



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Seminary Program Launched for Women at Central Mississippi Prison

JACKSON, MS (Jan. 15) – A group of incarcerated women are celebrating the beginning of their new journey in a seminary program that the Mississippi Department of Corrections expanded since launching it with incarcerated men more than 10 years ago.

During a ceremony at the chapel of the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility (CMCF) in Rankin County, MDOC Deputy Commissioner Gary Young on Thursday, January 14, presented 23 women with certificates marking the completion of the “Experiencing God” discipleship course designed to deepen their understanding of God and their faith. It is also a requirement for the seminary program within the prison.

The women will join other inmates in the 29-member inaugural women’s class in a four-year fully accredited seminary program taught through the Leavell College of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Starting Tuesday, January 19, the seminarians will receive training to become inmate religious assistants to assist chaplains.

Deputy Commissioner Young, who oversees programs, education, re-entry, and rehabilitation activities in the prison system, told the women they have the support of the agency. Mississippi’s seminary for women is one of only three of its kind in the nation with the others in Louisiana and Georgia. It is the same program as the one that started for the men at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman in 2009, the second of five programs in prisons across the nation.

“Your seminary will grow exponentially and there is no doubt about that. One of the things you want to try to do is make a place better when you leave than how you found it. You have done that already,” Young said. “It won’t be easy but as you progress with your seminary degree, you will make this a better place. You have reached a great milestone and the greatness is yet to come.”

The seminary program is entirely privately funded with no taxpayer funds being used, Young said. In addition to the New Orleans school, support is also coming from the Mississippi Baptist Convention through donations and fundraising efforts. One of the participating instructors also coordinated the raising of more than \$8,000 for supplies and materials for the program.

Young also noted that persons of all faith denominations are welcome and invited to participate in the seminary program.

To participate, inmates 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 have a G.E.D. They also must have completed the “Experiencing God” course and be recommended by a chaplain or spiritual leader.

After two years in the program, the participants will have earned Associate’s Degrees, and after four years, they will have earned Bachelor’s degrees. Also, a new class of inmates will be ushered into the program every two years.

Dr. Beth Masters, director of the program at CMCF, said the program is already making a difference in the women’s lives through the work completed.

“This program means a change in the lives of the women, their families, and the culture of the prison and the culture of society,” Masters said. “Examples of the change we have seen include women who have undergone restoration and reconciliation with their families through talking about their faith and what they have learned.”

While graduates will not be ordained, they will be in a position to minister to other inmates.

“The seminary program brings a deeper understanding of God’s word and how to minister to people in their current circumstances where they are. Chaplains have limitations in that they can’t 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,” Masters said.

After graduation, as inmate religious assistants, the inmates will be able to assist with baptisms, funerals, worship services, and offender emergencies. They will also conduct Bible studies, assist volunteer religious faith groups, and lead devotions among other activities. Future plans include starting a hospice program for the inmates.

Inmate Sara Koch said she is looking forward to deepening her faith and using it to help others. “This means everything to me. I have gained wisdom and clarity and this is a door that is opening for me to do whatever God’s purpose is,” Koch said. “It’s not about me, it is about what He wants.”

For inmate Breanna Conerly, the seminary is an opportunity for a new focus of service. “It means everything to have this experience because I have needed it for so long. I once lived a fast life and that was on my time. Now I am living in God’s time,” Conerly said. “I want to grow as much as I can so I can share that light with others.”

The launching of the women’s seminary program was a high priority for Commissioner Burl Cain, who took the reins of the agency last year. Cain, who helped with the establishment of the seminary program at the Mississippi State Penitentiary while leading Louisiana’s state prison, said he was happy to see the program already in progress here.

Media note: PHOTO CAPTIONS

MDOC 1 – Inmate Katina Quinn, left, receives her certificate from MDOC Deputy Commissioner Gary Young for completion of the “Experiencing God” discipleship course in preparation for her participation in the first seminary class for women at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility.

MDOC 2 – Inmate Sara Koch reacts to words of encouragement provided to her and other incarcerated women about to begin seminary coursework at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility.

MDOC 3 – Deputy Commissioner Gary Young congratulates and offers words of encouragement to the woman starting the first seminary at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. Young oversees programs, education, rehabilitation, and re-entry activities for the Mississippi Department of Corrections.

MDOC 4 – Dr. Beth Masters, who will serve as the director of the seminary program at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility, offers words of support to the inmates.

