

## **Keynote for the Freedom Network U.S.A. Human Trafficking Conference**

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I met the man I'll call "Juan" underneath a flatbed truck. From my position atop the truck, I saw him reel and then go to his knees and then crawl underneath it. I jumped down and crawled under the truck after him. The sun was beating down like mad, the crowd around us was massive and chanting. "Juan" was curled in a fetal position, gripping his stomach, his pupils were dilated. His breath was short. *Que pasó?* I asked. He told me he was blacking out and that he had horrible cramps. I asked him, may I take you to a doctor? He said no. I said, please. He said no. I want to finish this. I want to show them. No. Don't take me.

I don't work on the front-lines with slavery survivors. I work on the protest lines with slavery survivors. What I just recounted to you was my conversation with "Juan," who, after being subjected to brutal conditions of forced labor in the fields of Florida, after having testified against his slavers who were doing time in federal prison, after all that, "Juan" was now, together with his companions from the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, undertaking a hunger strike in front of Taco Bell world-headquarters. They would go for 10 days without food. "Juan" had chosen to hunger strike along with seventy other farmworkers, some students and church people, to make a moral demand upon Taco Bell to end modern-day slavery and other abuses in the fields of its tomato suppliers.

Taco Bell didn't change that day, nor that next year, but by spring of 2005, the moral demand made by "Juan" and others that day had mushroomed into such a potent movement of students, people and institutions of faith, and human rights groups, that the largest fast-food company in the world, Yum! Brands, Taco Bell's parent, was forced to recognize the farmworkers who harvest its tomatoes as partners in doing business, and begin working together with them to eradicate the poverty and slavery that have plagued Florida's fields for so long. It marked the beginning of industry-wide change; change that is coming; change that is dawning our time.

As I look across this room I am amazed at the dedication and expertise gathered in this space. As front-line service providers and legal experts, as government officials and law enforcement, you have empowered survivors of servitude, helped create and pass the first federal law to prohibit human trafficking – gotten that law *strengthened* during reauthorization (which is no small thing), and, through the Freedom Network's Training Institute, educated thousands of government, law-enforcement, and social service personnel on prevention, protection, and prosecution. This is complex work. It's exhausting work. It's rewarding work. It's the work of freedom. It's the work of holding up the dignity and power of every human being. And your work is the seed that is helping to give birth to a new consciousness throughout our society and a renewed determination to root out slavery and end the conditions that make it possible in our day.

I come from that part of society that has been inspired by your work, namely the faith community and specifically the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). As clergy, members, congregations and as a national denomination, Presbyterians have committed themselves to working to end modern-day slavery together with former slaves, first-responders, human rights groups, law enforcement, and government officials. From decisions of our democratically elected governing body, the General Assembly, to on the ground assistance provided to survivors by local congregations; from using our power as an institutional shareholder to insist that hotels and airlines post warnings about child sex trafficking; to marching with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers and demanding the food industry advance farmworkers' human rights, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is already on

the move. And we, like many in the religious community, are seeking partners so that our efforts can create not only an effective, human-rights based approach to assist survivors of human trafficking but an effective, human rights based approach that can attack the sources of slavery at their very roots.

For those of us who are committed to a human-rights based approach to ending modern-day slavery, however, we've still got our work cut out for us.

I don't know about you, but when I do educational presentations among church people and say, the CIW has uncovered, investigated and helped the US Department of Justice to prosecute seven cases of modern-day slavery in the fields, I usually get glassy-eyed stares in response. It's as if there's some thick, viscous membrane between us, and what I'm saying is coming from some other universe.

Typically when I encounter this I stop and say, just to reiterate, by slavery I mean men and women sold by the head for \$1500, forced to work against their will. No response. I continue, pistol whipped or threatened in other ways if they leave, often locked up at night, sometimes chained and beaten. Silence. OK, I say, we have to stop right now. Because I've just told you about modern-day slavery in the fields and you've given me no response. Often the silence becomes more awkward.

Then someone may dare to break it, "but you don't really mean *slavery*, you mean *slave-like*, right? All those bad wages. You know, they're in *virtual* slavery." No, I reply. I mean cases that meet the high standard of proof and definition under US federal law; laws forbidding peonage and indentured servitude that were passed just after the Civil War during Reconstruction (18 U.S.C. Sections 1581-9) or under the 2000 Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act. Silence. OK, I ask, is it that you just don't believe it? Waffling, shifting in seats. And then the predictable response, "if it were really true, why haven't we heard about this? Why isn't it all over the media?" Well it's been there (National Geographic, the New Yorker, Washington Post, NY Times etc.), but it hasn't received the same kind of saturated coverage that say, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt's trip to the grocery store gets. So I pop in a clip from one of the many dvds that documents the CIW's fight against slavery; there's "Juan" again, speaking from the basement of Central Presbyterian Church in Louisville. And the group is suddenly riveted. And the even better news; they're getting angry.

So once we start convincing the broader public that modern-day slavery and human trafficking is alive and well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we then have a second task: to not let them get overwhelmed by the horror or diverted by anger, but motivated. And so we insist that shock and indignation is not enough; that as a society, we can and we must put an end to these abuses.

Now if we're going to attack the root causes of human trafficking and modern-day slavery and not simply assuage its symptoms, I want to suggest that there are five things that we must do together. And I am putting these things out there so that we can think about them, challenge them, discuss them together during the conference and beyond.

### **The Five Things We Must Do**

First we must uphold the dignity and human rights of every person, particularly those who are survivors. Second we must properly identify the causes of human trafficking and modern-day slavery *and* where we can impact these causes. Third we must remove the moral legitimacy from the status quo in business or wider society that permits these abuses to continue. Fourth we must continue to put forward compelling new models in business and the broader society – in the

justice system, in law enforcement, in governance -- that ensure human rights. And fifth we must build a social movement that harnesses the strengths of every dimension of our work against human trafficking.

**First: Uphold the dignity and human rights of every person, particularly survivors.**

The human-rights based approach to human trafficking has achieved an essential advance: it has shifted our legal and social response from regarding people who have been trafficked as offender to understanding people who have been trafficked as victims. The importance of this shift cannot be underestimated. People are victimized by human trafficking. But you know a human rights approach does even more. It is central to our ability to see a person not simply as a victim of slavery, but as a whole person; as someone who plays guitar and tells goofy jokes, who is a Roman Catholic, who is good at math. The human rights approach never ever narrows a person to simply “victim” status, where a person can become little more than an object. A human rights approach insists on viewing a victim of human trafficking as a whole person and respecting their culture, their choices, and their integrity.

But you know, many people don't automatically share this human-rights based perspective. Let me start with the church. Some of us in the church are quite comfortable, even excited, to imagine ourselves or our institutions as the hero, the rescuer who swoops in to condemn slavery and to save (in whatever way you want to understand that word) the helpless victims of slavery. And to be honest, outside the church I've encountered my share of self-proclaimed anti-slavery groups that share this, “victim as object/we are the heroes approach.” Of course at the root of this fantasy is power – the desire to wield power over someone. Ironically and dangerously this “I am the hero/you are the victim” approach simply replicates the violation that survivors of slavery have already experienced, but this time, purportedly in the name of “good.”

Friends, we don't need heros. We need humans. Humans who are ready to see and support other humans whose human rights have been grossly abused. Humans who are ready to understand that their own rights are intimately intertwined with the rights of those they seek to help.

Many of you know far better than I what survivors are dealing with and how traumatized they are when they've gotten out of servitude. The journey of empowerment, from victim to survivor, is harrowing, but through the Freedom Network's careful, conscientious approach, you are modeling to our society at its most basic, what it means for human beings to support human beings. For you have said to survivors, what the biblical character Ruth said to Naomi, “where you will go, I will go.” And that kind of loyalty to another person, the Hebrew word is *hesed*, is what will ultimately spell the defeat of slavery in our day.

**Second: Properly Identify the Causes of Human Trafficking /Modern-Day Slavery and Where We Can Impact these Causes**

The only way we'll be able to properly identify the sources of slavery is if we continue to insist that survivors of slavery are the experts on slavery, and that they must be at the forefront of our shared analysis and action to end slavery. People who have been enslaved know what works on the ground; what's effective and what's a lot of hot air policy or procedure that will do nothing to change the reality.

For example, some argue that to end modern-day slavery what we need is better enforcement. Of course we can always do better with enforcement and we learn better approaches and practices every day. Our dedicated colleagues in law enforcement are always critically examining these practices. But the Coalition of Immokalee Workers knows from its experience that slavery doesn't occur in a vacuum, it occurs in sectors where human rights are systematically deprived or

degraded. Enforcement and prosecution are “after the fact.” If we are to eliminate slavery we’ve got to ask what’s generating the demand for this cheap, expendable labor? And in the CIW’s field of work one of the principal forces that has been identified are the major food buyers whose high-volume demand for produce at the lowest possible cost, help create the poverty and exploitation in which modern-day slavery flourishes. How do we impact these forces? The CIW honed in on conscientizing the consumer base of these major corporations, particularly their target markets, about how what we’re purchasing either advances or undermines fundamental human rights and by inviting ordinary people across the nation to join the farmworkers in public campaigns for corporate responsibility.

Another example: members of the Freedom Network who have focused on sex trafficking have argued strenuously, and at least as far as current federal legislation is concerned, successfully, against conflating prostitution with trafficking and against separating out sex trafficking from other forms of human trafficking. Now there are many in our society, including religious institutions, that have grave concerns about the involvement of consent and coercion in prostitution and this can get us all tangled up and confused when it comes to dealing these issues in sex trafficking. In order to preserve the strength of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act and to defend the human rights of trafficking survivors, the Freedom Network has insisted that these offenses remain separate. This is where your on-the-ground experience in investigating and prosecuting cases as well as supporting survivors is irreplaceable and desperately needed.

**Third: remove the moral legitimacy from the status quo in business or wider society that permits these human rights abuses to continue.**

If we’re to address the root causes of human trafficking and modern-day slavery, we need to remove the veil of legitimacy that adorns current forms of business. You know in the early days of the Taco Bell boycott, people who wrote to the company in support of the CIW would receive a very polite letter back saying something like, “Taco Bell does not directly employ the farmworkers. We would never interfere in the business of another company.” It was up to the farmworkers and their allies across the country to demand that corporations start require their suppliers to uphold human rights for farmworkers!

Religious institutions can be helpful partners in removing moral legitimacy from the status quo. Now some of you may be getting worried, thinking, but those religious institutions don’t necessarily agree with one another. Wouldn’t it be safer to just to avoid the potential unpleasanties that can arise when working with these faith groups? Friends, we live in a pluralist society where moral ground is contested every day. I submit that it is urgent that the Freedom Network bring its potent and effective analysis intentionally to the widest possible number of religious institutions. Engage us. Challenge us. Work with us. Remember that every week millions of Americans attend local congregations seeking meaning in their lives and hoping to contribute to a better world. Together we can find the proper intersections between the worlds of faith and the worlds of human rights based anti-slavery work that can awaken the slumbering consciousness of this nation.

The inimitable Frederick Douglass once said, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.” Removing moral legitimacy from established ways of doing things also means confrontation. It means non-violently standing eye to eye with those forces that are in direct opposition to the advancement of human rights. Some members of the Freedom Network have a very public dimension to their work, others by necessity or choice confront these forces, in any number of ways, less publicly. And this is where having allies in the wider community can help. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) can do things that a safe house for survivors of slavery

can't and shouldn't. But whether public or private we must resist any law, any corporation and any process that stands in opposition to the advancement of human rights.

**Fourth we must put forward compelling new models in business and broader society that ensure human rights**

We must be the ones to create what we need. There can be no waiting around for new models to drop out of the heavens. Together with survivors of slavery we must, right now, begin imagining how things could be otherwise and putting those dreams into action. We know what's not working in the old systems; if these systems are going to be replaced we must make sure that what they are replaced with doesn't just replicate the problem in a new way. The CIW has been imagining their way into restructuring the entire food system. I look forward to learning of the reimagining and prototyping that's going on with other groups in this room. So people tell us no one's ever done it before? Great. Let's be the first ones!

**Fifth: Build a social movement that harnesses the strengths of every dimension of our work against human trafficking.**

And let's begin by helping our nation see the connection between people who are enslaved and people who are exploited – that there is a continuum here. And we need to build that understanding, that connection, not only to support survivors of slavery but so that we can garner the necessary power and communal support to mobilize for change. Who are the groups fighting for an end to the degradation of human rights in various locations in our society? How might the specific and imperative work of social service and legal support for survivors of human trafficking be buttressed by connections with such groups? How does being a part of such a community further empower survivors?

Modern-day slavery is a social problem. And social problems need social solutions. So beyond identifying groups that are already resisting other human rights abuses or conditions of exploitation that are ripe for slavery – we must ask what sectors of society need to know about and connect to our work if we are to build a social movement to end this atrocity? How is the Freedom Network connecting with students? With the religious community? With the labor community? Can you imagine what we will be able to if we can work together?

We are fortunate that one of the key advocates for the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Reauthorization Act is now Vice President. When the honorable Mr. Biden was serving in the Senate, he listened closely to what the Freedom Network U.S.A. had to say about the legislation. We are also fortunate that Secretary of State Clinton was a stalwart supporter of the TVPA when she served in the Senate. I am certain that you join me in hoping that President Obama will make human trafficking a top priority for his administration. But you know what? I'm not worried. I'm not worried because I believe that those of us in this room will not stop working until ending human trafficking *is* a top priority for not only for this administration and but for our nation as well.

**Coda**

Friends, we've got our work cut out for us. As front-line legal and service supporters of slavery survivors, as first-responders from government, law enforcement and the faith community, I can imagine that in these economically challenged times you're trying to figure out how to rob Peter to pay Paul so you can keep up your extraordinary and irreplaceable work. And I can tell you that in the church, we're facing these challenges too. So right now, there is an enormous temptation for us to put on blinders – to focus on the narrowest possible definitions of our missions. But I would submit, that these times are precisely the times when we need instead, to remove anything

that is impeding our vision of one another and to begin collaborating, human with human, to create the kind of society in which the fundamental human rights of all people are ensured.

Now look to your left. Look to your right. Look across the table. Look across the room. And hear these good words from the poet June Jordan: We are the people we've been waiting for. Thank you.

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