

Human trafficking—exotic and close to home

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By John Hall

Texas Baptist Communications

AUSTIN—Lauran Bethell likes dark streets and late nights. She loves prostitutes.

She's a self-described "missionary who hangs out in red-light districts."

Bethell, an American Baptist Churches missionary, and students from the International Baptist Theological Seminary walk the streets of Prague, Czech Republic, greeting prostitutes with carnations and a simple message—someone cares about you.



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(Photo by
John Hall)

The greeting usually builds into a relationship between Bethell, the students and the prostitutes. They begin to recognize each other and develop a friendship. Bethell and the students started having coffee with some of the prostitutes in local bars.

The missionary discovered many of the prostitutes are Bulgarian gypsies.

Some of them were trafficked into the country and forced into prostitution. Most of them asked Bethell and the students to pray for them, a request they gladly accepted.

“The focus of our work, the work we have felt most profoundly called to, is to pray with and to pray for,” she said during the Ethics Without Borders conference, organized by the Baptist General Convention of Texas’ [Christian Life Commission](#).

Human trafficking happens in all nations, Bethell said. As many as 17,000 people—mostly women and girls—are trafficked into the United States each year. They travel primarily through Texas, California and New York.

Baptist General Convention of Texas-endorsed Chaplain Bruce Peterson of Alvin told conference participants human trafficking is an issue Texas Baptists must deal with, because it happens in their backyards. Trafficked individuals work in the food-service industry, bars and strip clubs. Some of them work as prostitutes.

Messengers to the 2006 BGCT annual meeting passed a resolution decrying human trafficking and calling upon Texas Baptists to minister to trafficked individuals at their point of need.

Peterson asked Texas Baptists to follow up on the resolution by looking for people near them who have been trafficked. Ministering to these individuals impacts a local Texas community, but it also touches victims’ families around the world.

“We’re without borders when it comes to this issue, and we need to live that way,” he said.

Bethell concurred human trafficking is a large issue.

When she first encountered the people who are modern-day slaves, she

didn't know what to do. She didn't think she could affect such a large problem.

But Christians can fight it with little actions, she added. The prayer and relationships Bethell and the students have offered are evidence that strategy makes a difference.

Many of the prostitutes Bethell and the students met and befriended have stopped walking the streets. The first bar where students were having coffee with the prostitutes was raided and later shut down. The second also shut down. Both have been replaced by other businesses.

"My 'not enough' and the 'not enough' of so many people ... were being multiplied way beyond anything we could have imagined," said Bethell, who received the 2005 Baptist World Alliance Human Rights Award.

"Our God is not the God of not enough, but the God of the multiplication of loaves and fishes."

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