

## **Bishop Blake: We are part of God's body**

Written by Abby Ingalls

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Friday night's plenary session at the CCDA conference was dedicated to the empowerment of women and the transformation of Christ's love. This year's conference in Minneapolis was far travels for many, but seats were filled as 600-700 people sang together in worship and listened to speakers Cheryl Miller, Christina Harrison and Sarah Waters, introduced as strivers who work to "make beautiful things out of dust."

Miller is executive director of Perpetual Help Home, a housing ministry in Texas that helps women break the cycle of incarceration and homelessness. She also works as a volunteer mediator for a victim/offender mediation program of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. There she has seen women who have been victimized sit down in front of their offenders and forgive them. "It is the most profound reconciliation opportunity I have ever seen," Miller said. And in her programs, she says, "reconciliation is not an option."

Miller said she has seen women's lives transformed before her eyes, she said, including those of Harrison and Waters who joined her on the platform to share their testimonies. Harrison, a middle-aged woman who comes across as meek but on fire for Christ, said: "I came to Perpetual Home with a 12-year addiction, 89 pounds, and half alive." She added, "I lost my job, my home, and my son was taken away from me." Harrison joined Center for Peace, a program through Perpetual Help Home designed to teach women skills in computers, business, office work, and employment. "Center for Peace helps make major life changes," she said with tears in her eyes. Now a full-time director of outreach ministries at her church, Harrison said she is excited to be able to bring "tangible hope to others and my community."

Waters, a dark-hair woman with a sturdy disposition, told the haunting stories of her past. She had a 20-year drug addiction to heroin, cocaine and methamphetamines, had been in prison five times, and has eight felonies. She recounted how she was discharged from Navy boot camp for the use of heroin, and was a thief who stole any chance she got. But, coming to Perpetual Help Home and enrolling in the Center for Peace program changed her life, she said. With a crack in her voice, Waters told the audience that she was praying for reconciliation for her family. "I need prayer for reconciliation, because my brother, my mother and my father have not spoken to me in 13 years," she said.

Later, with a smile that was difficult to suppress, Waters proclaimed after 18 months at Perpetual Help Home and the Center for Peace program she is now the director of the Center for Peace, 32 hours away from a bachelor's degree in psychology, and a firm believer in Jesus Christ. "As for me," Waters said, "I know that the will of God will not take you where the grace of God cannot protect you." The crowd clapped in affirmation as Waters finished, "I am proud of the woman I have become – a woman of dignity and grace."

The night broke into songs of worship and a finishing message from Bishop Charles Blake, presiding bishop and CEO of the Church of God in Christ, the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world. His message was about being "workers together" and how we are one body in Christ. "I need you, and you need me – we are members of the human race. We are a part of God's body," Blake said.

This theme seemed to ring true with everyone attending that night. The three women of faith

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affirmed that they needed others to help them and now are sharing Christ's love as they serve others. People from all over the country came for the CCDA conference and stood together and worshipped – different parts, but all within the same body.

*Perpetual Help Home is a Christian-based restorative justice organization assisting women in breaking the cycle of incarceration and homelessness through making life changes, regardless of race, color, or creed. They help women become productive members of society with transitional support, new life-skills training and permanent supportive housing.*