

Robinson preaches gospel of education

■ **Survivor:** At 70, the state's top public safety official continues to argue for keeping people in school, not prisons.

By KATE SHATZKIN
SUN STAFF

Outside the House Office Building in Annapolis, a dapper figure in a trench coat with close-cropped gray hair drags on cigarette after cigarette. He unfolds a piece of yellow legal paper that contains his standard sermon, a litany of hopeless numbers with the words "Quality of Life" underlined at the top.

The man some call "the archbishop" has come to preach.

And by the end of the budget hearing at which state public safety chief Bishop Lee Robinson is the star witness, the delegates are rocking ever so slightly in their seats to his words.

When he says "Isn't that right?" they even murmur "Yes, that's right," in the manner of churchgoers echoing a pastor's call.

Corrections chiefs come and go — victims of scandal, failed policies and the crime waves they cannot control. But Robinson is a survivor.

He made it through three years as Baltimore police commissioner, beat brain surgery, still smokes when frustrated and this week, at 70, marks his 10th anniversary as the state's top prison official.

And despite persistent rumors that he will retire soon, the secretary of public safety and correctional services re-



CHIAKI KAWAJIRI : SUN STAFF

"I came here with 12,000 people in prison. Now I have 22,000. This is absolutely appalling. It's abhorrent to see the waste of human, young lives."

Bishop L. Robinson, Maryland secretary of Public Safety and Correctional Services

fuses to say when his job will be done.

Meanwhile, he is using his bully pulpit to argue for better education to slay the money-grubbing dragon that the system of punishment has become.

Robinson has been occupied this legislative session not only with trying to convince lawmakers that they must curb crime instead of just building prisons, but with behind-the-scenes lobbying on the landmark settlement [See Robinson, 5A]

Secretary preaches the value of education

[Robinson, from Page 1A]

proposal to pump money into the city's schools.

"I'm part of the problem," Robinson admits. "I participated in this narrowly focused response to crime. ... We are, I guess, in a Catch-22 situation. We're spending so much money on the back end that there's not enough money on the front end.

"I came here with 12,000 people in prison. Now I have 22,000. This is absolutely appalling. It's abhorrent to see the waste of human, young lives."

He looks down at his yellow paper describing the numbers of unemployed.

Fifteen thousand coming out of his prisons every year. Their average level of education, he says, is 6½ years.

"What the hell are they equipped to do in the community? Nothing," he said.

"I would rather intervene so I could spend \$5,800 a year on a child than \$18,000 to keep him in prison as an adult."

If anyone can sell the linkage between education and crime prevention, it's Robinson, admirers say.

Del. Peter Franchot, a Montgomery County Democrat, said he planned to vote for the schools settlement despite the opposition of others from his county who say the city is getting too much money: "I'm going to do it largely because of Bishop's arguments."

"Every governor wants a Bishop," said Timothy F. Maloney, a former Prince George's County delegate who chaired a committee that oversaw Robinson's budget. "He's a natural performer.

"He revels in absorbing facts, facts and more facts, and talking about them in a very persuasive way. He's a great salesman."

At one point Robinson wanted to leave the public stage.

Four years ago, he announced he was going to direct security for the Johns Hopkins Hospital — a job that would have brought with it more money and perhaps less pressure.

A month later, he underwent surgery to remove a blood clot from his brain — and had a change of heart.

Bishop Robinson was born Jan. 16, 1927, into a Baltimore vastly different from the one whose citizens he imprisons at alarming rates today. Back then, you could sit and visit in the courtyard of the McCulloh Homes where he grew up in West Baltimore. "Nobody was running through the neighborhood with a Tec-9," he said.



CHIAKI KAWAJIRI: SUN STAFF

Stamina: Bishop Lee Robinson was Baltimore police commissioner and is marking his 10th anniversary as the state's top prison official.

His father, John, couldn't read or write, but he had an uncanny head for numbers, and he stood over young Bishop and made him finish his homework.

Bishop Robinson locked up his first prisoner in 1951, when as a rookie policeman he caught a young man smoking a marijuana cigarette. Thirty-three years later, he would sit behind his desk as police commissioner and marvel at the 12,000 drug arrests his officers were making each year — a number he is now nostalgic for.

Former Gov. William Donald Schaefer, who as mayor appointed Robinson to head the Police Department, brought him to Annapolis in 1987.

"He was very strong in what he thought was right," Schaefer said last week. "I agreed with him 90 percent of the time, and he knew that."

Robinson has presided over the destruction of the infamous South Wing of the Maryland Penitentiary and the construction of the more antiseptic "Supermax" in the national trend of leaner, meaner confinement.

He has seen his dream of a high-technology Central Booking and Intake Center — integrating booking and jail functions to give police officers more time on the streets — become a reality.

And he has been stung by criticism of its stumbles along the way, including a lawsuit filed by inmates who claimed they were held for unlawfully long periods.

Still, he has glided through the political crises with aplomb.

Neither a Justice Department investigation of "Supermax" nor problems with delays at the booking center have tarnished his luster. Even a union official for Robinson's correctional officers, who have complained of overwork and dangerous prison conditions, praised him.

"If I have to evaluate his overall performance, I think it's been excellent," said Archer Blackwell, who handles prison matters for Council 67 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

"He's been very well rounded in trying to raise the standard of correctional officers. For a long time, they were not regarded as professionals."

But Robinson has not been

able to change the fact that a higher percentage of criminals — including more "nonviolent" ones — get prison instead of probation than when he took the job.

His "Correctional Options" program has been heralded as a national model for community supervision programs, and recent studies show that components of it — the Herman L. Toulson Boot Camp and the drug court program in Baltimore — have made a real difference in recidivism.

But Correctional Options has a roster of 2,300 inmates, just a tenth of the number in state prisons. The numbers will grow soon as the program extends into Anne Arundel and Prince George's counties, but some wonder whether it can expand much more without accepting candidates who are riskier both criminally and politically.

Robinson "is a nice guy and he says some of the right things frequently," said Frank M. Dunbaugh, a lawyer who represents inmates at the Baltimore City Detention Center. "But I can't see that the administration under him has done much to stem the tide.

"They set standards nobody could argue with, but they don't take chances on anybody who doesn't meet standards, which is very few people. It's at great cost to us. In order to keep one person from creating a public safety problem, you lock up 10 people who wouldn't create a problem."

But Robinson says the criteria for the Correctional Options program will not become more permissive: "I think the issue here is the safety of the people."

Meanwhile, his preaching on education continues. On the rare nights he is not in Annapolis testifying and lobbying, he might be home making "Chicken Bishop," a personal concoction of chicken, crab meat and country ham, or taking one of his drives in the country to escape the depressing realities of his job.

As to when he might escape them permanently, he is coy. As to whether he will stay long enough to see the system of crime and punishment reformed, he is clear.

"Some people will fix it, but it won't be me," he said. "I hope these people who do accomplish it just remember a guy who said it a long time ago."