

SUMMER 2013

JUST+WOMEN

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Speaking the truth in love

SHEILA P. SPENCER

I love facilitating intergenerational conversations. Each generation shares what they appreciate about the others. The second component consists of each generation sharing what the other generations need to understand about it. These conversations have always been open, transparent, healing, powerful, and at times uncomfortable. The key is that the other generations must be fully present and completely attentive to the group talking. During a recent conversation, a young woman shared with her seasoned sisters, “We appreciate your wisdom and speaking your truth, just don’t forget about the ‘in love’ component.”

Having a courageous conversation does not always mean we end up on the same page. It may mean having a dialogue that allows us to understand which page each of us is on. The process involved in having a courageous conversation is just as important, if not more so, than the actual outcome. Our lives are filled with opportunities for courageous conversations. Just don’t forget our sister’s gentle reminder not to forget about the “in love” part of speaking the truth.

Discover the power of courageous conversations in our lead article by Ayanna Johnson. Be inspired by Pat Donahoo’s and Cynthia Wright’s profiles of your Disciples sisters who have taken courageous steps to make an impact in their communities beyond the church walls. Travel to China through the reflections of delegates from the 2012 Woman-to-Woman Worldwide Journey to China. Tana Liu Beers shares how human trafficking affects immigrant populations and how the church can be an advocate for people at risk.

Remember that online study guides are available at www.discipleswomen.org.

Speaking of courageous conversations, after prayer and seeking God’s guidance, I have accepted a call as director of Christian education/faith formation for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). My position may change, but my connection remains because I am always a Disciples woman. It seems *Just Women* magazine and I have grown up together in these last five years. It is an amazing resource because it is written, inspired, and read by thousands of amazing Disciples women.

I am a Disciples woman! Soy una mujer Discípulo!

Je suis une femme de Disciples! 나는제자 여성입니다!

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EMBRACING LIFE

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 **CHRISTIAN CHURCH**
(DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND THE LAWS THAT MAKE IT POSSIBLE

BY TANA LIU-BEERS

Something didn't seem right. I had spent the spring and summer driving back roads visiting with migrant farmworkers. Most were men from Mexico and parts of Central America, both young and old with skin leathered by the hot Carolina sun. Here and there I met a small crew of African-American workers traveling the historic migrant trails up and down the East Coast. But something about this particular crew didn't seem right. They were from Thailand. Why was a group of 30 Thai men picking vegetables in North Carolina? It just didn't add up.

Over the next few months, my coworkers and I kept going back to visit these men. As they moved from farm to farm across the state, we tried to keep track of them. They refused to talk to us and seemed scared. But we kept going back, and eventually they started talking.

The men came from rural areas in Thailand, where their families had farmed for centuries. Most had wives, young children, and parents waiting for them back home. Life there was hard, and farming no longer provided enough to survive. So they sought work in the city, Taiwan, or Dubai. It was a sacrifice to be separated from their families, but it was a question of survival — not really a question at all. Those who worked abroad might even earn enough to pay for school-

ing, so that their children could have a chance to escape the cycle of grinding poverty.

When the opportunity to work in the United States presented itself, it was like a dream come true. Working in the United States not only meant high pay, steady work, and a great place to live, it came with bragging rights. Mothers boasted proudly to their neighbors, "My son is working in the United States." The recruiters promised three full years of work, good pay, and good housing. The cost was \$10,000 U.S. dollars, more than a life's fortune. But they did the math; it would be worth it for this amazing opportunity, and they would earn more than enough to cover expenses.

The next few months were busy with several trips to

Bangkok to apply for passports, obtain visas, attend interviews at the embassy, and attend orientation with the recruitment company. There was also the monumental task of raising the required funds. Most men took out several loans from banks, family members, friends, and private lenders. They sold their few valuables, like family heirlooms, and mortgaged parcels of land.

Arriving in the U.S., the promised land of opportunity and good work, they found something entirely different. The boss confiscated their passports so that they would not "escape." They were housed in deplorable conditions and forced to work long hours picking crops without pay. Meanwhile, the boss made it clear to them that the terms of their visas allowed

them to work only for him. If they tried to leave, they would be "illegal." He promised to call the police and have them deported. To emphasize his point, he showed them his gun.

The shame of their situation was overwhelming. Here they were, supposed to be living the dream of working in America, but instead conditions were much worse than any they had known working as migrants in other countries. And worst of all, they were not making any money to send home to their families, who were waiting desperately for it. Calls from home told of lenders hounding their wives to pay up.

Disciples women who have participated in the current Quadrennial social action emphasis have heard similar

TO LEARN MORE

For more information about the immigration legal services available to Disciples congregations and to learn how you can get involved in advocating for humane immigration reform, go to www.discipleshomemissions.org/legal-help/.

stories. We have come to recognize the signs of labor trafficking. But each story always strikes me as remarkable. And I still have to ask, “How on earth did this happen in my own backyard?” There are a lot of answers to that question, of course, but one significant answer is this: The broken immigration system in the U.S. made it possible.

These men’s situation highlights problems with the current immigration system. They came to the U.S. on a type of temporary work visa that, like most work visas, allows them to work only for one particular employer. This arrangement gives that employer enormous power over them. Immigrants find themselves in a foreign land, not speaking the language and not knowing their rights. When conditions are abusive and pay is nonexistent, they do not complain for fear of losing their jobs and the right to work in the country.

Meanwhile, if they leave the employer or try to work elsewhere, they become “illegal” or “undocumented.” For thousands of workers who come to the U.S. to work on this type of visa, the fear of becoming illegal is palpable. It was for these men. They stayed in a wretched situation for

months because of the fear of detention and deportation.

These fears were not misguided. Under current law, any person without proper papers allowing him or her to be present in the U.S. can be locked up and then deported. Under current policy, hundreds of thousands of immigrants (with and without criminal records) are deported every year. To these men, the shame of being locked up and then deported back to Thailand penniless would be unbearable. In fact, this fear helped keep them under the control of the traffickers.

In practice, the culture of immigration enforcement hurts victims of human trafficking and is a boon to traffickers. Local law enforcement in almost every state can funnel immigrants into immigration detention. Any immigrant who is arrested, regardless of whether charges are ultimately dropped, can be turned over to the Department of Homeland Security for deportation proceedings. Victims of labor trafficking, particularly if they are men, can be hard to identify. So, despite progress in recent years, some law enforcement officials are more likely to treat these individuals

as lawbreakers to be prosecuted rather than victims to be protected.

When the situation got to be unbearable, the Thai men called us and asked for help escaping. We arranged a time when they knew the boss and his son would not be around. My coworkers and I borrowed church vans and drove to pick them up. In the early morning, they quickly loaded their luggage and silently climbed into the vans. Ultimately, these men applied for and were granted “T” visas as victims of human trafficking. After several years, they were able to reunite with their families and stay in the U.S. with lawful status and work authorization.

Not every story has that happy ending. As Disciples Immigration Legal Counsel, I have the privilege of working with pastors and members of congregations facing immigration issues. Many are desperate to obtain some kind of legal status to escape the daily fear of being deported and torn from their families. I review all possible legal options with them. Have they ever been a victim of a serious crime? Were they abandoned, abused, or neglected as juveniles? Have they ever been a victim of human trafficking? For each of these questions, the answer is often, “No, thanks be to God.” And I also thank God that this person has

been spared these types of suffering. But then, more often than not, I have to give the bad news that they are out of luck. No amount of waiting in line, paying fines, or applying for visas will give them a chance to have any kind of lawful immigration status in the U.S., much less citizenship.

For many of the approximately 11 million people who are in the U.S. without lawful status, those who are called “undocumented” or “illegal,” the only hope of getting some kind of visa or status is if they have been a victim. That is the strange state of our immigration laws and policies today.

Thankfully, we finally have a chance to do something about it. This summer Congress is debating proposals for an overhaul of our nation’s immigration legal system. Immigration reform could provide more protections to immigrant victims and survivors of human trafficking. It could provide protections for immigrant workers so that fewer people are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation — and ultimately so that fewer people become victims of human trafficking.



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