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WISDOM FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Making a dent in the growing modern slavery trade

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I had the privilege of travelling to Cambodia and Thailand this year to see modern slavery for myself. It was challenging but it was also full of hope as I got to see what good looks like (I shared some of that in the June edition of TMA, looking at the fishing industry, particularly in Thailand).

There are good news stories in Cambodia too but before we get there, I want to step back and show you the contours of this heinous and global problem, and why I got involved.

As a citizen of the kingdom of God, I have some responsibility for citizens in my own country and around the globe. Christians are called to love our neighbours as ourselves. That includes understanding who has power, how they got it, how they use it, and seeking to make the world, here and now, a more just place.

Modern slavery is fundamentally about an abuse of power. It takes many forms, on a continuum with other forms of exploitation. It is an affront to basic human rights and human dignity, which Christians regard as inherent in all who have been created in God's image. In every case of modern slavery people are denied opportunity and personal freedom.

What struck me travelling to Cambodia was how poverty, poor governance, internal conflict and corruption create the perfect cocktail for modern slavery to thrive in, with women and children being the worst impacted (the US State Department estimates that 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year, 80 per cent of them women and about half children).

Cambodia, which many Australians have visited or are based in while working in the not-for-profit sector, is enjoying strong economic growth, but it remains very poor. It is recovering from years of war and trauma. There is no real social welfare safety net, no independent media. The education system is weak. Teachers are so poorly paid that students are expected to provide teachers' lunches. The school system also reinforces gender stereotypes, contributing to high rates of gender-based violence.

Twenty per cent of men surveyed admit to physically abusing and raping a woman! According to Hagar International, a non-profit organisation which supports people who have escaped sexual slavery and human trafficking, one in every two women believes it is okay for a man to beat her. Of course, this affects children, too. According to the United Nations, more than 50 per cent of Cambodian children report being the victims of physical violence, and 25 per cent report emotional abuse.

Poverty and violence contributes to high rates of informal migration out of Cambodia and human trafficking. Up to two million Cambodians live abroad for work. They cross borders without paperwork, making them hard to track. The courts are close to government, which compromises their ability to prosecute perpetrators. Forced marriage is a growing problem as women in Cambodia and across south-east Asia are bought against their will to try to bridge China's gender gap.

The Cambodian Government has a human trafficking unit of about 30 police officers in Phnom Penh. Other organisations investigate, engaging informers across the city and countryside. After building the case, they hand it over to the officers to break down doors and make arrests. This has led to change. The biggest known ring of brokers and traffickers that use children for begging has been broken up. But poverty and corruption strangle sustained change.

In recent years the head of the anti-trafficking police was himself convicted for his part in supporting the human trafficking trade. He was tried in absentia after fleeing Cambodia. Today he heads another division in the Cambodian police force. He popped back up after laying low for a while, with few consequences.

Big sister, little sister.

How do you make a dent in the growing modern slavery trade? Efforts to do this must include prevention, and that's where Christian organisation Alongsiders International comes in. It is among a number of agencies and businesses in south-east Asia seeking to break the cycle that leads to bonded labour and exploitation.

Led by New Zealand-Khmer couple Craig and Nayhouy Greenfield, Alongsiders equips compassionate young Cambodian Christians to walk alongside vulnerable children and orphans in their own communities. The organisation doesn't ask children at risk to do anything else but share their story.

Monika is 13. Her mother makes a meagre income selling snacks at the front of her one-bedroom house. Monika's father, a soldier, is dead. Monika broke her leg after she fell from a height, but her injury wasn't treated early enough to prevent a permanent disability. Her impairment made her more socially isolated. This matters because children with a disability are susceptible to manipulation by brokers who collect them from villages and bring them into the city for begging.

Daly, a volunteer with Alongsiders, often noticed Monika in her village, limping along by herself. She connected with the younger girl, making regular visits to talk and, above all, be a listening ear. Daly and other mentors have been trained to share comic book stories with those they mentor. Their themes, intrinsically linked to Christian teachings, include unconditional love, safe communities and respect for women.

"[One of the] comics comes with a balloon activity," said Daly. "When we have problems it's like a balloon. It gets bigger and bigger if we don't talk about it. So we need to learn to let our feelings out. Monika has taught me about perseverance. I see her, and she is fatherless, and it's hard for her to walk, but she continues to persevere. By comparison, I have everything, and that makes me want to persevere like her."

Daly taught Monika using a contextualised comic book about her rights to safety and protection, called Good Touch/Bad Touch. Monika learnt about the child helpline number from the comic book story and was instructed to count off, on her five fingers, five people she can turn to if she is in danger of trafficking or abuse. The usual NGO model relies on expensive and scarce NGO staff to monitor and respond to problems in the community, but Alongsiders International considers itself more of a grassroots movement, with hundreds of volunteer Alongsider mentors spotted through rural villages across 10 provinces of Cambodia. They live within a stone's throw of their "little brothers and sisters" so they are well placed to recognise, respond to and report any challenges their mentees might face.

Monika is safer because Daly has been trained to walk alongside her. Ultimately, their friendship has made Monika less vulnerable to modern slavery.

There are hundreds of children like Monika being supported by Alongsiders like Daly. Aged between 16 and 30, they are blessed with energy, commitment, enthusiasm and spare time. They commit for several years to support a struggling younger person. They are not fazed by or cynical about working with smaller children. They are excited to be given a mandate to minister in their own communities.



It is a ministry that recognises not only God’s heart for the poor, but that God wants us to care for the well-being of children – and to see children and young people as central to God’s redemptive purposes for the world. “Little” brothers and sisters often become “big” brothers and sisters.

Alongsiders International is funded by supporters and partner churches around the world and welcomes new donors. Its model is sustainable because it engages volunteers and uses innovations such as inexpensive app technology. It can easily scale up.