

Baptist sex-traffic mission worker urges others to ‘show up’ for ministry

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By Marv Knox

Editor

WASHINGTON (ABP)—The key to ministry in Jesus’ name—even in difficult and dangerous places—is to “show up,” Luran Bethell told participants in the William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society annual meeting.

Bethell, an American Baptist missionary who has spent most of her adult life ministering to and rescuing women from prostitution and sexual trafficking, received the Whitsitt Society’s annual Courage Award. The group met during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly in Washington, June 28.

“I don’t feel very courageous. ... The word ‘fool’ describes it,” Bethell said as she accepted the award. “I did not ever plan or prepare to be hanging out with prostitutes and to be involved in trafficking.”

But she became burdened for the physical and spiritual needs of prostitutes when she moved to Thailand for missionary language school more than 20

years ago, she recalled. There, Bethell first saw, then met, young women who worked as prostitutes. She learned many of them were victims of sexual trafficking. Some literally were sold as sexual slaves.

Others were tricked into the trade when they accepted what they thought were respectable jobs and moved far from their homes, only to find they had no escape. Still others sold their bodies as the only way to support their families.

“I was unprepared to encounter this. It’s unrealistic,” Bethell acknowledged. “But I knew I wasn’t going to be happy in this country without helping these women, who were sacrificing themselves for their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, and sometimes even their own children.”

At first, she felt all alone in her calling. “The church response to this issue was silence,” she recalled. So, she prayed, expressing her shock and anger to God.

Six weeks later, fellow missionaries told her they were starting a ministry to rural Thai women who were leaving the countryside for big-city brothels. Although Bethell had “no qualifications, no training, no funding,” the call changed her life and, ultimately, the lives of many others. “I knew in that moment why I was in that country,” she said.

They started New Life Center in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Although Bethell was the director, she said tribal women from Thailand primarily staffed the center. “These women were smart, fun, incredible—my guides,” she reported.

They listened to girls who came looking for work to support their families and wound up in prostitution. They sought to meet the women’s most pressing needs by providing education and vocational training.

Within a few years, five Christian groups were operating ministries to Thai women trapped in the country's notorious sex trade. And then the media wanted to know about the "sexy story." Eventually, the government started to get embarrassed about people being trafficked, being forced into prostitution across borders.

"This was God's moment to reach the darkest places—constant and unrelenting abuse," Bethell said.

Later, Bethell became a full-time consultant, traveling the globe to help groups of Christians who want to minister to victims of sexual trafficking. She lives at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic. Although she travels often, she also leads a ministry to prostitutes in Prague, many of whom are young Eastern European women who have been trafficked into the sex trade, trapped far from home.

When the ministry started, Bethell and seminary students encountered 30 to 40 prostitutes on the streets. They sat with the women in the smoky bars, sipping coffee and soft drinks and, at the prostitutes' request, singing Gypsy praise music, while pornography played on the television and other prostitutes turned tricks in the bathrooms.

In time, two bars that were the center of significant prostitution closed down, and the number of prostitutes has diminished.

Bethell credited prayer as the key to ministry, noting she and her Christian friends prayed for a year before they went out into the streets of Prague. "What we have felt most profoundly is we are called to pray. So we go out every week and pray," she said. Even after years of ministry to prostitutes, Bethell sees "no formulas or models; every situation, city or country is different."

Lest they get too comfortable, Bethell reminded the Whitsitt audience that the United States is not immune to sex trafficking, noting 15,000 to 20,000

people are trafficked into the United States each year. “Most end up in prostitution,” she lamented.

The lesson Bethell has learned through her ministry is simple, she said.

“Doing new things doesn’t mean we have to have all knowledge first. We have to show up,” she said. “God takes control and does surprising things. ...We don’t have to do God’s work. We just have to show up. God will do God’s work.”

The Whitsitt Society is named for William Whitsitt, president and church history professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the late 1800s. He was hounded from office after he proposed that Baptists could not trace their lineage in unbroken succession all the way back to the first century church and Jesus. Eventually, all reputable church historians backed Whitsitt’s view.

Bethell is the 16th recipient of the society’s Courage Award.