

Faith behind bars: MCIW prisoners graduate with seminary degrees in historic NOBTS commencement

By Tony Martin
Editor

The commencement service for the graduating class of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (NOBTS) and Leavell College was held at the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women (MCIW) on Dec. 16 at the prison in Rankin County. Twelve women graduated with either an Associate of Arts in Christian Service or a Bachelor of Arts in Christian Service.

Beth Masters, director of the MCIW Extension Center at NOBTS, said, "The most rewarding thing about my job is seeing the women who are already believers step into leadership and just fall in love with Jesus even more. But also it's for those women here who don't know the Lord, getting to walk with them. And we've been talking lately about we're not only disciple makers, we're disciple senders. And if we've missed the sending part, we miss the whole thing."

Burl Cain, commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections and former warden at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola in West Feliciana Parish, north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, expressed his gratitude.

"I look back and can't express how much we appreciate folks in Mississippi, particularly the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB) because without the \$90,000 you give every year, we wouldn't have the graduation class we have," Cain said. "This state, Mississippi, and Louisiana are the only two states that will have chapels in every one of their

facilities, all paid for by private donations.

“And I have to thank Gov. (Tate) Reeves. Without him I wouldn’t be here. I promised him when he hired me that I was going to have a chapel in every one of the prisons because we needed more rehabilitation more than anything else, because we need God. He is really our Father and that’s what we need to rehabilitate people.”

Speaking of the graduates, Masters said, “Four of them will be heading to Delta Correctional Facility as field ministers. They are going to take on more responsibility, create new programs, and we’ll be able to expand our faith-based offerings because they will have the degree and are able to just be turned loose as field ministers. And so my greatest aspiration would be to see them step into those roles with integrity and honesty. Love people well and walk in obedience to the Lord.”

Ben Browning, director of prison programs at NOBTS, emphasized the program’s significance.

“This program makes such an impact. I can’t describe how important this is,” Browning said. Addressing the students, he continued, “We are so thankful to be here in this journey with you and to welcome everyone on a big day like today.”

Masters added, “Integrity is a big thing in here. Integrity is not something that many of our women here have when they come in. There’s lots of hiding things. There’s lots of, ‘I can be one way with these people and one way with these people.’ And so to be authentically a Christ follower in every aspect of your life here is really hard. And over four years they’ve come to learn how to do that in a way that they didn’t before. And in a place that lives and breathes dishonesty and chaos and disruption, to walk in honesty is huge. And then just to love people well, because also in this environment, if you love somebody, your motives are always questioned. What are

you trying to get out of them? What are you trying to do? What are you trying to manipulate me to do?"

During the commencement, Superintendent Tereda Hairston offered words of encouragement.

"There are 12 exceptional women graduating today," she said. "Your accomplishments today are a testament to your unwilling, unwavering faith, unyielding determination, and resilience. As the first ever female graduates of this program in the state of Mississippi, you have not only earned the title of field ministers, but you have also carved a path for countless women who were following your footsteps. You have chosen a path of service, compassion, and spiritual guidance. You will minister to your fellow inmates offering solace, hope, and the transformative power of faith. This is a calling that requires immense strength, empathy, and a deep understanding of the human spirit.

"Throughout your journey, you have faced challenges and overcome many obstacles," Hairston continued. "You have navigated the complexities of the correctional system while pursuing your spiritual growth. Your dedication to both personal transformation and service to others is an inspiration to all. As you embark on your new roles as field ministers, remember the power of your voice and the impact you have on the lives of those you serve. You are pioneers, you are role models and agents of change. May your journey as field ministers be filled with purpose, fulfillment, and the enduring grace of God."

Shawn Parker, executive director-treasurer of the MBCB, gave the charge to the graduating class.

"I serve as the executive director of the Mississippi Baptist Convention," Parker said. "I've served in this role now for five years and one of the first significant decisions I was called to make was to give approval for the funding of this

program at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility. And I must say now, five years later, I consider it to be one of the proudest decisions that I have ever made.”

“Ministry is not about the recognition you receive,” he continued. “It’s not about the affirmation that you get from others. I love the affirmation that I receive from being a minister. It took me a long time to recognize that that affirmation means very little. It’s not about the affirmation you receive. It’s not about the recognition that you gain. It’s not about notoriety. It’s not about establishing some exalted status. It really is about humble service to the Lord.

“Some of you may be meteoric, and it may be that over the course of the next month, you make such a splash in the ministry that God has given you that everybody in the Mississippi Correctional Facility and far beyond knows your name and knows who you are,” Parker said. “But my guess is most of you are going to fly below the radar and you’re not going to receive that level of notoriety. And the key is this, do it anyway. This is the kind of faith that pleases Christ.”

Other commencement speakers included Norris Grubbs, provost at NOBTS, who gave the invocation and conferred the degrees; Mike Wetzel, director of prison programs at NOBTS, who brought a welcome from the seminary; Sandy Vandercook, associate vice president for accreditation and assessment at NOBTS, who shared the prayer of commissioning; Greg Wilton, dean of Leavell College, who presented the graduates; Tommy Doughty, who led the congregation in the “Hymn to Alma Mater”; and Masters, who gave the benediction.