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College Degrees Giving Incarcerated Women New Found Hope

JACKSON, MS (June 12) – It’s been a year since the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women had its first seminary graduation to produce 12 women who are the first female inmates in Mississippi to graduate with associate’s degrees from a nationally accredited seminary. Since then, they have firmly established their roles within the prison.

Inmate Nomatter Hudson explains, “Now the officers and the staff here call upon the seminary students when someone is in crisis, when someone has a death in their family. They find comfort in knowing that there is peer support here. There is a level of expectation that the seminary is here to help. It’s really changed how people view things here.”

The launching of the seminary brought hope, ambition, and a positive outlook to the inmates at MCIW.

Hudson said, “For someone who goes through the process of being incarcerated and feeling like you’ve lost everything, that there’s no longer a purpose in life, the seminary has given us an opportunity to rebuild our lives and to know that not all is lost and that we still have purpose and that purpose is centered on God. There are still things that I can do to help, not only myself but other women in this place.”

Graduates are not ordained but act as inmate religious assistants to chaplains. The seminarians conduct baptisms, funerals, worship services, and provide support to inmates during emergency situations. Along with their crisis support duties, they conduct Bible studies, lead devotions, and assist with volunteer religious groups. “Chaplains have limitations in that they cannot be everywhere all the time. The seminarians are a part of the inmate population and are there all the time. They can be there for their fellow inmates where they live,” Dr. Beth Masters, program director, said.

The first female class graduated with associate’s degrees in Christian Ministry in May 2023 and are now pursuing their bachelor’s degrees. The second group of seminarians are on their way to earning their associate’s degrees with 126 hours of course work under their belts in December.

Dr. Masters is now enrolling the institution's third class, and that group is set to graduate in 2026. The privately funded program is an extension of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, which has operated within the MDOC since 2004. Commissioner Burl Cain helped establish the seminary program at the Mississippi State Penitentiary years ago while leading Louisiana's State Penitentiary. He is happy to welcome a new class of women enrolling in the seminary program without using taxpayers' dollars. "The seminary brings moral rehabilitation to the population through peer ministry. It helps eliminate gangs by creating positive groups of inmates. It also helps by creating future pastors to work in our communities," Commissioner Cain said.

The seminary provides opportunities for inmates to support each other as well as teach them valuable lessons that can be used within the correctional facility and after release. Inmates beam with pride when talking about how the seminary and the chapel built last year have changed the culture within the facility.

For inmate Sheila Ealey, the seminary is an opportunity not only for the graduates, but for other women within the facility, "We see the women that come to church, they worship, they meet us on the sidewalk with questions, or they will come to find us. When something is going on and they need comfort, they seek us out."

Since the planting of the churches and the arrival of the seminary program, church attendance has doubled.

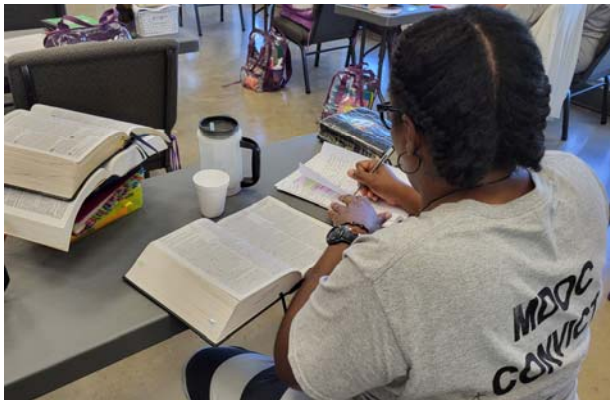
The Mississippi Department of Corrections will soon have its second group of women graduates who can work toward earning a position as a field minister within the facility.



Inmates who graduated the seminary program at the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women pray over incoming inmates (yellow jumpsuits) as part of their intake orientation upon arrival. The seminary graduates serve as field ministers to other inmates in addressing spiritual needs and coping with prison life.



Field minister inmate Cassie Barker talks to incoming inmates about the kind of life they can expect in prison and the assistance that the seminary graduates can provide in helping them adjust and cope with prison life.



Inmates at the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women in Rankin County study their lessons as students of the seminary program operated through a partnership between the Mississippi Department of Corrections and the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. The program trains females at MCIW and males at Mississippi State Penitentiary to become field ministers to assist other inmates in the housing areas.

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