

Baylor and CBF help churches respond to human trafficking

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LAREDO—A Baylor University social work professor and her students worked in partnership with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field personnel to develop a ministry toolkit to help churches in cities along the Texas/Mexico border combat human trafficking.

About two and a half years ago, a conference on trafficking at South Main Baptist Church in Houston brought together Nell Green, Houston-based CBF field worker; Ben Newell, who serves with CBF in South Texas; and Lorenzo Ortiz, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Emanuel in Laredo.

Together, they began to explore the trafficking connections between gateway cities along the Texas/Mexico border where victims enter the United States and destination cities where victims end up as sex slaves or in labor bondage.

Ortiz invited his new acquaintances to travel to Laredo, its surrounding unincorporated *colonias* and other communities along the Rio Grande to see for themselves.

“Drive-through convenience stores are common in the area, and some are fronts for sex trafficking,” Newell said. Although some local law enforcement personnel denied the problem, an informal survey of young people revealed “they know it’s where to go for drugs and sex,” he added.

Coalition created to fight trafficking

In time, the concerned Baptists joined with others to develop the [Coalition to Combat Human Trafficking](#), a group committed to break the chain

linking desperate people at points where they enter the country and those in urban centers who exploit them.

The coalition decided to begin its work in Laredo and then expand to other sites along the Rio Grande. The group particularly wanted to equip congregations in border communities to identify and address the problem locally.

Ortiz wanted to know how pastors could rise to the challenge—not only responding when a possible trafficking victim might come to a church seeking help, but also being alert to danger signs and aware of whom they should contact.

“We need to be the eyes and ears in the community,” Ortiz said. “When our people are visiting a drive-through, they need to know how to report it when they see something suspicious and how to connect with local authorities.”

Social work researchers get involved

Green worked to pull together experts and additional partners who could identify needs and problems in the Laredo area, as well as strengths and resources. That’s when the coalition contacted Elizabeth Goatley, assistant professor in Baylor’s [Diana R. Garland School of Social Work](#).

Goatley first traveled to Laredo in November 2015 to meet with pastors and a local prosecuting attorney. Six months later, she and a four-member student team of researchers spent a week in Laredo.

The researchers conducted more than a dozen interviews with a variety of people in the community and its churches, as well as personnel at local shelters, a county judge, a representative from the district attorney’s office, a consulate officer and personnel with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Familiar patterns emerge

They discovered a pattern, particularly among new arrivals in the United States. People in Latin America travel to the United States to seek a better life economically or to escape violence, often related to drug cartels. To facilitate their journey, they often pay *coyotes*—human smugglers who help immigrants cross the border into the United States. But the immigrants discover the price they pay is subject to change.

“Once they get to the border, the coyotes demand more money,” Goatley explained. “That’s how people enter into debt bondage and servitude.”

Often, the immigrants are held in stash houses along the border until they are sent to Houston, Austin and other urban areas where they are trafficked. Victims of sexual trafficking often are groomed for exploitation while they still are near the border, she noted.

“We found more evidence of labor trafficking than sex trafficking in Laredo,” Goatley said. “Among the men who are being trafficked, it is mostly labor trafficking. Among women, it is both sex trafficking and labor trafficking—often debt bondage with elements of sexual exploitation.”

A recently released [study](#) by the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault at the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work revealed of the 314,000 human trafficking victims in Texas, about three-fourths—approximately 234,000—are involved in labor trafficking.

‘Body tax’ paid to enter the country

At the same time, Goatley noted, she and other researchers were moved by stories of women who endured sexual exploitation—both before and after they crossed the border.

“I was surprised by their resiliency, and by the fact they were so open to

talking to us,” she said. “Some of the stories we heard were about people who risked their lives to get into the United States. They looked up here and decided it had to be better than what they were leaving behind in their home country.

“Even in their most dire straits here, they felt it was 10 times better than risking being killed just for walking out their front door in their own country. Mothers prepared their daughters, ‘You may have to be raped along the way.’ They called it the ‘body tax’ women pay.”

Creating a ministry toolkit

To equip churches to respond, the Baylor researchers developed a community asset map, identifying resources available in the Laredo area. Then they created a [ministry toolkit](#) for the Coalition to Combat Human Trafficking, with information about how to identify trafficking, guidance for trauma-informed engagement with victims, initial response protocols and a directory of people to contact for assistance.

Subsequently, the coalition trained 35 church leaders in the Laredo area how to use the toolkit most effectively, overcome fears about getting involved and share the information with others in their congregations.

In the near future, the coalition hopes to expand to Eagle Pass and the lower Rio Grande Valley. That involves not only assessing the resources and needs in each community, but also understanding its distinctive culture.

“Every single border community is different,” Green said.

The coalition also has identified educational resources geared toward prevention, and it particularly is focusing on the link between pornography, sexually oriented businesses and trafficking.

“If you address pornography effectively, you reduce the demand for sex trafficking,” Green said.

For her part, Goatley sees the role of churches as central in eliminating human trafficking in all its forms.

“The church is a great vehicle for dealing with the issue, because Christians have a heart for people,” she said. “If the church is being the church, eradicating the exploitation of anyone will be one of its goals.”