

MINISTRY WITH SURVIVORS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

In 2005 I established Josephite Counter-Trafficking Project (JCTP) to promote, by way of holistic direct services, the spiritual, physical and emotional development of people who have undergone the trauma of being trafficked to Australia. Since then I have continued to provide culturally sensitive support and direct services to trafficked children, women and men with a view to improving their quality of life and to facilitate cultural and social integration, and rehabilitation. Weekly visits made to the ladies at the Salvation Army Safe Accommodation have entailed mentoring and accompaniment. It is a privilege to be entrusted with their stories and to be part of their life's journey to wholeness and I am often inspired by their resilience in the face of adversity encountered along the way. I am reminded of the saying that "when the going gets tough the tough get going."

Part of the enculturation program for survivors of Human Trafficking has included visits to the Easter Show, as well as the celebration of festivities such as Christmas, Chinese New Year, the Hindu Festival of Lights and Ramadan. It was a good experience for us to visit a Hindu temple. This was an opportunity for a Hindu lady to give thanks and celebrate the granting of her protection visa. This was also a great opportunity for me and the ladies to share in the richness of our cultural diversity.

Through the generosity of donations from individuals, schools and parishes I have been able to assist with rentals, provision for medical needs, clothing, food and basic necessities, for those who have started life afresh in rental accommodation.

Weekly visits have also been made to Villawood Detention Centre where I met women who had been victims of sexual and domestic servitude and forced marriage. I also met men and women who had been trafficked into the labour force.

In 2015, PATH (Parish Against Trafficking of Humans) was established by me and four parishioners of Enfield parish, with the support of the parish priest at that time. Since then, the group has grown and developed its own Vision and Mission Statement, focusing on awareness raising, advocacy and support of victims of Human Trafficking. Awareness raising initiatives have included events such as having guest speakers and film nights on Supply Chains and Forced Marriage. Annual fund-raising events such as the sale of ethically certified Easter eggs and Christmas cards helped to raise the issue of child slavery in the chocolate industry and awareness of children, women and men who are victims of debt bondage, forced marriage and domestic servitude, living in our midst. Along with these initiatives PATH members have contributed to the support of victims and survivors of Human Trafficking. In one instance we were able to assist a victim of forced marriage to return from overseas, after she had fled to the airport in her pyjamas.

As part of the advocacy program we have also had discussions with the then Federal Government Minister, Craig Laundy, on the government's Seasonal Workers' Program and the registration of Labour Hire Agencies.

Every year I have travelled with members of ACRATH (Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans) to Canberra, visiting Parliamentarians to ask for bipartisan support for victims of Human Trafficking. My annual visit to the Embassies has resulted in strong ties with the Philippines Embassy as we work in collaboration to support students and those who have been victims of Human Trafficking. As Coordinator of JCTP I have written submissions to the Federal and NSW governments in 2012, 2017 and 2019. The good news is that we now have a Federal and a NSW **Modern Slavery Act**.

The Impact of COVID-19

However, like many Australians, many Survivors of Human Trafficking are suffering hardship as a result of COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdowns and need for social distancing.

I have been unable to visit the Villawood Detention Centre and the Safe House for Trafficked women. However, I can still stay in touch with the Survivors of Human Trafficking by phone calls.

In March this year I was alerted to the fact that many students had lost their jobs and were in constant fear of being evicted because of their inability to pay rent. They were also unable to access any benefits. Many have found themselves stranded and helpless during this time of uncertainty "feeling defeated by

this unknown enemy.” I introduced three International students to journalist Ben Doherty. He interviewed them and his article in the Guardian enabled us to highlight the plight of International Students in Australia.

I have been told that 80 per cent of those seeking assistance for food from a local Foodbank have been students, some of whom have been skipping meals to make ends meet. Many NGOs have also come to the aid of students, providing food parcels. International students are at the mercy of landlords who take advantage of their vulnerability. A couple of overseas students had to sleep in a shed with only one bed.

At-risk migrants such as domestic workers and modern slavery victims who have no access to healthcare or government support are among the most vulnerable in Australia. Some are pushed into seeking precarious jobs for economic survival where the risk of exploitation is high. They are most susceptible to exploitation by employers as they try to pay for food, bills and accommodation.

It is a matter of great concern that major Australian clothing brands such as Mosaic Brands (who own Rivers, Katies, Rockmans, Autograph, Noni B, Millers and W. Lane labels) have tried to cancel and/or delay payments, asking for big discounts on millions of dollars from garment factories in Bangladesh. (Amy Bainbridge, SEA Correspondent for ABC, 13 May 2020). Women who work in the factories are on the brink of poverty and need to be paid the pittance of 4% of the garments which go to the wages of the workers. I was also amazed to discover that tea sold at T2 for \$12 per 100gms only pays 6c per 100gms to workers on the tea plantations.

On the other hand, it is good to know that global brands including Adidas, H&M, Marks and Spencers, Nike and Uniglo have publicly committed to paying in full for orders completed and in production.

A report by the United Nations on World Day Against Child Labour (12 June 2020) notes that the crisis of COVID-19 is having a devastating impact on families. It is estimated that 152 million children are already working in child labour situations. There is a current warning by the International Labour Organisation that with the rise in poverty as a result of the worldwide Pandemic, many more children will be forced into slavery so that the family can have food on the table.

During this time of crisis and instability many are hurting and in danger of dire poverty. However, as members of the Global Village we do not want to be eating, drinking or wearing someone else’s misery, least of all the enslaved children.

We as consumers have the right to challenge our grocery food outlets to know if their supply chain in the meats, produce, dairy and seafood are slavery free. We can also do this with Big Brand companies in the garment industry.

On 30 July, the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, we can choose to buy ethically sustainably sourced chocolate - UTZ, Rainforest, Fair Trade, and seafood that is not tainted by slave labour. We can also pray for children, women and men who are working in slave-like situations, so that they are “Slaves no more but Brothers and Sisters in Christ.” (Pope Francis)

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