

# Baptists urged to reach out to victims of sexual exploitation

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**By Patricia Heys**

*CBF Communications*

ATLANTA—Sexual exploitation is a worldwide issue, Lauran Bethell told an audience at a special interest session of the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant.

Bethell, an American Baptist Churches USA global ministry consultant, led a panel discussion on sexual exploitation Jan. 31, at the Georgia World Congress Center. Panelists included Lia Scholl, founder of Star Light Ministries, Inc.; Susan Omanson, of the NightLight ministry center in Thailand; and Charity Marquis, who started a branch of NightLight ministries in Los Angeles.

For 14 years, Bethell served as director of New Life Center in Chiang Mai, Thailand, which ministered among victims of human trafficking. Bethell said that in many developing countries women feel they have an economic responsibility to their families and will sacrifice themselves in prostitution.

“I don’t believe that women are going into prostitution as a life choice—that they are growing up thinking that is what they want to do for the rest of

their lives,” Bethell said.

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“There is also a pattern of brokenness among women in prostitution, with large numbers of women who are victims of child and sexual abuse. I know that the common thread between those in developed and developing countries is that these women need to know that they are precious daughters of God.”

Omanson, who previously served as pastor of First Baptist Church of Sioux Falls, S.D., said God has called her and is calling the church to reach out to victims.

“We, as Baptists, have come together this week, and we are saying to God, ‘Here I am, help us, hear us,’” Omanson said. “There are people all over the world that have that same heart cry. There are men, women and children who have been caught in exploitation, and I have seen this firsthand in Thailand.”

NightLight reaches out to women and children working in the bar areas of urban Bangkok. The center provides job training, education, shelter,

emergency assistance and relational evangelism. Seven women from the center were recently baptized, Omanson said.

Marquis, who is Omanson's daughter, has facilitated the start of a Los Angeles branch of NightLight, which provides training on recognizing human trafficking and works with local organizations to reach out to victims.

"We wanted to give people an opportunity to partner with us not only globally but also locally," she said.

Scholl's ministry is focused in the United States, as Star Light Ministries volunteers reach out to exotic dancers. Scholl said that most exotic dancers are between the ages of 18 and 24, and they often have little no relationship with their families.

"We don't leave our college students without chaplains, so why would we leave these young women?" Scholl said.

Scholl listed five qualities people need to engage in ministry to exotic dancers:

—"You believe that one event in your life shouldn't determine whether you have a good life. You believe in second chances, third chances and seven times 70 chances."

—"You believe that lives can be transformed—God transforms lives and people can transform their own lives. And those two things working together can transform society."

—"You see people and lives as possibilities."

—"A really great game face. You will hear stories that will make you want to cry, that will make you shudder, that will make you lose your faith in human beings. But you can't show it—you have look at the young woman

with love and acceptance.”

—“You are compelled to learn.”

The panelists encourage audience members to pray for their ministries and ministries around the world. They also urged people to get involved with local organizations reaching out to victims of sexual exploitation.

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