



An employee publication of the
Texas Department of Criminal Justice

May/June 2015
Volume 22 Issue 5

Agency News

Darrington Seminary graduates first class of ministers

In May, the inaugural class of 33 TDCJ offenders graduated from the Darrington Extension of the J. Dalton Havard School for Theological Studies.

The groundwork for the seminary program began when the Chairman of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee John Whitmire, then-Senator Dan Patrick and TDCJ officials visited the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, then home to the only in-prison

seminary in the nation. Once considered one of the most dangerous prisons in the country, Angola's culture began to change when the seminary program was introduced.

With the support of the Legislature, TDCJ expanded its offender rehabilitation programming by creating the Darrington Seminary, which accepted its first class of 40 students in the fall of 2011. TDCJ Executive Director Brad Livingston spoke at the gradu-

ation ceremony in May and underscored the unique nature of this program, saying, "We have a lot of programs within TDCJ, but this one is an absolutely exciting one - very different from what you'll see in most prisons across the country."

Most rehabilitative programs in prison target offenders who will be releasing into the community, with the intention of making them productive, law-abiding citizens and reducing recidivism. More than two-thirds of the Darrington Seminary students are convicted of murder, with the remainder serving long sentences for aggravated assault. Offenders accepted into the program must have at least 10 years remaining on their sentence before they're eligible for parole and many will spend a significant portion of their lives behind bars.

With their new degree in hand, a Bachelor of Science in Biblical Studies from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, these offender-ministers are only beginning their journey toward redemption. They will now transfer to six maximum-security units located throughout the state where they will work to spread God's word. As Field Ministers,



Seminary graduates receive a Bachelor of Science in Biblical Studies from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Continued on page 2

Continued from page 1

their focus will be to mentor and tutor other offenders who will be returning to the community and still have a chance to lead productive lives. Seminary graduates will lead discipleship classes and Bible studies, minister to hospice and hospital patients, and offer grief counseling. They will also work with the agency's unit chaplains to conduct worship services.

Darrington Unit Warden Mark Jones has seen how this pro-social perspective has changed the culture at his maximum-security prison, noting, "Their faith in Christ will encourage others to become better individuals by leading them closer to God." He believes that by sharing their testimony, these recent graduates can provide hope and serve as a good example to other offenders, demonstrating that anyone can change to become a better person. Jones continues, "The opportunity has now arrived for them to preach what they've practiced for the last four years. It's time for them to show that they can be humble, obedient and can treat others with the utmost respect."

All applicants are screened by Chaplaincy staff and members of the Southwestern Sem-



Offenders graduating from the Darrington Unit Seminary sing *To God Be the Glory* during their commencement ceremony.

inary before being accepted into the program and are required to adhere to a strict code of conduct. Since its inception, the seminary has added a class of 40 new students each year, and current enrollment stands at 185. No taxpayer money is used to support the program. Private donations pay for the salaries of the professors as well as computers, books and materials.

Executive Director Livingston's closing remarks to the recent graduating class described the positive effect this program will have throughout the agency, stating, "Before you know it, future classes will graduate and you will have peers in every unit throughout the state. Imagine the profound impact God will have through you and your peers." ●