

Dean of Baptist Student Union directors in Mississippi reflects on 40 years of campus ministry

By Tony Martin
Associate Editor

Jimmy Breland, retired and still-beloved director of the Baptist Student Union (BSU) at Delta State University (DSU) in Cleveland, spent almost half in collegiate ministry.

“I was born in Neshoba County, outside Philadelphia,” said Breland, age 94. “I was raised in Linwood Church. We had a fine group of young people. I was very active. We didn’t have anything but a pastor, but we were active in the church. On Wednesdays, it was mostly youth with a couple of adults.”

Breland recalls being drafted too late to see combat in World War II. “I stayed in the Army 14 months. From there, I went to what was then East Central Junior College, and then to Delta State University.” He taught math for one year after graduation. “I’d rather teach math than eat when I’m hungry,” he said.

Breland said he felt for some time that he should go into some kind of full-time ministry, and he was committed to follow the leadership of the Lord. He considered the pastorate, and indeed has pastored a couple of rural churches over the years and preached in churches all across the Mississippi Delta.

After that year of teaching, he was led to return to DSU as director of the BSU there – a position he held for 40 years, from 1951-1991. “I had no idea they would invite me to come back,” he said. “A faculty member, Dr. White, was very

interested in BSU and recommended to the committee that they consider me. After that, they couldn't get rid of me."

The BSU at Delta State didn't have a building of its own at that time. "We had a two-story house. Later the [Mississippi Baptist Convention Board] built us a building that was adequate for our program, but so many of our students began living off campus so I started a lunch and I'd cook for 150-200 students each Wednesday. That started bringing in some of our Greek groups who couldn't come in the evenings."

Breland recalled many high points during his ministry to the young adults involved in the BSU. "I think of a boy who came here from Clarksdale. He came and got involved in the programs at the BSU. This was at the time we were moving from our old building to the new one. This would have been in the 70's.

"He came in my office one day, popped his hands on my desk, looked me straight in the face, and said, 'Brother Jimmy, don't let them move this building. It has meant too much to me to be moved.'

"We had to move, because we just didn't have the space. I've kept up with him across these years. He's an accountant in Arizona now. He's just one, a particular one, but I think about him when I think about what our program has meant to the students."

Much has changed about BSU since he began his collegiate ministry. "I have a lapel pin that has the letters, 'BSU,' with three chain links at the top. At the time, BSU was the link between the campus and the local churches, seeking to enlist the college students in local churches while they were in school.

"One great difference was back in those days very few students had cars, so they stayed on campus. I've had students tell me recently that it meant so much to them to have a place to gather, a home away from home.

BSU is no longer just a link between the campus and the local church, he noted. "BSU has to provide a ministry. Students are too scattered around to be very involved in the local churches, so we have to provide ministry to meet the needs of the students who are off campus most of the time."

The mobility of modern students continues to be a matter to be addressed, Breland said. "I was told by our chief of police at Delta State that in last spring's enrollment of approximately 3,100, only 500 – 600 live on campus. They have to plan programs to reach those students who are coming and going all the time.

"Fifty or sixty years ago, just about everyone lived on campus. They're having to think more about what to do in small groups and arrange times to work with them."



Lunceford

Lloyd Lunceford, director of collegiate ministry at the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, was a DSU student under Breland's tutelage. "When I arrived on the campus in 1970, Jimmy Breland had already been there for 18 years. God used Bro. Jimmy to clearly define my call to ministry that I had made at age 15.

"During my sophomore year, I clearly sensed that God wanted to use my life to reach, disciple, and mobilize college students.

He invested in me and 'coached' me through the next six years. All I have done in ministry rests on the foundation that God built in me through those years as a college student alongside Jimmy Breland."

The BSU program in Mississippi depends on local churches to be involved in leadership and funding, and Breland encourages churches to continue to support collegiate ministries in their areas.

“It means so much to so many,” he said. “I was in the hospital for a week recently, and I was contacted by almost 200 of my former students during that week, expressing what BSU meant to them during their college days.”

For more information on collegiate ministry in Mississippi, contact Lunceford at llunceford@mbcb.org. Web site: <https://www.mbc.org/church-engagement/collegiate-ministry/>.