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First Women Inmates Graduate Seminary in MDOC prison

JACKSON – The Mississippi Department of Corrections made history Wednesday when a group of female inmates received seminary degrees toward becoming effective ministers at the Magnolia Correctional Institution for Women within the state prison in Rankin County.

A class of 12 women became the first female class to earn associate degrees during a commencement on May 17 in a newly built non-denominational chapel at the women’s complex within the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. The seminary program is an extension of the Leavell College of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary which has operated within the Mississippi Department of Corrections.

Commissioner Burl Cain said the seminary program already in place at Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman was a major factor in his taking the leadership role for the agency. He praised the efforts to establish and continued operation of the program, first for incarcerated men and now for women, and the inmates’ participation.

“I’m here because of this. It’s amazing what God has done. He has created this in Mississippi,” Commissioner Cain said. “Just look at what God has allowed you to do. It’s amazing.”

Twila Nunnery, one of the graduates chosen to speak for the class, noted church attendance has quadrupled among inmates has grown with almost a third of the inmate population attending regular services with support from prison staff.

“We studied long and hard, formed bonds, and learned how to come out of our comfort zones to spread the word of God,” Nunnery said, adding that she appreciates the support inmates receive from prison staff.

Dr. James K. Dew, president of the Seminary, said the women’s value as people is important and what the graduates do with their education and experience matters for them and others. “No matter how unloved you may have been before, in Christ, you are seen. You are known and most important ladies, you are loved,” Dew said.

Dr, Beth Masters, director of the women’s seminary program, commended the graduates’ perseverance and work ethic and is looking forward to the next group of 22 new students.

“I am incredibly proud of the women who stayed the course and graduated and I am looking forward to seeing them earn their bachelor degrees,” Masters said. “I am also excited for the students coming into the seminary this summer.”

Standing before a room filled with family members, friends, and other guests, the graduates carried signs reflecting their past feelings and signs of their new optimism. The commencement included musical worship as well as student testimonies followed by words of encouragement and prayer commissioning before degrees were conferred.

The fully accredited New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary program was started at the state prison in Parchman about 15 years ago and has turned out many classes of male graduates. The program for women started two years ago at the state prison in Rankin County.

Graduates are not ordained, but they work alongside the chaplain department in all areas of ministry. Graduates may also work toward earning a position as a field minister within the facility.

To participate in the program, inmate applicants must have at least 10 years remaining on their sentence, be free of rule violations for at least one year, and have completed high school or a high school equivalency education. Applicants must also complete a 12-week course to prepare for the seminary. After admission into the seminary program, students must complete 126 semester hours of coursework to earn their degree.

To view a video coverage of the commencement ceremony, visit the following address on the internet: <https://youtu.be/n2rS-MfS774>

Media note:

<https://www.facebook.com/MississippiDepartmentOfCorrections/>
https://twitter.com/MS_MDOC



Inmate graduate Twila Nunnery accepts her new degree from Dr. James K. Dew, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.



Graduates held signs of inspiration during the commencement ceremony.



The 12 graduates heard words of encouragement and praise for their achievement



A room full of family members and friends as well as other inmates and prison officials celebrated the commencement with the graduates.



Graduates received their diplomas in covers similar to other commencements.



Other inmates witnessed the graduates' accomplishments in completing their coursework in Seminary education.