

Ministries shining light of Christ into brothels

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BIRMINGHAM, England (ABP)—“Sasha” had two children and an abusive husband in the Czech Republic. After being hospitalized from a spousal beating, she accepted an offer to go work in a restaurant in Germany to gain financial independence.

Instead, her travel papers were stolen and she ended up “working in the windows”—a prostitute—in Amsterdam, Holland.

“Rebecca” grew up in Burma in a poor Christian family. As a teenager, her parents asked her to leave and get a job so they could better care for five younger children. She was kidnapped and sold to a brothel in northern Thailand—alone in a strange country with a language she didn’t know, and with no legal documents or status.

On the wall of the brothel, in large letters she wrote in Burmese words from Psalm 27:1— “The Lord is my light and my salvation.”

The message of God’s love and salvation in Jesus is seldom heard in the alleyways of a “red light district” or inside the guarded walls of a brothel.

But Baptists in several areas of the world are working to change that grim reality. Several reported on their work during a focus-group session July 29 at the Baptist World Alliance Centenary Congress in Birmingham, England.

Among those ministries are:

— Rahab Ministry in Budapest, Hungary. In 2003 Kati Szenczy in Budapest, Hungary, knew God wanted her to begin work in a new area, but doing what? Then a government office called Hungarian Baptist Aid to see if they worked with prostitutes. Kati knew this work was God’s “new thing” for her. Now she is director of Rahab Ministries, a part of Hungarian Baptist Aid.

Rahab offers more than 150 women a shelter from their abusers, training for future jobs, help in finding a new place to live, and a daily witness in word and deed to the gospel of Jesus.

— Project Hope in Prague, the Czech Republic. Lauran Bethell is an American Baptist missionary who had directed a ministry in Thailand for women trapped in prostitution—a ministry that earned her the BWA Human Rights Award, presented by former United States President Jimmy Carter during the Baptist World Congress.

In 2001, she relocated to Prague to facilitate such ministries around the world. She began a prayer walk through the streets of Prague, literally looking for a way to connect to others walking the streets for prostitution. She talked with some of the young women on Prague’s streets and found that many of them were from Bulgaria, working to support children or elderly parents back home.

Simon Vlechkov was a Bulgarian student at International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague. Lauran’s interest and expertise, combined with Simon’s ministry skills and Bulgarian language skills, became the outreach now called Project Hope.

They were surprised to find that many of the young women were from charismatic Christian homes. They were toughened on the outside by their circumstances but broken in spirit on the inside.

They make contact with the young women by talking with them and offering to pray with and for them. They offer training in skills that can lead to new work, such as using knitting machines to make scarves and other items for sale. Most importantly, the workers say, the young women see in concrete terms what Jesus can do in their lives, if they accept and follow him.

— Freeset, Calcutta, India. New Zealand Baptist Kerry Hilton moved to Calcutta, India, specifically the infamous Sonagacchi red light district, to help the women trapped in the “human misery trade” of that area. On any given night, 20,000 men cruise the streets to pick out one or more of the approximately 6,000 prostitutes. The women are there because of illiteracy, poverty, betrayal and sale into white slavery by a family member or “friend.”

When someone asked him if Hilton could “feel the sin” when he was out on the streets of Sonagacchi, he replied: “I feel the sin—in here (his heart). When I sin, I choose to sin. These women get to sin every day, but they don’t have a choice.”

Freeset helps the women find work by offering them another business—making straw bags. By the end of 2005, they will have 60 women working with them and plan to have 100 by next year, when their facilities will be enlarged.

Even if Sonagacchi streets are bleak and mean, Jesus would find them right up his alley, Hilton said. “If you were to hang out with Jesus, you would have to spend time with the poor.”

— New Life Center, Chiang Mai, Thailand. Karen Smith of the American

Baptist Churches-USA, works in this ministry in northern Thailand specifically geared to help young women of ethnic tribes who are sold into prostitution by their families. When her brothel was raided, “Rebecca” was taken to the New Life Center. Once connected to a Christian group that could help her, the young Burmese woman was able to return home, and is now studying in a Bible college.

Christians, especially Baptists, are just now getting organized and coordinated in trying to minister in the world of human trafficking, according to Bethell. And yet, trafficked men, women and children “are probably the largest unreached people group in the world,” she said.

Some names in this article were changed to protect the subjects’ identity.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.