

**PRISON MINISTRY WITH CHEMICALLY DEPENDENT AFRICAN
AMERICAN WOMEN EXPOSED TO TRAUMA**

An Interview with Reverend Dee Dee Osobor

ABSTRACT

African American churches throughout the United States have formed drug ministries to address the increased incarceration rates of African Americans with substance use disorders. This interview is with Reverend Dee Dee Osobor, Director of Prison Ministries of Apostolic Faith Church, Chicago, Illinois, where Bishop Horace Smith is pastor. Reverend Osobor's ministry focuses on helping chemically dependent African American women who are incarcerated heal from trauma.

Interviewer: Reverend Osobor, how did you first become interested in prison ministry?

Reverend Osobor: My introduction to prison ministries began when I lived in California in the 1990s. I was first involved with Angel Tree, which gave gifts to children of incarcerated parents. My impetus for involvement in Angel Tree was the fact that when I grew up as a girl living in Chicago, my mother was hospitalized a great deal. Since I knew how much I missed my own mother, I was convinced that children who had parents who were incarcerated missed them as well. My involvement in prison ministries began in 1992. I was invited by a fellow parishioner to attend a church service for a men's prison in Los Angeles area. I was apprehensive about going at first, not necessarily interested in prison ministry, but when I got there, I saw hundreds of men who were incarcerated standing in line to go to church, holding their bibles up in the air. This touched my heart; I felt the presence of God there, and I witnessed men crying as they gave their testimonies. This piqued my interest in prison ministry. In 1994, I moved back to Chicago, and by 1995, I had become a member of Apostolic Faith

Church. I immediately signed up for prison ministry and did a great deal of outreach at Cook County Jail, Women's Division, and Dwight Prison for Women. What I quickly noticed was the large percentage of African American women who were incarcerated for drug-related offenses and who had histories of trauma. I decided to make this my micro-specialty, to provide groups that facilitated healing for chemically dependent African American women who had experienced life trauma.

Interviewer: What types of trauma?

Reverend Osobor: I looked at the research that indicated that 70 to 90 percent of chemically dependent women were either sexually abused as girls or raped as women. I found that this is the story of most of the women I ministered to who were in prison, having the experience of being sexually abused by fathers, stepfathers, uncles, older brothers and even by women they knew. Some of these women have histories of prostitution to support their drug habits and were often abused by pimps and others who were soliciting prostitution. Almost every woman I have ministered to in the prison system has a history of domestic violence. Others had witnessed the domestic violence of their mothers when they were girls, and those women who have been incarcerated for long periods of time have also experienced a great deal of trauma while they have been in prison. No different than war veterans, many of these women suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and they medicate the pain of the trauma they have experienced with the use of alcohol and other drugs.

Interviewer: Is there something unique about trauma in African American women?

Reverend Osobor: I have found that, when women are traumatized, they tend to keep the trauma they have experienced a secret, and that secret tends to haunt them. It has been my experience that African American women are even more likely to keep these things secret. She is well aware of the experiences that African Americans in general and men specifically, experience in the criminal justice system. Her mindset might be that “this man gave me a black eye or he touched me inappropriately, but if I call the police on him, they might kill him.” The fact that so many African American women are socialized to be “strong,” the belief is that “if bad things happen to you, you don’t break down; you have to always be strong – your children need you; your family needs you; the whole community needs you.”

Interviewer: What has been your preparation for this work?

Reverend Osobor: After I became an ordained minister this gave me the spiritual foundation to do the work. I also combined this with secular knowledge. I enrolled in school to get a degree in alcohol and drug studies, and I completed many courses outside of college on gender-responsive approaches to working with women.

Interviewer: Can you describe the work that you do in prison with chemically dependent African American women exposed to trauma?

Reverend Osobor: I developed a prison-based model that we facilitate in the prisons entitled, “Processing the Pain.” The first thing we do is make sure that we do not open up wounds without providing a safety net for the women. We often meet with staff first, especially the counselors, to work with them so that they will provide support to the

women when we leave. We also make sure that our work is not a one-time occurrence, so after these powerful group experiences, we almost always come back the following week to process these feelings. In the groups themselves, we work to create a container, that is, a safe place where the women can share their stories of trauma and pain. Some of these women have sat with their pain for so many years, sharing their stories can be quite healing. I have learned that confession, when surrounded by support and non-judgmental eyes can be a healing ritual. Each group has a theme, ranging from childhood sexual abuse, incest, rape, domestic violence, etc., and using small and large group formats, women share their stories with each other, facilitated by members of the prison ministry. We also identify concrete ways to help women manage the symptoms of traumatic stress. We describe the stages of trauma recovery and do a great deal of grief work with these women. We also have segments in our workshops that give women tools to remain abstinent when they are released from prison if traumatic stress symptoms emerge. We provide many bible verses that promote healing from traumatic experiences. Another important part of this work is teaching women to love themselves. Many members of the drug ministry are also African American women who are leading successful lives. The feedback we have received from women in prison is that we serve as role models for them, that we are like mirrors of what they would like to become.

Interviewer: Are there any other services that you provide?

Reverend Osobor: As I visited the prisons, I became keenly aware of the fact that it is not enough to provide services for women behind bars; you must also create services

for them on the outside. When I was involved in prison ministry in Los Angeles, Chuck Colson, who was indicted with President Nixon during Watergate and sent to prison, started a program called, "Prison Fellowship Ministry." They started a pilot program called Transition of Parolees (T.O.P.'s) where they converted a hotel in LA where they received inmates once they were released from prison to provide spiritually-based recovery support. In Chicago, I started a nonprofit organization called, "SISTAH." It stands for "Sisters in Sobriety Transformed, Anointed, & Healed." This organization continues to provide recovery support and help with trauma healing when women are released from prison.

ABOUT REVEREND OSOBOR

Reverend Dee Dee Osobor is director of the Open Door Prison Ministries (ODPM) of the Apostolic Faith Church in Chicago. She is the founder and executive director of SISTAH, an organization that works with women of all background and religious beliefs in recovery. She can be reached at 773 762-9000 or mysistah@att.net. For more information, you can visit her website at www.mysistah.org.

She's been a survivor for over thirty years from drug use and also a six-year cancer survivor.