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Slavery: it exists today, and it's an affront to God

Toni Hassan

The Melbourne Anglican

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Australia's first Modern Slavery Act, which was passed last year after years of advocacy by church and civil society groups, represented a milestone in the fight against the scourge of modern slavery. Toni Hassan, who is on the board of STOP THE TRAFFIK Australia, recently took part in an exposure tour of south-east Asia to see examples of what slavery looks like today – and the good work being done to combat it. In the first article in a two-part series, she looks at exploitation in the seafood industry.

I am a relatively new advocate in the campaign to end modern slavery. It wasn't hard joining, because I could see that Jesus Christ, the holy troublemaker, the revolutionary Messiah, lived in a world not unlike our own.

There were slaves and masters then and there are slaves and masters now. It's just that today, despite our access to 24/7 news media, slaves are largely hidden. In fact, the risks of becoming a modern slave are rarely visible to the victim, until it's too late.

There's a story I heard that illustrates this.

Cho, not his real name, was 15. He and his Burmese family were barely able to afford to eat. Then someone offered him a job in a factory. After being transported to an unknown place, Cho was locked in a room. "I thought, 'Why do they have to lock the door?'" Cho's photo was taken. "They said it was for a passport." But Cho's name was changed. "I knew there was no way out. The police, the mafia and the traffickers were all working together."

Cho was forced to work on a ship. Not just any ship, but a fishing boat staffed by dozens of young men like him who were kidnapped on land and forced into slavery, trawling the ocean for fish and seafood, more than 16 hours a day, until they either die or escape.

The human trafficker who ensnared Cho lived right next door to him. Traffickers are not strangers. They are often people a community knows and trusts.

A global menace including and beyond seafood

The International Labour Organisation estimates there are 40 million modern-day slaves, more than at any other time in human history. It's hard to fathom but modern slavery is the fastest growing trade after illicit drugs.

What often comes to mind when we think of modern slavery and trafficking is sex trafficking. In fact, sex trafficking accounts for only about a third of human trafficking. The majority is forced movement and labour across industries from fashion to seafood. Many modern-day slaves are trapped on foreign fishing boats, catching, filleting and freezing fish far offshore. Modern slavery essentially robs someone of their freedom. Their labour is utterly controlled and abused by others. For Australians who love their seafood, this will come as a shock. For Christians who are called to love thy neighbour and free the captives, it's a call to get involved to make a difference.

The economic model that sustains fishing today is driven by reduced fish stocks and, well, greed. For crews in developing countries including Thailand and Vietnam to make a profit, they have to travel further out to sea on large freezer boats for what turns out to be months or years at a time. Smaller fishing vessels offload tons of catch to the large cargo-type ship in a practice known as transshipment.

Global supply chains deliver 70 per cent of the seafood Australians eat. China, Japan, Russia, Spain, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand are all regarded as being at high risk of modern slavery in their fishing industries. Combined, these seven countries generate more than a third of the world's catch. Other countries also house modern slavery operations, Ireland and the United States among them.

Bad practices are often hidden and under-reported. Thailand's seafood sector has come under scrutiny in recent years but labour abuses are by no means unique to Thai vessels.

Businesses trying to do better

During a recent trip to south-east Asia as a board director with STOP THE TRAFFIK Australia, a broad coalition of church, civil society, community and other organisations working against trafficking in Australia and around the world, I heard harrowing stories, but also stories of hope.

In Bangkok, I visited Thai Union Group, one of the world's biggest seafood processors, which supplies fish to Australian restaurants and supermarkets. It is actively improving standards in-house and throughout its supply chain. The task is massive.

Thai Union produces 600 metric tonnes of tuna a day at 17 locations around the world. Its strategy is three-fold: strong workers' rights, safe and legal labour, and sustainable fishing and packaging. Because it only processes tuna provided by suppliers (it does not own any fishing vessels), it demands its suppliers sign a business ethics code of conduct.

"You can't easily go and visit or order a vessel when it's at sea, and so the workers essentially don't have a voice," says Dr Darian McBain, an Australian scientist and engineer who is global director of sustainability for Thai Union.

"One of the things Thai Union and others in the seafood industry are doing now is making sure that we can connect with the workers while they're at sea."

The company is trialling a remedial vessel improvement program that offers training to would-be onboard workers about their rights, translates contracts for them and offers satellite phones to track them while at sea.

Another notorious problem in the global seafood industry is the delicate and nimble work of prawn-peeling. Thai Union used to outsource that work but learned a few years ago that contractors were employing children, with their smaller hands, for the job. The company brought prawn-peeling sheds in-house to improve standards.

Operating under a human rights framework that assesses, detects and reduces risk, the company recognised it can't change systems that allow modern slavery without working with other players, including not-for-profits, governments and responsible buyers. And that's where you, the consumer, come in.

Your purchasing power

Rather than avoiding imported fish, Dr McBain urges Australian consumers to ask retailers where their stock came from, and who caught and processed it.

"They need to engage with their retailers," she says. "They can let retailers know that they care. Also, don't disengage from companies that are doing the wrong thing. Too often retailers will still buy the cheapest, and that doesn't help anybody."

“If you boycott a country, or a particular company, there really isn’t an incentive to improve, and one of the benefits of the Modern Slavery Act is that businesses are going to start to be more transparent about what they’re finding in the supply chains.”

With other organisations, many of them Christian, STOP THE TRAFFIK worked hard to lobby the Australian Parliament to pass the Modern Slavery Act last year. It’s not perfect but it represents a milestone in that for the first time, businesses and not-for-profits operating in Australia with a global revenue of more than \$100 million will be required to report what they are doing to stamp out slavery in their supply chains, both domestically and overseas. Similar legislation was passed earlier in New South Wales.

We may know all about the efforts of famous Christian businessman William Wilberforce who, with others, worked to abolish the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. But more than 200 years after his bill was passed, the anti-slavery campaign continues. Just as slavery laid the foundations of the wealth and industrialisation of the Western world, the wealth I enjoy today is not without painful human cost. Slavery, which takes many forms and is practised in many industries, is an affront to human rights and human dignity and the God I worship.

In the next edition of TMA, I’ll take you to Cambodia where a Christian organisation is making a difference, one young person at a time.