

**CHURCH OF HOPE:  
An American Baptist Church at the South Dakota Women's Prison**

Church of Hope had its first service on a Saturday night in July of 1997. Five inmates and two visitors from area churches attended. I arrived with a dozen old-edition Lutheran hymnals that had been donated to us, paper cups and plates, and a small container of juice for communion. We had no piano or organ, no sound system, no pulpit or communion table. Almost nine years later, through the generosity of ABC churches across the Dakotas and churches of many denominations in our city, we have all of these items: new hymnals, a communion set, a piano, and a guitar. We even have a beautiful free-standing stained-glass window made by one of our former inmates.

Our weekly worship services happen on Saturday night. Our average attendance is about 90. Often it is our music that brings women to church the first time. "I didn't know Christian music could be fun!" they say. We use a lot of contemporary Christian music but the old standard hymns get included too.

As I have preached over the years, I have watched the faces in the congregation: some very young, some senior citizens, some dark, and some light. Some faces remain blank during worship. Some faces shine with the Holy Spirit. Some faces are wet with tears.

The "life stories" that I've heard over the years have been sadly similar. Most of those who attend our services have been abused: some physically, some verbally, some sexually, and some a combination of the three. Many have grown up on their own, their parents too caught up in addiction and their own issues to pay much attention to them. Most of our inmates are mothers. Many have lost their parental rights, which is another hurt to deal with in a long line of hurts.

I've seen God make amazing transformations in lives during the last nine years. Terrible anger vanquished. Unforgiveness, violence, despair; and soul-destroying hurts gone. These are replaced by faith, self-worth, and compassion. Hope for a better life, power over addiction, mended relationships, and spiritual peace become realities for the first time.

I receive letters from women after they leave prison telling me that it was the church services and the Bible studies that got them through their incarceration. Many of these women are now church members in their communities. It's good to know Church of Hope has lived up to its name.