Caged flock
Pastor of Women at the Well practices faith behind bars
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“It’s not ‘how could you do this terrible thing you did,’ it’s ‘I don’t know how you’re still standing,’” she said.

Although she’s gained more of an understanding of those within her ministry, Schott did experience apprehension going into WAW, concerned the congregation would not take her seriously. The pastor admittedly had little “street cred,” she said and was worried about communicating to the group.

“God is really good at bridging that gap,” she said. “And what I get to do is love them and help them hear that God loves them. That’s a surprise to a lot of people.”

Schott said this is visible in the story of “K.” The pastor uses initials when referring to her congregation members in the Women at the Well UMC Facebook page promoting the church’s efforts. K came to Mitchellville within the last two years from a very abusive relationship. Schott described the inmates a simple person and quiet. Although WAW has helped K with a transformation, Schott said being in an environment away from the violence has been just as influential.

“We’re part of her story,” Schott said. “I’ve just seen her unfurl. She’s part of our leadership group. She’s part of choir. Over the last couple of months, she’s started singing solos. If you would have asked me when she first arrived if I thought she would be singing solos, I would have said ‘no way.’”

The church is booked for worship visits months in advance of the service. Volunteers in the faith community are encouraged to attend. Services are held Thursday nights, so Schott is able to travel and speak to other transitional congregations throughout Iowa on Sundays about WAW.

But within the prison walls, Schott said she gets to share compassion with people who have never before heard the words “God loves you.”

“That’s really important because a lot of these women don’t have visits. The idea that these strangers would come and worship with them and visit with them is really meaningful and it’s a connection to the wider community,” Schott said.

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