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Research Partnership Highlights ongoing Transformation in Mississippi Prison System

PARCHMAN - Two years into a continuing research study at the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman, a new film offers a glimpse into the early transformation and cultural changes observed so far. The film premiered at the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C.

The significant role the seminary program plays in reshaping prison culture is the primary focus of "Faith and Flourishing: Parchman Farm," which was shown on September 30. The film was shared with the Mississippi Corrections and Criminal Justice Oversight Task Force.

The study, led by Pepperdine University President Jim Gash and Dr. Byron Johnson, a distinguished researcher in criminal justice at Baylor University, examines the impact of voluntary participation in the prison seminary on rehabilitation and prosocial behavior among inmates. The research also explores the effect of inmate field ministers and faith-based groups that have formed within the prison population.

Statewide Public Defender Andre' de Gruy, a task force member, said he was already aware of the change. "I've been visiting Parchman since the late 80s," he said. "What I've seen at Parchman this year is a transformed place."

The film features Johnson, Chief Superintendent Marc McClure, and Commissioner Burl Cain, as well as inmates who share personal reflections on the prison's transformation.

"I can honestly say that my experience at Parchman made me a better, more honest man. A sober man, a man worthy of respect and love, and a man who will be productive and a valuable addition to his community," said Will Westmoreland, an inmate who was recently granted parole.

Johnson emphasizes the community aspect of moral rehabilitation stating, "Flourishing isn't about 'I'm doing better' - flourishing is 'how is my neighbor doing'. It's communal. As people are authentically transformed, everything changes, and now they think, 'How can I help my brother?'"

The project expands upon previous research into Commissioner Cain's efforts to improve correctional facilities with challenging histories. Mississippi was chosen as a follow-up to studies of Cain's earlier success at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola. Similar research initiatives have been conducted in Colombia, New York, South Africa, Texas, and Virginia.

"Mississippi's prison system has been going through changes," said Charles Dunn, an inmate with a life sentence. "For true change to happen in Mississippi's prison system, it has to start with us, the inmates...serving lengthy sentences, willing to help others learn from their mistakes in life and understand that they have the choice to control their futures. We are finally able to sense pride in the things we do, to know that we are valued."

To view film noted above, visit the following link:

<https://vimeo.com/1062854452/92319b0d5d?fl=pl&fe=sh>

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