

MAGNOLIA MINDS: No secrets in prison – a glance at baptism Sunday

By Dr. Beth Masters

From the back of the sanctuary, a line of women stood with towels in hand, gazing toward the water where sunlight gleamed off the baptismal. These women, ranging from twenty-two to nearly eighty years old, were waiting for baptism at the Mississippi Correctional Institute for Women (MCIW). They had been attending church, hearing God's Word, and learning how to follow Jesus amidst incarceration. Although these ladies come from varied backgrounds, they currently share a common address. This is not their desired address, but it is a place where God is at work and where a community is being transformed.

As each woman stepped to the front of the baptism line, someone who had been a part of her discipleship journey read her "life change story with Jesus." Phrases like "God has turned my mess into a message" and "I'm listening Lord, I'm finally listening" echoed throughout the sanctuary. Many of these women had endured lives marked by rape, abuse, drug addiction, and more. Yet, in these moments, they spoke new words over their lives about the power of Jesus to make them a new creation.

One of the women shared, "I even worshiped Satan for a while because of my messed-up view of God. But now I see God and His love for me." This transformation was not just amazing for her but for the others as well. On this particular Sunday, forty-nine women entered the waters of baptism as four faith-families cheered them on. During one service, the inmate choir sang "take me to the waters to be baptized." As the song rang

out, tears welled up in the eyes of many in the congregation.

The women being baptized were affected by the gravity of their decision, as were the other ladies in the congregation. Each life change story that was read mentioned circumstances that many in the congregation related to at that moment. The bitter days these women had survived allowed them to see the stark contrast in the sweetness found by following the Lord. The week before baptism was Easter, where worship service attendance was high, but on this particular Sunday, the number of women in attendance was even greater. They came to see their friends and chosen family publicly declare a life change of following Jesus.

The difference with making a public statement of baptism in prison, as opposed to the free world, is that there are no secrets in prison. Overall, the residents of MCIW live in open bay quarters and sleep on bunk beds with a lockbox built into the foot for storage. They go to the dining hall together, attend school together, and spend time in the yard together. This level of togetherness means that if someone declares they are changed in front of their faith-family and yet their life does not match that declaration, the accountability is beyond anything a person in the free-world could understand.

In reality, the word "accountability" is not popular, especially in prison. It is a concept that the women in the seminary at MCIW have learned over the past three years and have shared with the population. The idea of someone asking hard questions instead of turning a blind eye is difficult for their culture. Honestly, it is challenging in any situation; however, people outside of prison can have secrets, but remember, *there are no secrets in prison*. This reality makes baptism Sunday at MCIW even more special.

Another notable event at MCIW is the seminary program from Leavell College. Currently, twenty-two students are enrolled, with an additional twenty-five set to begin in August 2024.

These women work diligently each week to lead Bible studies, care for women throughout the facility, and create environments for spiritual and emotional growth. These ladies are being used by God to do great things. This is one of the reasons why April 7, National Baptism Day for Southern Baptist Churches, was such a joy – watching these faith-families gather and be a part of a national expression of worship.

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