

Partnership forms church at Ionia, MI prison

Contributed by Charles Honey
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IONIA -- Dressed in blue-and-orange prison suits and tennis shoes, the men came forward for Holy Communion singing an old spiritual.

"Hallelujah, we're going to see the king," they sang in deep baritone voices. "Soon and very soon, we are going to see the king."

The Rev. Richard Rienstra gave each a small wafer, saying, "The body of Christ, broken for you." The Rev. Carol Muller offered cups of grape juice: "The blood of Christ, shed for your sins."

The inmates smiled at each other, shook hands. They began clapping in time, and their voices grew stronger.

"No more crying there, we are going to see the king. No more dying there, we are going to see the king."

Inside the walls of this state prison, the presence of God was evident in the faces and voices of these two dozen men. For two hours, in a cinder-block classroom, they found faith within the razor wire.

For Dave Payne, serving a life sentence for murder, this new congregation is making a real difference at the Ionia Bellamy Creek Correctional Facility.

"When there's a strong Christian presence, it changes the very atmosphere of the prison," said Payne, 38, a slender inmate from Kalamazoo. "It has a very transformative effect. We've already begun to experience some positive fellowship."

That is one of the aims of the first prison congregation in Michigan, recently launched as Celebration Fellowship.