Church heals women living behind bars

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

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Iowa Correctional Institution for Women inmates Tiara Williams (left), 28, and Jami Sullivan, 31, talk about their involvement with Women at the Well Church.
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 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 also 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 women to come and go as they need to confide.
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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.

“This ministry does live that out. But I would say it’s more than that,” she said of the church that began in 2007. “It’s more than visiting and leaving. It’s getting connected and being changed by it.”

The United Methodist pastor speaks from personal experience when she says working with inmates will change you, because eight months ago she did not want to accept the position when she was selected as head pastor of the Women at the Well Church.

“I was totally reluctant. I was totally not excited about this,” Schott said of leading the congregation.

But that soon changed once she met the women and fell in love with the ministry, she said. The prison congregation meets on Thursday evenings so Schott can visit other congregations around the state on Sundays and share the powerful story unfolding at Women at the Well.

This aspect of the ministry brings growth to both the women on the inside and the congregations on the outside — many of which donate regularly to Women at the Well to sustain the ministry.

“Because of Pastor Lee, we aren’t just imaginary. We’re real,” said Megan Jo Sells, a member of the Women at the Well Church council.

“And we’re not just looked at as inmates. We’re looked at as women.”
Another woman on the council, Tiara Williams, 28, said she has received significant healing from attending the church, which she joined two years ago.

“This is the first place I told my story,” said Williams, noting she holds a 30-year sentence. “I figure if I want to heal, I have to let go and I have to tell my story.”

Many members said Women at the Well has become a safe place where they can be open and honest, and heal through safe relationships with others.

“I’ve made more friends here that I can count on,” said Jami Sullivan, 31, who had not attended a church since the age of 12 before she started going to Women at the Well five months ago.

She said she hopes to be released in a couple weeks, but plans to continue working with Schott and the congregation long after that.

The pastor welcomes outside individuals and congregations to visit Women at the Well — so long as they request the visit and begin the background check process a couple weeks in advance. She also encourages visitors to be challenged and changed, as she was, by the experience.

“These women worship in a way that is really powerful and authentic, and (visitors) realize these women really know how to worship,” Schott said, recalling previous visitors. “They say, ‘These women look like my niece, my daughter, my cousin. They aren’t as scary as I expected,’ and they feel a connection with these women that they didn’t expect.”
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