Lee Schott never expected her pastoral pursuit with the United Methodist Church would require correctional officer training. But she got three weeks of it before starting her new position as head pastor of Women at the Well Church in July.

Her congregation is made up of female inmates and meets behind the bars of the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women in Mitchellville—a place Schott never imagined herself spending much time. But once inside, many are surprised by how normally and traditionally the church operates.

Colorful banners hang around the sanctuary, where at least 60 women gather weekly. Many of them tithe regularly, despite their prison wages being less than $1 per hour. The average rate is 20 to 43 cents per hour. Bible studies and prayer groups meet weekly. The church also offers a re-entry program for women preparing to leave the prison. And all this is directed by a church council made up of inmates and Schott, the only church member from outside the prison walls.

Schott said her job with Women at the Well feels somewhat different than at a traditional pastor’s role, considering the needs of her congregation.

“It’s like pastoring an outside church, only intensified,” she said. “The issues are more raw.”

Her counseling skills are in higher demand during the week in a place where about 60 percent of the women suffer from mental illness. That is why her office door inside the prison is always open for inmates to come and go as they need to confide.

Schott said she has a direct impact, either through counseling, church services or weekly group meetings, on about 20 percent of the roughly 540 women at the prison.

The pastor says she goes a step beyond Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25 concerning visiting prisoners. In the New Testament passage, Jesus identifies the righteous—“the sheep”—as those who fed the hungry, clothed the naked and visited prisoners. Schott truly understands the latter of these actions.

“Because of Pastor Lee, we aren’t just imaginary. We’re real. And we’re not just looked at as inmates. We’re looked at as women.”

Pastor Lee Schott leads a service Thursday at Women at the Well Church at the Iowa Correctional Institution for Women in Mitchellville. JESSICA MILLER/HERALD-INDEX PHOTO.

Church heals women living behind bars

Women at the Well directly impacts 20 percent of inmates at Iowa facility

By TIMOTHY MEINCH
timothy.meinch@dmreg.com

IOWA CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION FOR WOMEN
Head pastor: Lee Schott
Services: 7 p.m. Thursday
Contact: (515) 822-4594, womenatthewell@iaumc.org
Online: www.womenatthewellumc.org
Facebook page: Women at the Well UMC

See CHURCH, Page 4B

Inmates and others involved with the Women at the Well Church pray for inmates who are set to be released soon.

Iowa Correctional Institution for Women inmates Tiara Williams (left), 28, and Jami Sullivan, 31, talk about their involvement with Women at the Well Church.

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