

God brought healing to sex trafficking victim

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NEW YORK (BP)—She was an awkward and shy 19-year-old art history major when a handsome, charismatic stranger asked her for directions in broad daylight at a New York City railway station.

He courted her, charmed her by opening doors, held her hand in public and presented himself as a perfect gentleman.

✘ More than 21 million people in the United States are victims of human trafficking. “Then, all of a sudden, things started changing,” said Iryna, now 28. “He became very moody, very controlling.”

He insulted her, accused her of cheating on him, and said her family and friends were “no good,” she recalled.

“He was slowly isolating me from everything I knew and loved,” said Iryna, who had immigrated legally from Eastern Europe to the United States with her mother and brother six years earlier. “He basically exploited me. He sold me for sex. That’s what he did, in a nutshell. ... People don’t realize the psychological and the emotional hold that the abuser has with his victim. It’s like he controlled my every move—every single move.”

More than 21 million people in the United States are victims of human trafficking, according to a 2015 State Department report. That encompasses sex trafficking of children and adults, forced labor of children and adults, bonded labor or debt bondage, and involuntary domestic servitude.

The church has ‘a vital role’

The church has a vital role in seeking justice and salvation for trafficking victims, said [Raleigh Sadler](#), a human trafficking awareness advocate based in New York, where he is director of justice ministries for the [Metropolitan New York Baptist Association](#) and a college pastor at the [Gallery Church](#). Sadler has worked with Iryna in helping victims heal.

“Iryna is a trophy of grace,” Sadler said. “She and I meet with several young girls that have been trafficked. My role is simple—to provide an example of a man that does not want to buy sex. Iryna seeks to love these girls as others have loved her.”

Sadler founded the Let My People Go movement, challenging Christians to see people set free both physically and spiritually. He speaks, teaches, mobilizes others and offers a weeklong mission trip for college students.

✘ Church leaders participate in a roundtable discussion hosted by Raleigh Sadler to mobilize congregations to fight human trafficking. (BP PHOTO) “When Moses went up to Pharaoh, he said, ‘Let my people go that they may worship God on the mountain.’ There was always a connection between spiritual freedom and physical freedom,” Sadler said. “And I think when we just focus on one at the expense of the other, there’s a danger, whether it’s just sharing the gospel and proclaiming it and not meeting physical needs, or it’s just meeting physical needs and not proclaiming the gospel. Both need to be present, because we’re holistic beings.”

Shannon Lane, director of Baptist Collegiate Ministries at Louisiana College, took a seven-member team of students on a mission trip to New York in May. The students prayer-walked Chinatown and Manhattan, noted signs of trafficking to report to the FBI human trafficking hotline, distributed hot meals, toiletries and other items to the homeless, and shared the gospel. Sadler repeatedly reminded the students trafficking victims are “not rescued until they know Jesus,” Lane recalled.

Recruiting pastors

Sadler has recruited a multi-ethnic, interdenominational group of 20 New York pastors committed to the cause. They participate in bimonthly roundtable discussions, focusing on how to proclaim justice from the pulpit and in small groups, how to educate congregations, and how to collaborate with specialist groups in achieving justice. They promote the gospel as the motivation of any successful justice ministry.

“We’re challenging churches to develop a strategy at the local-church level, whereby they are seeking to care for those who are most vulnerable,” Sadler said. “Oftentimes, traffickers target those that Scripture would identify as the widow, orphan and sojourner. By loving those vulnerable to trafficking, the local church not only prevents exploitation, but may find themselves intervening.”

Benjamin Ing, pastor of New York Chinese Baptist Church, an American Baptist USA congregation, has participated in the roundtable discussions since their inception and met informally with Sadler before he launched the group.

“I think this is a good opportunity for my church, in particular, to be more aware of the needs of our community,” Ing said. “We’re in a community where there’s a lot of human trafficking going on, both labor trafficking and sex trafficking. I would encourage other churches to get involved, because I think we need to grow in our understanding of human trafficking across the U.S. and even across the world.”

Recognizing potential victims

Learning to recognize potential victims is key to securing their freedom, Sadler teaches. He points to the hospitality, restaurant and service industries, nannies, door-to-door sales and street peddling as prime covers for trafficking.

Signs of trafficking can include bruising, branding, tattoos of other peoples' names, emotional distress, girls with older boyfriends, limited freedom of movement and confiscated identification papers. Many might not even realize they're being trafficked, he noted.

❑ Learning to recognize potential victims is key to securing their freedom, Sadler teaches. Traffickers might allow their victims to attend church regularly, Sadler said, because it offers a stability that may advance the traffickers' goal of entrapment.

"Oftentimes, their chains are psychological or emotional," Sadler said. "Some think that they have a job with a tough boss when they're really trafficked for labor. Some think that their boyfriend's just demanding and slightly insecure, when he's ultimately pushing them to sell their bodies for his gain. Human trafficking happens when there's an exploitation of vulnerability for commercial gain."

For Iryna, help arrived after a neighbor saw men entering and leaving the house where the trafficking occurred. She noticed Iryna crying outside the house and intervened once when the trafficker was yelling at Iryna on the street.

"She came out of her house. She brought me into her home. ... And she became my friend," Iryna said. The neighbor thought Iryna was the victim of domestic violence, until Iryna revealed the truth.

"She didn't laugh at me. She didn't judge me or criticize me. She said, 'What he's doing to you is wrong.' It was like my light-bulb moment."

The woman told her: "This is not your fault. You didn't do this. You're being forced to do this, and what's being done to you is wrong."

"It was a like a paradigm shift in my head," Iryna said. "It took me almost from August until April of the following year to finally sever all ties with

him. There was a lot of going back and forth.”

Iryna’s abuser played mind games, professing love for her and manipulating her, but she saw the neighbor as consistently kind and loving.

“She helped me build back my self-esteem to the point where I could stay no more,” she said.

She thought she was losing her mind

Iryna cried every day when she was with her trafficker and after she managed to leave. Suffering from depression, nightmares and claustrophobia, she thought she was losing her mind. A friend invited her to church at the nondenominational Brooklyn Tabernacle, where she made her profession of faith in Jesus.

“I felt like my soul was dirt—not just my body, but my soul, my heart, my mind,” she said. “There was this kind of dirt that I couldn’t wash away. I always felt like I was a second-class citizen, and I didn’t deserve anything in this life.”

As Iryna walked down the aisle during altar call, she thought she would collapse, she said, but she felt God giving her stability to walk in spite of her trembling and tears.

God cared

“I felt this presence, and this presence was holding me up,” she said. “I knew God not only saw what happened to me, but that he cared. He wasn’t judging me. He wasn’t condemning me.”

Iryna now works in social services as a case manager with senior citizens, and she dreams of earning a master’s degree in social work to become a therapist for survivors. Nearly three years after her salvation, she began

speaking publicly of her ordeal. She reported the case to the police, she said, but had no evidence that would stand in court.

“Maybe my case is a little bizarre, but I wonder how many cases like mine never get reported, because the women are so ashamed,” she said. “I didn’t start speaking out until well over a year ago.

“I always felt that the Lord has done great things in my life, and it’s because of him I’m never ashamed to say it. The healing, the forgiveness, it’s all from him. And just being able to not feel ashamed, not feel embarrassed—it’s definitely him.”