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## Prison Preachers Learning Their Trade



Staff photo by Doug Koontz

*Inmate Henry Walker listens to Bible instruction at the Maryland Correctional Training Center in Hagerstown.*

HAGERSTOWN -- A hum of anticipation strengthens to a low roar as the men stream into the low-ceilinged room. On the simple dais are three microphones. In the far corner near the front, a band assembles: Bongos, a drum set, electric guitars, a keyboard.

Church services at the largest prison in Maryland are held regularly, though the chapel, called Grace Church by its members, holds only 145 and the inmate population is more than 3,000. The chapel is open seven days a week and offers a variety of activities and programs.

This night, however, it becomes a classroom. Thirty of the men are seminary students, the first group of prisoners in the United States to be enrolled in an accredited theological program, according to its advocates.

"Save the souls farthest from you, Father ... let your spirit reign supreme," he implores, to more vigorous nodding and clapping.

That different face belongs to the Rev. John Bayles, the one who delivers what prison chaplain Gerald Banks characterizes as "top-shelf teaching."

The Rev. Bayles comes from Halpine Church in Rockville. He is also the leader of this branch of the Covenant Theological Seminary of Tallahassee, Fla., and a member of its board of directors.

The program, established in 1991, is taught in Florida, at the Halpine Church and in a self-directed format, giving students a more affordable gateway to a credential. The two-year, 34-hour credit program culminates in a master's of theological studies.

A former inmate studying theology at Halpine Church told the Rev. Bayles that many of his fellow prisoners could benefit from the same program.

"Most of the speakers in our church came to evangelize, not teach. We didn't learn interpretation or the historical context of the Bible," said Tony Pavlo, who was released in 2001 after serving time for armed robbery. Today, he is an active church member, determined to help turn around the lives of others.

When he told the Rev. Bayles that he wished the guys at MCTC could have the same chance, the pastor replied, "Why not?"

The two met with the Rev. Banks and the idea took form.

The prison-to-pulpit program drew a standing-room only crowd at its first seminar in November 2002. Would-be students applied and 30 were accepted. The Rev. Bayles meets with them four times a semester; the rest of the course consists of self-directed study, including homework, readings and papers.

The strongly evangelistic and systematic curriculum of the program and the dynamic style of the Rev. Bayles appeal to MCTC students, many of whom have sought out other educational opportunities while in prison.

"Several things are very effective in helping people change their lives," said Mr. Stouffer, the warden. "Whether it is further education, a skill or a spiritual influence. And we work on providing those things to change the direction of these men's lives."

Faith-based opportunities, according to Dr. W.A. Young, director of the Covenant Theological Seminary, can make all the difference in life after prison.

He said studies in Florida have shown that 67 percent of prisoners there end up prisoners again. Those who go through faith-based programs, however, have a recidivism rate of just 35 percent.

"The Christian faith has a big impact, helping them to be real contributors to their communities," Dr. Young said.

MCTC seminary students have different goals, but are motivated by a desire to counsel others and further their academic knowledge and preaching skills.

"These are amazing guys," the Rev. Bayles said. "Very enthusiastic, very grateful. And they come with a huge range of abilities and backgrounds."

Drummond holds a bachelor of science degree in business from Frostburg State College. He has been in prison for 23 years and six months. The program is helping him toward his goal of becoming a full-time prison minister.

"Who better to go back and tell these guys, 'I have been where you are sitting,'" he said. "They already know that they are the scum of society, the lowest of the low. A connection to God can help turn them around."

Covenant Theological Seminary leaders say they hope to graduate 150 men from the program in the next 10 years, influencing not only the men who complete the program, but the communities where they return.

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