



# Chapel of Hope



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ROSHARON, Texas (SWBTS) – At 7 p.m. every Tuesday, a buzz can be heard throughout the living quarters at the Darrington prison unit as more than 200 inmates discuss the Bible and pray for one another. Darrington is a maximum-security unit within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) system.

Started by students in Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary’s Darrington extension program, these Bible studies contain both Southwestern students as well as inmates from the general population. They represent the growing culture change within the Texas penal system anticipated by seminary administrators, program organizers, TDCJ leadership, and lawmakers. These leaders gathered with inmate students at a chapel service, Aug. 26, to celebrate the start of a new semester and to welcome the third class of students into a program that is already changing lives.

“This is a true partnership and one that we value tremendously,” TDCJ executive director Brad Livingston said at the chapel service. “Now we’re moving into the third year. We already have a lot of success behind us, and I know we have future success in front of us as well.”

In 2011, Southwestern Seminary launched undergraduate classes in Darrington, offering a Bachelor of Science in Biblical Studies to 40 inmates. An additional class of students has been added each year since, and the current number of enrolled students stands at 114, with the first class expected to graduate in May 2015.

“Very clearly,” Livingston said, “it’s a program designed to change lives so that offenders who one day are released do not come back. In addition to that, the real unique component to this is so that they can minister to other offenders while they’re here within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. It’s a fascinating and unique program not found in many other places, and we are committed to it.”

(Continued on Reverse)

## A seminary behind bars seeks to change Texas prison system

BY JON HERSKOVITZ

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1 OF 15 Offenders read and write papers inside the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary library located in the Darrington Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice men’s prison in Rosharon, Texas August 12, 2014.

CREDIT: REUTERS/ADREES LATIF

The privately funded program was modeled after a similar program at Angola Prison in Louisiana, which is led by New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Texas State Senator John Whitmire, who serves as dean of the Texas Senate and chair of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, visited Angola four years ago and was immediately impressed by the impact the program had on inmates and the culture within the prison. He returned from that trip convinced that the program could be duplicated in Texas.

Whitmire addressed students during the chapel service, challenging them to continue to work hard.

“Juniors, guess what—we are already talking about when you graduate in the class of 2015, the plan is for you to go and minister to other inmates, often younger inmates who will be released sooner than later,” Whitmire said.

“You know when you got into this program that it is largely not to minister to the free world; you’re assignment—and you’re already doing it, I understand, in your cell blocks—you’re going to change the culture of this system. It’s already happening in Darrington.

“Gentleman, I need your help. The other inmates, approximately 150,000 at 109 locations this afternoon, need your help. They’re looking to you for leadership.

“We are out of space already. We met earlier this afternoon about how we can turn the gymnasium into classrooms. We are ready to receive approximately 40 more students. The Lord is going to use you to carry His message and change the whole penal system of the state of Texas.”

Southwestern Seminary President Paige Patterson preached the chapel sermon from 2 Samuel 16, which gives the unusual account of a man named Shimei hurling rocks and curses at King David as he escaped Jerusalem when his son Absalom declared himself king. David’s mighty men asked if they should kill Shimei for his insolence, but David refused to allow it.

Patterson asked inmates how David could have responded to Shimei in this way when man’s natural tendency is to fight back.

“David was not a weak man but a meek man,” Patterson told inmates. He explained that David recognized God’s sovereignty and trusted the Lord.

“I can absolutely trust the future to [God] because He is just, He is merciful, He is all-knowing, and He is all-powerful,” Patterson said, adding, “You can trust a God like that.”

Classes at Southwestern’s Darrington program are taught by faculty from the seminary’s Houston campus. This semester, professors are teaching three classes per day, five days per week, inside the prison.