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## Finding new life 38 inmates baptized at Kershaw prison

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Prisoners celebrate during a baptism service for 38 men at the Kershaw Correctional Institution on Monday, Jan. 23. The service was conducted by members of Elevation Church in Blakeney.

Haley Jones

Thirty-eight prisoners got a new lease on life, spiritually, this week.

The men were baptized during a service Monday, Jan, 23, at Kershaw Correctional Institution and Reentry Center. Pastors from Elevation Church in Blakeney, N.C., led the event and church members came to celebrate the milestone.

Chaplain Jerry Potoka has been working at the Kershaw facility for 15 years, retiring during that time and then coming back to work as a second chaplain, under Chaplain Miller.

“We regularly do baptism services here as guys change their life and commit their life to follow Christ, then we baptize them here in the chapel,” Potoka said.

“Elevation Church and Transformation Church (in Indian Land) are the two big church supporters that we have here. This is the opportunity that they wanted to be able to say we’ve had a lot of people respond positively to our programming.”

Potoka said the program with Elevation Church is so popular among inmates that there is a waiting list to join. Inmates must spend time in individual reflection and prayer, as well as listen to music and sermons by Pastor Furtick.

One of the inmates, Chris, has been in and out of the prison system for about seven years.

“Chris has been in prison between South Carolina and Georgia; this is at least his third time,” Potoka said.

“A lot of times guys have a history of being in church growing up, in church having a relationship with God, but then they get messed up,” Potoka said. “And then when they come back here, so it’s an eye-opener, it’s a wake-up call. And so, they’ll come and be involved, and that was Chris.”

Chris said through his Bible studies and reflection, he realized he wanted to get baptized through Elevation Church.

“Just being back in the dorm doing my readings that I was doing, I actually felt that heavy prompting from God to get baptized, and I struggled with it because I was baptized when I was younger,” Chris said. “Especially coming into prisons — oh, God, I feel like I’m a hypocrite doing this.”

Chris said for him getting baptized is like renewing marriage vows — “you never stop loving the person, you’re just renewing your commitment to them.”

Chris said getting baptized exemplifies God’s forgiveness to him for the mistakes he made, and the number of times he found his way back into the prison system.

“It’s an overwhelming feeling for me to know that there’s that kind of love, because I can’t forgive myself at times for things I’ve done,” he said. “I struggle with that. But knowing that no matter what I’ve done, he does forgive me; he has cast my sin as far as east to west. It’s an overwhelming feeling for me.”

Chris said there was nervous excitement in the cell blocks leading up to the baptism, because prison is a place where there is so little hope, and everyone has been beat down.

But “God is still moving, and he is working and there are guys who want to gently turn their life around,” he said.

Chris said it was encouraging to see the growth and progress each person has made with their faith journey.

Miller started the event by rejoicing with inmates for allowing Jesus Christ to enter their life.

“We’re glad to witness this, I’m so grateful,” Miller said. “I want to thank God for bringing us here and helping us to celebrate the wonderful changes that Jesus Christ can make in our lives. I want to thank Elevation, too, for all the support that has been a hand in leading up to this moment.”

Jaclyn Cataner, director of outreach for Elevation Church, became involved in prison ministry through personal experience, as her father was incarcerated.

“Taking on that legacy of what my dad wanted to do, which was being in prison ministry, it’s just something that has pulled on my heart this entire time,” she said. “It motivates me to get here. I’m just so happy. It’s such a blessing to see these guys get baptized, and it was so special, and so important to me.”

Dan Quartuccio, pastor of prison ministry of Elevation Church, said he and his team have been coming to Kershaw every Monday for about the last five months to hold church services.

“The biggest thing we want to communicate to these guys is that they are loved, that there’s grace. God loves them, we love them, and God’s purpose for their life,” he said.

Quartuccio also said that consistency is key with any prison ministry. That goes for those looking to be baptized, and church volunteers who lead the ministry.

“We want to communicate to them that, ‘hey, we’re gonna be here. Regardless of the month, you can count on Elevation Church to be here, forever,’ ” Quartuccio said.

Potoka said that 85% of Kershaw Correctional Institution inmates get out of the prison system within five years, so it is important to use inmate’s time intentionally when they arrive at the facility, to help them turn their life around and have the ability to reenter society.

“We have the lowest recidivism rate in the nation and South Carolina, which is great,” said Chrysti Shain, S.C. Department of Corrections communications director.

“Good programming is good discipline,” Potoka said. “We do everything from how to be a better dad, a better husband, a better citizen, how to think different, how to reduce their criminal thinking. The more they do here, then they’re able to do it when they go home, too.”

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Haley