

Mercer conference focuses on ending modern slavery

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MACON, Ga. (ABP)—In the face of the world’s fastest-growing crime—the enslavement of an estimated million people every year—Lauran Bethell had some simple advice for participants at [Mercer University’s](#) recent conference on human trafficking: “Just show up.”

Bethell, an [American Baptist Churches USA](#) global-ministry consultant, said advocates must begin with the victims, ministering to their greatest immediate need and working on that until they can work on the next need, and then the next. Victims have a spark within them, she said, and the resiliency of the human spirit will help to heal them if they can be reached and given hope for the future.

“The healing process is long, it is arduous and there are often many, many, many curves along the path, but we must continue to simply show up in the lives of people, to accept them, to care for them, to listen to them no matter what,” Bethell said. “For no matter how long it takes, no matter how things don’t go the way that we wish. No matter what: just show up.”

Participants listen to anti-human-trafficking activists during a recent Mercer University conference. (PHOTO/Mercer)

Bethell, recipient of the Baptist World Alliance Human Rights Award, spent the past 20 years fighting sex trafficking — first in Thailand, then in Eastern Europe. She told the audience she had stayed sane despite working some of the “darkest situations on Earth” by following the example of her leader, Jesus, who went to the dark places of his time because it was the right thing to do. Using the Bible’s example of the “woman of ill repute,” to

whom Jesus ministered in Samaria and who later became one of his greatest advocates, Bethell said Jesus was the ideal example of showing up — as was his Samaritan apostle.

“She’s an example of showing up. Showing up in places where even the disciples raised their eyebrows,” Bethell said. “What would Jesus’ solution be in our time, in our century, of modern-day slavery? I know one thing: He’s sure pleased with what you have all done today, just shown up. He’s sure pleased with what we have seen today, people sacrificing time and energy to learn from each other and participate together in seeking solutions.”

A diverse group of more than 800 people were following her advice in attending the conference, held March 19-20 on Mercer’s Macon, Ga., campus. They came to learn about the problem of modern-day slavery and how they could help defeat it. The student-led conference, titled “STOP Sex Trafficking: A Call to End 21st Century Slavery,” included presentations by anti-trafficking advocates from around the state, the country and the world.

[According](#) to the State Department, more than a million women and children are trafficked into sex slavery each year — often forced by economic circumstances into prostitution’s horrors. Nearly 20,000 are trafficked annually into the United States, and many of these victims are trafficked into the Southeast. Mercer students in STOP, the Sex Trafficking Opposition Project, organized the conference to counter the growing worldwide crisis.



Lauran Bethell

Among the presenters were trafficking survivors Kika Cerpa and Joana Santos. In a pattern typical of trafficking, both were lured to the United States under false pretenses and told they owed large debts for their transportation after they arrived.

Santos, who was pregnant and had paid for most of her own trip, managed to hold off her tormentors and free herself. In the process, she brought down the ring that had enslaved other girls from her native Brazil.

Cerpa, who accrued a debt from her trip to New York from Venezuela, was not as lucky. She endured terrifying years as a sex slave in brothels around New York City — including three convictions for prostitution — only escaping after she got a judge to listen to her harrowing story.

“I was punished by the system and by society,” Cerpa said, highlighting a major issue in trafficking, particularly in the United States: that the legal system is only beginning to recognize that women like Cerpa are being pimped to pay false debts, rather than working by choice as prostitutes.

The system needs to change its focus in regards to trafficking, said Dorchen Leidholdt, co-executive director of the [Coalition Against](#)

[Trafficking in Women](#) and [Sanctuary for Families](#), the group that helped Cerpa.

“Most states have laws against prostitution that are often used against prostituted people. That is the problem with people who are trying to access the criminal-justice system,” Leidholdt said. “Most states have laws against patronizing a prostitute. Those laws are, generally, rarely enforced. All of the energy of our criminal-justice system — all of the resources — go to arrest prostituted people.”



Alesia Adams

Addressing those disparities, particularly in the United States, is the goal of the [Polaris Project](#). Bradley Myles, deputy director of Polaris, presented

some ways to target the problem. The approach to sex trafficking is three-fold, he said, focusing on prevention by targeting the men who frequent brothels, adding protection for the victims and increasing punishment for traffickers.

Myles explained that the legal definition of sex trafficking includes both transporting victims for sex and simply coercing someone into sex with others. He also highlighted some of the myths about trafficking.

“Don’t get boxed into thinking it’s just foreign people [who are trafficked in the United States] or that trafficking requires transportation,” Myles said. “The term trafficking simply denotes trade — buying or selling.”

One of the areas that has the highest incidence of trafficking in the United States is Atlanta, and the problem there often involves American teenagers who are runaways. Girls at homeless shelters are approached by a pimp within the first 72 hours, according to city officials. Alesia Adams, who is the sexual-trafficking-prevention coordinator for the southern U.S. region of the Salvation Army, said it is important to realize the problem isn’t just international. “This isn’t a Third-World problem anymore; it’s in your backyard,” Adams said. “Dropping your child off at the mall alone has become the same as dropping them off at Beirut.”

The issue is also one of basic human rights, said Donna Hughes, a professor of women’s studies at the University of Rhode Island and a longtime anti-trafficking advocate. In approaching new ways to fight human trafficking, Hughes said focusing on perpetrators would be the best way to go forward, which would take the burden off the victims and stop the judgment inherent with any case of prostitution.

“We need to add a perpetrator-focused approach,” Hughes said. “We need to reform our laws so that we are targeting the perpetrators’ activities.”

-Mark Vanderhoek is director of media relations at Mercer University.

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