

Devotions for 2017 Human Trafficking Awareness Day (January 11)

Imago Dei



Today and everyday, our church is called to stand up against the exploitation of God's creation. The 222nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stated "The church stands against human trafficking and forced labor based upon its conviction that each person bears the image of God, or Imago Dei, and that work is both a necessity and a calling: "the laborer deserves to be paid." (1 Tim.

5:18). We may understand the image of God as the capacity for personal, covenantal relationship that gives all humans individual worth and responsibility to help redeem creation. The prophetic vision in Isaiah 65 presents a harmony of humanity within nature and without violence; Jesus' message of the kingdom or reign of God calls into question every structure that excludes or dominates others. We do not deny the degree of complicity that all of us share in the market system, but insist that human beings should never be treated as commodities. "

A delegation from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) visited Thailand to look at human trafficking in a context different to the ones we understand here in the United States. Our delegation met with representatives of church organizations, civil society, and governments. We met with those working to stop trafficking before it starts and those responding to persons who have been trafficked. The following are reflections from our delegation. We invite you to join us in devotion to God and prayer that human trafficking will become a sin of the past.

Prayer: God, we pray that every person who has been created in your likeness may live here on earth with dignity and respect. We pray for the unjust systems to be broken and that all may be free.

Mr. Ryan Smith, Director and Representative to the United Nations
Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations
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One Girl's Strength and Courage

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. ~Isaiah 40:28-31

“Something or something must have compelled her to believe in a different life than what was happening to her. Where did such strength and courage come from?” I wondered to myself, while listening to the testimony of this young girl. Behind the screams for help in a guest house and running away and hiding from her father’s multiple attempts at rape, she was determined to escape. She convinced fellow guests to help her at the guest house. She trusted community leaders in the first town after running hours through the forest. She told her aunt and then her mother who eventually left her abusive husband. This young girl now lives in safety and peace.

This young girl lives at the New Life Center Foundation in Chiang Mai, a northern city close to the borders of Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. For almost 30 years, this ministry has provided shelter, therapy, and education for at-risk young girls who are vulnerable to harm, abuse and exploitation. Before arriving at the New Life Center Foundation, this young girl’s life was limited to the opportunities of an undocumented migrant girl. Her grandparents initially nurtured her, but once old enough she cared for them. Due to their lack of Thai national ID cards, her family also suffered from lack of opportunities. With her father, she performed hard manual labor on a construction site with other young children and adults. What minimal compensation for her labor went to her parents, not her. Without these ID cards, there was no access to school, work, or medical care. Aware of these limitations, her father lured her into traveling alone with him to obtain her ID card. Along the way, she was still vulnerable to abuse and exploitation from a trusted family member.

While she might not sound like a typical human trafficking victim, her life seemed to hurdle in that direction because of being born a girl; being born outside of Thailand; living with domestic violence; working in manual labor with little regard for safety or protection. Although she temporarily escaped these limitations, many important unanswered and maybe unresolved questions loomed: What led her family to move to Thailand? What is life like now for her younger brother and mother? Did any of her family members obtain their Thai ID cards? What is life like now for her father? Who recruited workers for that construction site where she and her father worked? Were there laws to protect her and other underage or undocumented construction workers?

After this young girl completed her testimony, all I could utter through the translator was something like, “Thank you for the courage to share your story. You are a strong girl.” Looking back on that moment, and especially as I look forward, I encourage all of us to acknowledge the Lord who never grows weary or tired in

upholding all our lives, including the life of this one young girl to the many girls impacted by the ministry of the New Life Center Foundation.

Prayer: *Lord God, you are the source of all strength and power. Sometimes we see you at work among the most powerless and vulnerable people. Help us to renew ourselves and others by such strength and power, even as we seek to be faithful witnesses and advocates for the fullness of life. Amen.*

Rev. Cathy Chang
Regional Facilitator for Addressing Migration & Human Trafficking
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



A Providential Encounter

“When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. Truly I tell you, you will not finish going through the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” - Matthew 10:23

On a muggy Bangkok morning we came to the end of an alley on our way to breakfast. Out of nowhere we heard an urgent-sounding voice, “Pastor, Pastor! Can you please come and pray with my family? I am about to go and meet with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) for my last interview.”

Unknown to the pleading man, a stranger to all of us, this was the first day for our Presbyterian Church (USA) group's study trip on human trafficking and migration issues in Thailand. Little did this man know that God had directed him specifically to the pastor in the group who lives in Bangkok and is aware of the plight of so many asylum seekers who have escaped religious persecution in Pakistan, a nation where they are often discriminated against and at-risk for their lives for being Christians and actively practicing their faith. Little did this man know that at the end of the study trip this same group of Presbyterians would be visiting other Pakistanis who are being held in an Immigration Detention Center (IDC) in Bangkok for seeking asylum and trying to convince the UNCHR to recognize them and their family as refugees. But God knew the right person for this man to approach. God knew who would understand what this man and his family needed. God knew that this was the way this travel study group needed to be introduced to the plight of His people in a foreign land, as they now try to be recognized as a *bone fide* refugees who were forced into migration.

We approached this large extended family, including young children and older adults. The members of our group, as well as the Pakistani family, formed a large circle outside a small hotel, and together we praised our Father and glorified Him. Together we asked for His blessing for this family and asked for safe passage for them to the place He was calling them. Together we were One in Him.

This family had suffered much in Pakistan and also had endured a different kind of suffering as they waited for the answer from the UNCHR that could forever transform their lives. But as our prayers were lifted up for them and their future, surely they felt God's love and realized that in the global community of Christ, symbolized in our joined hands and united hearts, they are not alone.

Prayer: God our Father, you alone know what this family needs and where your Holy Spirit will guide them to a land of safety and a future of hope. May they know in the depth of their hearts that you are with them in all that they do and wherever they are. In the name of Jesus Christ, who was a refugee and is our Redeemer, we pray. Amen.

Ms. Shelly Dawson
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An Ounce of Prevention

" I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father." -John 15:15

Living in Southeast Asia, I hear far too many stories of persons suffering from the dehumanizing traumas of human trafficking. Stories of ... an innocent teenager who is deceived by an offer of a fake restaurant job, and then later she is trapped in a sex

club, forced to “work” until she can repay the money the trafficker “invested” in her. Stories of ... a greedy aunt who strikes a deal to receive fast cash in exchange for a strange man taking her teenaged niece to “work” in a nearby city. Stories of piercing heartbreak, crushed dreams, and empty tomorrows.

Thankfully, I also hear stories that reveal the joys of healing and the hope of resurrection. Stories of ... courageous trafficking victims giving testimony in court against those who orchestrated their systematic abuse. Stories of ... young girls who were sold as if they were robotic commodities to be used for someone else’s sexual gratification, and yet now they have received a gift of new life through unconditional love, education, and trauma healing.

But so many of the stories – so many of the lives – that echo the words “*human trafficking*” focus on what happens **after** the brokenness has occurred, **after** the scars of deep emotional pain are already present. Thus, I have developed a deep appreciation for those social justice advocates who compassionately work to preempt trafficking **before** it happens.

The New Life Center (NLC) is a Christian ministry that provides a residential program of aftercare for those who have suffered the abuses of trafficking. Additionally, NLC goes into rural villages and presents programs designed to educate communities about the dangers of trafficking. Their emphasis on prevention reminds me of the old maxim, “*An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*”

In addition to offering educational programs to local villagers, NLC also works to prevent human trafficking by developing close relationships with local community leaders and a consortium of Christian mission organizations that are working to end trafficking. When a group of Presbyterian Church (USA) leaders came to Thailand in early November 2016 to focus on the issue of human trafficking, the NLC took our group to visit a remote Lahu village. The Lahu people are one of many hill tribes, or ethnic minorities, who inhabit the mountainous regions of northern Thailand. As we walked around the uneven dirt pathways among the villagers’ modest homes, saw the on-the-edge of poverty living conditions of its residents, and then shared a meal with members of the community, we witnessed the deep value of NLC’s relational approach to human trafficking prevention.

Our day in the Lahu village with NLC reminded me that Jesus’ divine design for changing the world through empowering others is encapsulated in his words to his disciples, “*I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.*” (John 15:15) Jesus’ gospel strategy for global transformation rests on the foundation of *building relationships grounded in trust and transparency*. Jesus’ relational formula of trust and transparency is also at the heart of the NLC’s strategy for human trafficking prevention for the hill tribes of Thailand.

Prayer: Gracious God, may your transforming power be at work through the New Life Center and all who seek to prevent the suffering of human trafficking. In the name of Jesus, who offers the joy of abundant life. Amen.

Rev. Dr. Barry Dawson
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To be a Citizen

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually* into a dwelling-place for God. – Ephesians 2: 19-22*

Citizenship is something that many of us take for granted. We were born in hospitals and birth certificates were issued. The place of our origin was verified, the nation of our belonging was confirmed and citizenship was bestowed. No problem. But imagine being born into poverty or in some very remote, rural location, without access to a hospital. There quite possibly would be no birth certificate or legal document verifying our origin, and therefore no citizenship.

Citizenship affords individuals “inalienable” rights and responsibilities. Without it, people – even indigenous people – become vulnerable. They can be denied all sorts of fundamental rights and subject to all forms of exploitation. Health care and education can be withheld without citizenship. Legal employment can be denied and with it fair wages, worker safety and just labor practices. Without citizenship, individuals rarely seek out and utilize the protections of government entities and civil authorities. Absent a multitude of basic and fundamental necessities, those without citizenship become vulnerable to all sorts of exploitation, including human trafficking.

The challenge of citizenship – even in the land of one’s birth – is one of the root causes of the deplorable practice of human trafficking. In Thailand, with its many indigenous hill tribe people in the north and the multitude of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from surrounding countries, there is an abundance of children, women and men susceptible to trafficking – whether it be by forced labor in the fishing and seafood processing industries along the coast or in the sex travel and tourism industries throughout the country. In our time there we met with pastors and church workers accompanying indigenous hill tribe members through the cumbersome and costly process of obtaining their birth certificates and hopefully full Thai citizenship. We also met with staff of the US Embassy, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the European Union (EU) working to impact industries, institutions and economic systems that condone and contribute to the violation of human rights and the exploitation of those who are marginalized and vulnerable.

The letter to the Ephesians proposes a world where no one is a stranger or alien, but all are citizens. The image it provides is of a holy temple, where all people are built together – stronger together – as a place for God to abide. God abides in us – in all of us, to be sure. But we have a long way to go until all are respected and regarded as citizens, with all the rights and responsibilities that provides, and no one is made vulnerable or susceptible by any power or principality to the degradation and inhumanity of human trafficking.

God of justice and mercy, the trafficking of your people for profit, production and pleasure is an unthinkable and horrifying reality of our modern world. Give us, your Church and the world’s nations the strength and will to address the significant challenges that contribute to trafficking. Remind us that all people are entitled to be called citizens and to receive fundamental human rights, decency and dignity. In the name of Jesus, who himself suffered, Amen.

Rev. Carl E. Horton
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Show Me Where It Hurts

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. -Romans 12:15-16

While visiting the New Life Center in Chiang Mai, we toured the studio where residents receive art therapy. Among the jewelry and paintings made by these girls - - residents who had escaped trafficking or at-risk environments -- were dolls. The dolls were hand-crafted by the residents to help local police investigate child molestation and exploitation cases. They were anatomically correct.

The dolls help police get a clear and explicit picture from the victim of what exactly happened to her or him. A child whose communication skills are still developing could simply point to the place on the doll to show the authorities where they were injured or violated. Where it hurts.

Thailand floored us with its stunning beauty. During car rides we would take in the scenery, with its soaring mountains and lush greenery, and sit in awe of it. We soaked in the frenetic energy and pace of Bangkok and marveled at its expanse. We were warmed by the hospitality of her people, even as they mourned the loss of their beloved king. From its culture to its architecture to its vegetation, Thailand is

absolutely beautiful. Yet, we were in this beautiful place because there is pain there. The pain might be obscured by the fast pace of the city, but it's there in nightclubs and massage parlors where workers often are not there of their own volition. It's there in immigrant detention centers where human beings languish indefinitely while just yards away commerce and tourism take place, oblivious to the pain on the other side of the barbed wire fences. The pain might be obscured by the beautiful landscape, but in those majestic hills live indigenous communities cut off from opportunity because many who live there are undocumented. The pain was there in fine dining establishments where the food might have been sourced from fishers and farmers using exploited migrant workers. The pain was there in countless human beings who have a pulse, but no papers, and therefore do not exist.

This pain is not unique to Thailand. I noticed many parallels between labor, migration, and trafficking issues there and in my own United States. There is pain everywhere, and we often navigate through life oblivious to it. Such things ought not be so.

The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to solidarity with one another, particularly in our mourning. We are to sensitize ourselves to pain of our siblings, even if we do not feel that pain ourselves. Sometimes that requires us to leave our own comfortable places. Doing it changes us. I hope we let it.

Prayer: God, open our hearts to the pain around us, that we might be agents of healing for those who hurt and that they may no longer suffer in silence. Amen.

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For more information, please visit www.pcusa.org/humantrafficking

Photos by the Rev. Cathy Chang, Regional Facilitator for Addressing Migration & Human Trafficking