

Sexual exploitation alive in America; churches can end it

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ATLANTA (ABP)—Many church-goers know human trafficking and sexual exploitation are global issues. But more than 200,000 children in the United States have become “sex commodities” as well, Baptist social workers say.

Ellyn Waller and Brenda Troy led a discussion about exploitive sex at the New Baptist Covenant meeting in Atlanta—a city with the nation’s second-highest rate of human trafficking, they noted.

The seeds of exploitation start early, they said.

The seeds of exploitation start early, and Silence makes it worse.
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“The exploitation of women doesn’t just happen when they become women,” Waller said. “The intent is encouraged starting when they’re young. We also need to be thinking differently about what exploitation really is. It’s not necessarily the thing with sex acts. You can exploit women and children in the mind first.”

Both women lead outreach ministries in their churches to women and men who work as prostitutes. The victims—as do the pimps—come from every race, age, gender, ethnicity and religion, they said.

Most Christians do not understand the variety of circumstances that can push someone into prostitution. The women called on church members to recognize that pimps or sexually exploited women and children may be within their numbers. And they challenged Baptists to take note.

A wake-up call

“This is a wake-up call to any of us—anyone who benefits from the child prostitution is guilty,” Waller, who attends Enon Tabernacle Baptist Church in Philadelphia, said. “When you go play the lottery, gambling money is all tied up in child prostitution.”

But when Christians work with people who are sexually exploited, “your perception changes about the lifestyle,” said Troy, who attends New Salem Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio. “Not all of them were poor. Not all of them were homeless. A lot of them were successful people who just got dealt a bad deck of cards.”

Many of the people first lured into commercial sex acts—prostitution, exotic dancing, stripping and pornography—are children. One out of every three teens living on the street will be lured to prostitute within 48 hours of leaving home, Waller said. In the last eight years, 150,000 minors were lured into prostitution, at an average age of 12.

God loves them no matter what they do

Troy works with New Salem Baptist members on Friday nights, talking with women who they find on the street. They tell them God loves them no matter what they do.

“We tell the young ladies that they can trust us,” Troy said. “Second, we want them to learn the truth, which is in the Bible. We let them know we’re not here to judge you; we’re not here to tear you down—we just want to lend a helping hand. We want to help them break the stronghold of this lifestyle.”

The lifestyle can be a tough habit to break—even though 99.8 percent of the women who live it want out, Waller said. Women and children lured to a life on the street often are promised love and safety, which they desperately lack.

“A lot of things are promised to them,” Troy said. Pimps tell them: “Your family will be taken care of. Your family will never want for anything. Don’t tell anyone, ... but I’ll make sure your family is taken care of.”

Warning signs

Churches wanting to reach out to men, women and children who are exploited should take the time to get to know strangers who attend services, earn their trust and be aware of the warning signs of sexual coercion.

Look for physical and psychological control, because victims are trained to lie about pimps, Waller urged.

Many victims are deliberately kept transient and distrust law enforcement officials—more than 90 percent of the arrests in relation to the sex trade are of the victims, not purchasers or pimps.

Many victims have their names changed and are subjected to isolation and physical or emotional abuse. Others have been convinced they will be cut loose from their servitude after they pay off a debt or favor.

Someone who is being exploited may have excessive amounts of cash, hotel room keys, chronic homelessness, signs of branding like tattoos and jewelry, false IDs, a tendency to lie about their age, and the presence of “an overly controlling, possessive and abusive individual,” Waller said.

Overcrowding a problem

One problem Troy and Waller said they face is overcrowding in women’s shelters and a refusal to take in women who work as prostitutes—“they come with a lot of junk,” one shelter leader told Waller. In Philadelphia, only the hospital will take in a woman during the night without an ID.

Besides providing shelter or counseling for the women, churches have multiple options to start a ministry for the sexually exploited. Troy said night evangelism by small groups of church members has proved a strong tool to stop the “epidemic.”

Church leaders also can contact local attorneys, community activists, health-care providers and even postal employees for advice on reaching potential victims.

Troy said her church had to insist something be done to effect change in her community. They work closely with policemen in unmarked cars to monitor the neighborhood for suspicious activity.

“We demanded: ‘You need to help us clean up this community. ... We want this cleaned up and now,’” she said. “You’ve got to find someone who is willing to make a difference in your community. Once people begin to see that you’re serious, you’ll begin to make a difference.”

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