

At 19, Barnes joined the Army as a chaplain assistant. He was stationed in Germany and says, "I gained something in those four years that I could not have gained at a seminary: working with people of all different religious backgrounds, different cultures."

During those years, he started balancing his two passions: religion and writing. He worked as a pastor in addition to his Army work. He also took a home-study course in writing and sold his first magazine articles.

After he left the Army in 1984, he continued to develop his talents. He pursued a bachelor's degree at East Coast Bible College in Charlotte, N.C., wrote for the school paper, led a church, took journalism classes and tried to be a husband and a father to two boys. As he started to burn out, he tried to cut out his religious duties and focus on being a reporter. But he was drawn back to the church, so he rejoined the Army and spent time in Germany and at Fort Meade.

Along the way, his marriage ended, and the divorce proved to be another turning point.

"I did not feel that I was worthy enough to be called a minister after I had preached so hard against divorce," he says.



He worked to make peace with God and completed a master's degree at Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pa. Afterward, he worked as a newspaper reporter and published a self-help book and a book on Pennsylvanians in World War II.

He pursued drawing, wrote for magazines and delivered speeches about journalism and marketing. He wrote advertising copy, launched a marketing newsletter and started accepting invitations to preach again.

In 1998, he joined the Pennsylvania National Guard, where he became friends with a jail chaplain who told him he should consider working for Good News.

"That desire I felt as a 17-year-old to go and stand before people and to share, talk about Christ, I felt that same sensation," Barnes says. As he thought and prayed about whether to go into jail ministry, he says, "it just became clear as day."

In Baltimore County, Corrections Administrator James O'Neill was working with Good News to bring in a full-time chaplain to serve more than 1,100 county inmates. He had seen Good News chaplains work effectively in Prince George's and Anne Arundel counties.

"For years, [religious services] have been coordinated by a very dedicated group of individuals, but we're so big, it is a service that needed full-time attention," O'Neill says.

Barnes, who started at the jail in December, wants to document the ways ministry can make a tangible difference for inmates. He also wants to work with churches to create programs to give inmates support after they leave jail.

"The message is no good if it only works behind stained-glass windows," says Barnes, "I want to help local institutions of faith to see that `Yes, you have something that can make a difference, here's how.'"