Answering Altar Call Led to Prison Ministry

By NEIL FURR

Just about every day of his life, David Damron hears prison gates click shut behind him. It is a chilling sound that he heard for the first time three years ago. It is the sound of another world closing in—of being enclosed in another world.

Rev. Damron says that he has been steadily called to their grey prison world over the last several years. That call began in the Ouachita Baptist Church in 1980 when Damron saw "the need was there for me to straighten up the first time three years ago."

"Unless a man is changed on the inside, he's going to come out the same man who went in," Damron says. But he believes strongly that such change can occur.

"I was one of the lucky ones," he says, referring to the not so lucky ones he sees everyday on the other side of the prison gates at the correctional facility on US 21 north.

**Prayers Answered**

At the time that Damron was drinking, he did not know that the minister and congregation at the Ouachita church had the sound of another world coming out the same man who went in," Damron says. But he knew during an altar call that he was bound to do something.

Answering that altar call led him into being a Sunday School teacher at Ouachita, then an R.A. leader at Hebron Baptist, and then the leader of a Bible study at Rosewood Rest Home.

Curiously led him into accepting an invitation by Buddy Barker, then the mission outreach director at Hebron, to go to a Sunday School class at the Reddell Correctional Center. Damron was apprehensive at first, he admits, but it was actually the inmates who allayed his fears with their warmth and receptiveness.

"I was surprised at the freedom of spirit," Damron says. He saw how much the inmates enjoyed the extra contact "from the outside" and he was especially impressed with an inmate named Mickey. That inmate, who was a former biker, drug addict, alcoholic, and robber, "came to know the Lord and was a completely different person," Damron says.

**Bringing The Message**

"He was studying his Bible and going to church," Damron continues. In spite of the fact that he was serving a 25 year term for armed robbery, he "was not like some people are, didn't moan around, and didn't give people problems."

A short time later, Rev. William Wease of Hebron Baptist Church recruited Damron to assist with a Sunday School class at the prison. About seven inmates attended the Sunday School class at the Reddell Correctional Center. Damron's mission was to preach, Damron prayed for a volunteer if they would alternate "bringing the message" for a week.

Before his opportunity to preach, Damron prayed for a month. It would be a sign, he thought, if just "one soul got saved that morning." Following his message, five inmates responded to the altar call.

"I felt that this was where I was supposed to be," Damron says. "That it was exactly what I was led into doing." He is now the prison chaplain and was recently ordained. As the prison's ordained minister, he is a part of the daily devotions that occur Monday through Friday at lunchtime. He is also a part of the Bible Study and the prayer groups and the Sunday morning services.

**Gain Confidence**

But in the eyes of the inmates and in the eyes of the supervisory staff at the prison, the chaplain is much more than a man in a dark suit towing a Bible. He is a counselor, and he is a man "from the outside" who can be trusted. Outsiders, Damron says, are often viewed with distrust. "They wonder what your angle is, what you are after."

"The inmates are now after Damron as someone to confide in. Most of them are concerned about a lack of control at home," he says. "They are worried about their children and their lives."

They have questions about such things and they have the need to bounce them off the chaplain to see how he feels about them.

The prisoners, Damron feels, are often not hardened criminals and are not incapable of change. A year ago, he says, he felt "the call of the Lord to become a minister full-time" even though he was already operating an industrial cleaning service in the morning.

"I wanted to direct more time out there and share what the Lord had done for me," he says. "If he had done it for me, he could do it for anybody."

On Dec. 27, 1980, Damron was ordained during a special ceremony at the Piedmont Correctional Center in Salisbury.

**First Stop**

The prison chaplain at the Reddell Correctional Center has an obligation both to the staff and to the inmates. A regular part of Rev. David Damron's daily tour of the local prison is to talk to its administration and staff to find out about needs. Shown above are Robert L. Hopkins, chaplain for correcfional facilities in the South Piedmont Area.

**Daily Devotionals**

Arthur Matthews (left) and Rev. David Damron, prison chaplain, are shown discussing the meanings of Bible passages. During such discussions, Damron helps inmates find how scripture applies to their daily lives.

**First Stop**

The prison chaplain at the Reddell Correctional Center has an obligation both to the staff and to the inmates. A regular part of Rev. David Damron's daily tour of the local prison is to talk to its administration and staff to find out about needs. Shown above are Robert L. Hopkins, chaplain for correctional facilities in the South Piedmont Area.

**First Stop**

The prison chaplain at the Reddell Correctional Center has an obligation both to the staff and to the inmates. A regular part of Rev. David Damron's daily tour of the local prison is to talk to its administration and staff to find out about needs. Shown above are Robert L. Hopkins, chaplain for correctional facilities in the South Piedmont Area.

**Daily Devotionals**

Arthur Matthews (left) and Rev. David Damron, prison chaplain, are shown discussing the meanings of Bible passages. During such discussions, Damron helps inmates find how scripture applies to their daily lives.

**First Stop**

The prison chaplain at the Reddell Correctional Center has an obligation both to the staff and to the inmates. A regular part of Rev. David Damron's daily tour of the local prison is to talk to its administration and staff to find out about needs. Shown above are Robert L. Hopkins, chaplain for correctional facilities in the South Piedmont Area.

**Daily Devotionals**

Arthur Matthews (left) and Rev. David Damron, prison chaplain, are shown discussing the meanings of Bible passages. During such discussions, Damron helps inmates find how scripture applies to their daily lives.
Ministry

(Continued from Page 1-C)

...providing tutors to help with educational problems, getting clothing for an inmate to wear to court, or providing someone to help inmates arrange for jobs and housing when they get out.

And get out they will. At least 95 percent of the inmates in the local facility, which is medium security, "are going to be back on the street someday," Damron points out.

"Unless a man is changed on the inside, he's going to come out the same man who went in," Damron says. But he believes strongly that such change can occur.

As an example, Damron has only to think back to his ordination as a minister. The man who performed the ceremony, Rev. Isaac Reynolds, spent more than 20 years in a Virginia prison before finding his faith and his way.

(Anyone desiring more information about the Prison Ministry Program can contact Rev. Damron at 876-4608 or at 872-4043 during the afternoon).