

NORTHWEST UNIVERSITY

Overcoming Barriers to the American Evangelical Church Engaging Migrant Latin American  
Transgendered Women in Prostitution and Similar Demographics:  
Raising Empathy Through Story.

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Practicum II: Thesis

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20 April 2023

This Integrative Project is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in International Community Development, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Northwest University. Some material included in this thesis was previously submitted to meet the requirements for the ICD course: Research for Social Change, Funding and Grant Writing, Social Problems, Peacemaking, Social and Environmental Justice in Development, International Development in Missions, and Culture Studies.

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*Merciful God, we meet each other at the foot of the cross. We wait  
with each other as those who inflict wounds on one another:*

*Be merciful to us.*

*As those who close our eyes to the needs of the poor and  
the marginalized.*

*Be merciful to us.*

*As those who turn from what is small and weak:*

*Be merciful to us.*

*As those who put our trust in power and wealth:*

*Be merciful to us.*

*As those who put others on trial:*

*Be merciful to us.*

*As those who take refuge in our tribes and fail to value people  
who aren't like us:*

*Be merciful to us.*

*As those who so easily uphold the ideologies of our earthly  
kingdoms more than the priorities of the kingdom of God.*

*Be merciful to us.*

*As those who deeply struggle to yield our way to yours:*

*Be merciful to us. Amen.*

- Prayer by Pastor Sherry Muchira

## Introduction

It is no secret that Christian Mission tactics, or any religious outreaches, experience extensive scrutiny in the twenty-first century. Christian missions, having a history that promotes “paternalism, conquest, and ethnocide (Tizon 133),” have evolved to take different forms in recent years. Thus, engaging postcolonial missiology has allowed developers to reform their practices holistically. Since short-term mission trips have been held to the fire for refining, some have transitioned to long-term partnerships to reflect better practices (Howell 153). While many church leaders take this approach, congregants must unlearn past methods. Simultaneously, they must learn how relational evangelism in their city is holistic and less damaging than short-term trips. In their paper, *When NonBelievers Go on Mission Trips*, Quartlbaum and Kupper recognized that many Christians participating in New York City urban missions held skewed perceptions of cities and the poor. These Christians had little exposure from their upper-middle-class suburban lives and carried “bias[es] against urban contexts...stereotypes about poor people of nonbelief, and prejudice based on race and ethnicity” (68). Unfortunately, this deluded perception of nonbelievers in poverty is not secluded to New Yorkers; rather, it is endemic within the global evangelical Church which enables them to turn a blind eye to groups on the margins. If the American Evangelical Church is exposed to disenfranchised groups, addresses poor theology, and implements spiritual disciplines collectively, it would act more neighborly to its community members; this feat would require certain social barriers to be addressed, an embracement of narrative stories, and an establishment of secure personal religious convictions.

This paper recognizes two specific groups who disappear from the church’s plain view by asking the reader to reflect upon whom these groups represent in their community. The first group is the transgendered Latin American women in prostitution in Antwerp, Belgium’s Red

Light District (RLD). The next example is the trans youths that inhabit the streets of the Puget Sound region in Washington. Both of these groups are nuanced in their attributes, yet they carry similarities that most marginalized groups experience. For example, both groups experience homelessness which is a common trial for transgendered people. Most notably, Seattle's homelessness crisis has affected the latter group. As of 2020, Seattle is recorded having approximately 11,750 individuals experiencing homelessness (Sin). This statistic is a 30.2% increase since 2010 and sets Seattle as the third-largest homeless population. While homelessness is an issue, a significant population that experiences this is the transgender community; they also face family rejection, discrimination, and violence (National Center for Transgender Equality). The National Center for Transgender Equality stated that one in five of these individuals has experienced homelessness at one point, and many social services refuse to serve transgendered homeless people appropriately. Typically services deny them shelter based on gender identity, offered inappropriate housing spaces, and do not aid in addressing co-occurring issues that homeless transgendered individuals face (National Center for Transgender Equality). The greater Seattle area alone recognizes that 27% of homeless youth are LGBTQIA+ affiliated ("Seattle Youth Homelessness: 5 Things You Didn't Know"). Both of these groups endure overlapping circumstances which contribute to their marginalized position in society.

However, in Belgium, due to culture and laws, has a designated area for transgendered women in prostitution in the RLD. Interestingly the stories of these two groups have much in common. In a study regarding New York City's LGBT runaway-homeless youth, Ferguson-Colvin and Maccio discovered "that this population was subjected more frequently to sexual victimization than heterosexual runaway-homeless youth and more likely to engage in prostitution or survival sex for food, clothing, or shelter" (Schwarz and Britton 9). Similarly,

Shawn Alderman, Ground missionary at Breaking Chains Network, states that many women in the RLD express molestation from a relative at a young age, rejection from family during their transition, and a desperate need for money to keep from being on the streets; when they do not receive the finances they need to survive, they enter into prostitution (Alderman). This overlap demonstrates that transgender women have similar experiences regardless of their location and culture. Furthermore, it also highlights the church's role in preventing Tacoma's homeless trans youth from further exploitation.

Although these two groups share many more similarities, they still have nuances. Not every homeless transgendered individual in Tacoma is presently active in prostitution, and not every transgender individual in prostitution is homeless. This paper seeks to address the individual who is transgender and in need of services due to homelessness, stigmatization, or forced prostitution. This paper will use the word "marginalized transgender" to generalize someone who requires help but goes unseen due to the systems and structures set in place in society. This paper also addresses similar populations globally that experience some of the aspects mentioned in the description above, with the purpose to raise empathy and provide support for overlooked individuals via Christian efforts.

The interesting and equally heartbreaking factor is that Christian churches are not actively engaging with this specific demographic in their community. Although many highly esteemed Christian organizations seek out the homeless community, few recognize the nuance these individuals need to experience holistic healing. While the global Church has been tasked to feed the poor and needy, they also have been tasked to value relationships with the people they witness to; this demands best development practices executed with integrity. Due to this demographic's controversial nature, many American Christians must overcome multiple barriers

regarding their cultural perceptions, political beliefs, religious beliefs, and many other barriers to engage with transgendered individuals experiencing poverty.

This paper does not suggest an outreach solely to the LGBTQIA+ community. Rather, it argues that the American evangelical outreach practices do not cater to this specific community. The lack of contextualization to this group likens Christian institutions to religious leaders who pass on the other side of the road as their neighbor lies beaten in the ditch (Luke 10:25-37, NIV). As the body of Christ, long-term missional practices are essential to urban ministries fulfilling the biblical mandate to uphold justice for their neighbor. Therefore, the individuals in need who identify as LGBTQIA+ must be cared for by our congregations in ways that allow each member to maintain their personal beliefs and convictions.

When the American Evangelical Church broadens its exposure to marginalized groups and confronts its theology characterized by cultural wars rather than spiritual practices, it will embrace the underrepresented transgender community. In order to achieve these goals, they can love their community members by assisting them to overcome multiple social barriers, develop deep compassion for the personal narratives of the individuals they serve, and establish true confidence in their own belief systems.

### **Contextualization**

This journey began when I first landed in Belgium to partner with Breaking Chains Network (BCN) as requested by its founder. I was excited and nervous about working with this organization dedicated to fighting human trafficking and sexual exploitation. This ministry, located adjacent to the RLD in Antwerp, Belgium, makes itself accessible to the victims and survivors of the sex trade. It offers hope, healing, and material, emotional, and spiritual help to sexually exploited individuals by utilizing volunteers and full-time staff to develop relationships



with each individual. In addition, BCN offers their space, time, and resources to create friendships with the women and men who participate in the sex industry. In a personal interview with April Foster, she recognized that most of the victims BCN helps are Latin American transgender women who migrated to Europe (Foster, 2021; Lee 1). In fact, I spent most of my time getting to know these transgendered women. BCN's holistic ministry approach values people-centered development, copowering methods,<sup>1</sup> material and spiritual provision, and friendship. I entered this setting with an open mind about how I could contribute to the organization's mission. I left feeling my heart and mind transformed by the women who work in prostitution. In the next section, I will describe who they are and how they are regarded in society.

### **Migrant Latin American Women in Prostitution**

Migrant Latin American transgendered individuals in prostitution (MLATP) have multiple factors against them which push them toward their chosen vocation. The first factor is being in their country of origin. Many of these women are born in countries in Latin America. While using one country as an example is an overgeneralization, I refer to the European Freedom Network's (EFN) sources to better understand the MLATP's context. The EFN reminds us that Brazil has implemented laws protecting transgender people, yet "it remains the country with the highest number of transgender people killed in a year" (Moisander 15). This extreme reaction to transgenderism and prostitution is sometimes linked to religious ideologies deeply ingrained into society. Antwerp University student Julie Rausenberger conducted anthropological and phenomenological research on this group. She describes the reason for their migration:

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<sup>1</sup> Copowerment: "a dynamic of mutual exchange through which both sides of a social equation are made stronger and more effective by the other" (Inslee)

Intertwined with their gender identity and sexual orientation...mobility then becomes not purely economic, but rather a political, religious and very personal emancipatory motive with a push factor of transphobic discrimination and gender inequality in Latin America, and a pull factor of tolerance and freedom in Europe. (132)

This suggests their migration is motivated by a desire for liberation from oppressive rules.

Working the streets of Antwerp becomes their promised freedom.

Furthermore, Taina Moisander also recognizes the vast majority of prostitutes the EFN works with come from countries where the police are “corrupt and contribute to the success of traffickers' work” (15). Corruption leaves the victims skeptical and untrusting of authority. Similarly, Alderman, ground missionary at BCN, recognizes the MLATP’s distrust of Evangelicals. The women who attend the Oasis Center<sup>2</sup> confessed to her that Evangelicals are the ones with nice cars and big diamond rings who take their money in order for them to buy their way to God’s forgiveness (Alderman; Lee 2-3).

When MLATPs finally land in the RLD in Antwerp, Belgium, they have journeyed far to experience a secluded lifestyle. Rausenberger recognizes the discrete nature of these individuals. When she collected information regarding their experience, she faced difficulty. She said, “They often live an anonymous and isolated existence in society. They have limited contact with the local population as they often have long working days and hardly leave the prostitution district” (126). She explained the possibility of skewed data due to their inability to be registered. She also described their transient character, illegal status, lack of residency, and hidden prostitution. Her descriptions paint a group of unseen and unheard people whom the local church must seek

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<sup>2</sup> The Oasis Center: an apartment at the entrance of the RLD. This is where BCN volunteers make meals for the women, teach English lessons, teach jewelry making, prepare coffee for their outreaches, and facilitate a safe space for women in prostitution.

out; this begs the question who are the unseen and unheard people in each person's respective community? In Tacoma, the homeless trans youth are unheard and unseen and must be sought out (Lee 3-4).

### **Two Observations**

While conducting fieldwork, I had two experiences that caused me to question how the American Evangelical strategies approach the underserved transgender community. The first experience happened in Belgium. I attended a church service with Foster, where she gave an informative session; her goal was to preach what God was doing in the RLD and raise funds for a project she wanted to run among the women BCN serves. As we stood in the foyer, an older gentleman sprinted towards Foster, desperate to catch her. This man grew up in the US, but became an evangelist in Belgium. He was praised as a pastor and professor for his evangelistic heart and work to “reach the lost” with tracts.<sup>3</sup> He ran to us in the church foyer and said, “April! How do we speak to the homosexuals?! We have to know how to talk to the lesbians!” This man had accidentally wandered into a PRIDE parade in Antwerp the day before while witnessing in the streets. At this time, during the church service, Foster continuously repeated to the man, “The only way to reach them is to show them radical acceptance” (Foster). While his enthusiasm was evident, rather than listening to her, he continued to be adamant that there was a specific tract that would effectively reach the LGBTQIA+ demographic (Lee 5).

My next experience solidified my research endeavors. Upon returning to the states, I was excited to share the transformative experience with friends and family members. I reconvened with some old friends I had made when I initially committed to the Christian faith. I spoke about how BCN reaches its community with radical acceptance. Their goal is to give the women a

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<sup>3</sup> A small pamphlet that concisely communicates the gospel. It can be contextualized to specific groups.

space void of judgment or shame casting. My friends, who proudly identify as conservative Evangelicals, were disgusted. Concerned that I was not upholding scripture by working in this environment, I was informed that referring to the women as females was partnering with a lie. I was accused of complacency in the “affirming” or “non-affirming” culture war. It was not until I shared the common stories of these women that I noticed a change in my friends’ perceptions of them. Despite their lifestyle differences, my friends began to recognize these women I had come to love as dignified and valuable human beings instead of what an outsider’s judgment had expected them to be. Therefore, the goal of this project is to transform biases into empathy and compassion through exposure and story.

After a few interactions similar to my friends’, I realized the privilege I had of knowing the first-hand common experiences that these women had endured in their past (Merriam and Tisdell). In the RLD, at a young age (10-15 years) many of these women were either introduced to prostitution as a means of income, coerced into it by a loved one, or trafficked into it by a family member (Alderman; Hayes). By the time they had endured sexual abuse for many years and been threatened with homelessness in a foreign country, they were presented with the option to make more money as a woman in the windows of the RLD (Rausenberger 132). Finally, as biological women (fully transitioned), these women in prostitution could travel to different RLDs to sell their bodies in prostitution as a means to live by. Typically, when I explained this harsh reality, my Christian challengers would find themselves in a state of understanding and compassion. I would generally hear, “Oh, well, that is different,” (referring to their contrasted experience in the US media). Nevertheless, this caused me to wonder if the narrative in the US is different. Are other transgender individuals in the US subject to a privilege which excludes them from Christian compassion? Is there an injustice that Christians are unaware of because of the

polarization surrounding the language of the transgender community members? Is there trafficking, prostitution, and homelessness that goes unseen because of the church's fear of association with people they deem "sinful"?

These two experiences caused me to question much about my purpose working with this demographic. Both of these reactions revealed something about the American Evangelical Church that must be addressed if it desires to love the marginalized members of the transgender community successfully. Reflecting upon the first experience, I questioned how this man eagerly wanted to engage this group yet did not have the appropriate language to do so. He also did not listen to the expert's advice when she clearly explained what she had learned from working with this group. This is a major barrier to effective development and a significant value of the International Community Development (ICD) program. The second scenario caused me to wonder how my friends' offended hearts contributed to individuals not receiving care from the church solely based on a bias disguised as protecting the holiness of the Gospel; this concept of self-preservation runs rampant in the church and inhibits many from fulfilling its calling. In his writing *Unclean*, Richard Beck depicts this othering as "disgust." *Disgust* is the accompanied response to something people believe is offensive (20). This disgust then becomes a system in which people regulate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (26). In contrast, Julie Clawson defines the Christian mandate by stating, "Biblical justice goes beyond punishing wrongdoing...rather biblical justice involves healing the brokenness that marred our relationships with each other in the first place" (23). When people contrast this unchecked reaction to Clawson's definition of the Christian mandate, it is clear that something has gone wrong. If transgender individuals are neglected, the American Evangelical Church must

recognize them as neighbors and seek justice on their behalf. The church must participate in extensive relational peacemaking among these demographics to establish trusting relationships.

### **Who is the American Evangelical Church**

It is important to define whom the “American Evangelical Church” refers to. Although the scope of this research requires a generalization of this group, this cultural group still has some defining features. Before diving into this group, one must understand the context of religion within the US. In the 1950s, a revival increased congregation numbers and maintained a steady level for fifteen years (Grant). Now, in this cultural moment, people are exiting the American Evangelical Church in waves (; Miller 5:06)<sup>4</sup> nationwide spread of Christianity. This global Christianity established religion, politics, and Western culture as inseparable.

Popular media portrays Evangelicals as associated with Trump since 80% of his voters identify with this title, yet a closer look reveals 80% of these voters are not active participants in a Sunday church gathering (Miller 10:08). In a podcast hosted by Patrick Miller, John Mark Comer describes how in the US, only 8% of Millennials who grew up in a church express a desire to see and make change through their faith by attending church and practice Christian disciplines<sup>5</sup> (11:03); this 8% is what he calls true “resilient” Christians. This number of practicing resilient Christians remains consistent globally. However, Non-Western countries reveal a higher number of active Christians (13:41). This data concludes that the “American Evangelical Christians” may not be actively engaging in faith the way Scripture requires from believers. Therefore, this begs the question what is an American Evangelical Christian?

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<sup>4</sup> Christendom: when Christianity become the dominant world religion via Emperor Theodosius I in 380 AD (Aniol).

<sup>5</sup> This would include tithing, participating in different missional organizations, praying regularly, and other orthodox practices.

Unfortunately, the church in the US has been secularized and conflated into a political ideology. Leslie Newbigin, a missionary to India before WW2, accurately predicted that rather than maintaining a genuine religion, the allegiances of the Christian faith would be to their political ideology of choice over the teachings of Jesus. Newbigin believed that people would subscribe to politics above the New Testament writings or historical orthodoxy (qtd. in Miller 17:19). Culture now presents a hyper right version and a hyper left version of these religiously charged culture wars which involve topics such as race, wealth distribution, climate policy, and gender identities. This secularization masked by religion has placed the US to be the most divided since the Civil wars (Schneider). Recently the church has complacently accepted this political identity. Kristin Kobs Du Mez explains this conflation of church and politics when describing the state of the American Church today. Her research compiles historical events, Christian literature, clothing, merchandise, movie stars purportedly representing “Christian” values, and Evangelical church pop culture. One of her major themes highlights how celebrity evangelicals share a “defense of patriarchy...[as an] identity, and to growing commitment to political activism...dictat[ing] the boundaries of evangelicalism itself” (Kobs Du Mez 87). In her one-sided argument, she asserted that Trump exemplified Evangelicals’ requirements for Christian men, morals, and values, causing him to win the US majority vote in 2016 and take place as their “High Priest” (251-272). This infers that, in the US, when a political leader appeals to the “evangelical” popular culture, they win the support of the US majority (similar to the origins of Christendom mentioned above); what does this mean for the groups of people that struggle to fit into these religious norms or the outreaches that hope to witness to these groups? The ambiguity of who the American Evangelical Church is must be considered when BCN seeks to raise awareness among every Christian-identifying demographic.

## Research Design

Although the culture wars of our time are revealed in my personal fieldwork, evident in political media, and common among church congregants' perceptions of their counterparts, Phase One of this project aimed to identify how and why BCN was able to reach this marginalized group in Europe. Phase Two of the research investigated how pastors of American Evangelical Churches in the Greater Seattle area responded to a similar demographic in Tacoma, WA. Using the data collected from these pastors, BCN can implement better strategies to raise awareness contextualized to churches globally. This research also contributes to the much needed outreaches to similar marginalized groups.

This research design took the form of a case study. Using “a combination of description and interpretation or description and evaluation”, it pinpointed community needs that were not being addressed and helped establish where developers must channel their efforts (Lee 3; Merriam and Tisdell 40). Most of this fieldwork research took place “in the setting where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs...representing a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview” (Merriam and Tisdell 35). Having spent many hours at BCN's Oasis Center provided an extensive view into the daily lives of transgender women in prostitution who live in a society that does not allow them to express their fullest potential.

### Phase One: Insights from Antitrafficking Organizations

The first portion of these interviews took place leading up to my trip to Belgium and during my time at the Oasis Center. The purpose of these interviews was to gather knowledge regarding local nonprofit strategies. Insights from local and global anti-trafficking organizations revealed BCN's difficulties with clients and the board of directors. The gap between the two has



shown to be difficult to navigate when board members had criteria that did not fully recognize the trauma internalized by a sexually exploited individual.

A noteworthy interview from Alderman recognizes the MLATP's distrust of Evangelicals and explains the similarities in stories among the transgender women she serves in the RLD. Many women she works with have had an abusive religious or strict orthodox background. Alderman reflected upon some of her first interactions when the women who attend the Oasis Center express fear and skepticism toward Evangelicals who have used their religion to leverage power and mal intentions. From a demographics standpoint, this information aligns with Geert Hofstede's analysis of Latin American countries' high Uncertainty Avoidant Index (UAI) (Hofstede). Many countries with a high UAI tend to have many traditions, rules, and social norms that keep society functioning well. Alderman also mentioned that the emotion of shame drove most of the decisions these "ladyboys" made daily. This is important when we recognize the church's ability to cast more shame and unintentionally cause more harm in these women's lives.

Additionally, at an academic presentation held at Northwest University, Amanda Hightower, executive director and co-founder of Seattle-based Real Escape from Sex Trafficking (REST), found difficulty working with funders and the board of directors when she prioritized a data-driven approach. In attempts to work with the individuals escaping sex trafficking, Hightower emphasized people-centered development as the key to their success. Unfortunately, the board did not fully support some of her tactics since they are distanced from the realities of sex trafficking and barriers to these individuals' success. Statistically, she finds that housing is one of the greatest barriers for anyone exiting sex- work. She mentions that her clients' ability to graduate from their safe houses is the largest determinant of whether they will remain out of

prostitution. Her experience revealed that when they are not allowed to keep some of their drug paraphernalia with them, they will leave and live on the streets.<sup>6</sup> Thus, contrary to other homes, she allows them to keep their paraphernalia in hopes that they stay and reach the ultimate goal: remaining out of prostitution. Many funders did not appreciate this approach; most of them were Christian and could withhold finances for their programs and projects (Hightower). If the end-goal is for these clients to exit prostitution and enter into a journey of healing, then Hightower's approach is effective. However, if funders are disconnected from the concept of progressive healing and pull funding based on the clients' extracurricular activities, the end result will be unmet. Thus, exposure to the clients' perspective is essential to see change in this area.

The gap between Christian church members or supporters and the actual victims BCN hopes to serve must be bridged. While this gap in knowledge may seem small, it shows how a lack of understanding can inhibit the individuals believers are called to serve. This misunderstanding creates a greater need for peacemaking that bridges survivors coping with their experiences and the knowledge/ empathy of funders and donors. In *The Little Book of Conflict Management*, John Lederach shows peacemaking through transformation conflict (CT). Using his framework of CT, practitioners can address different areas like the one mentioned above. In this scenario, the board members must be educated on trauma responses and how a survivor responds to their minimal possessions being mishandled (SAMSHA).

## **Phase 2: What do pastors say?**

While the above interviews reflected the experiences of BCN's volunteers, the following phase of interviews was inspired by the work of Logan Knight and Njeri Kagotho. In their paper, *"On Earth and as It Is in Heaven—There Is No Sex Trafficking in Heaven: A Qualitative Study*

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<sup>6</sup> Likely a trauma response to protecting some of the only possessions they have (SAMSHA)

*Bringing Christian Church Leaders' Anti-Trafficking Viewpoints to Trafficking Discourse,*" multiple spiritual leaders articulated personal perspectives of marginalized victims. Their findings revealed that pastors believed God cares about trafficked survivors, Christians have a moral obligation to intervene, survivors also have essential roles to play in solving this issue, missional outreaches can cause more complex issues, and managing complexity begins by applying the truths underpinning the Christian worldview. These takeaways informed the questions assigned to this phase of research.

Replicating a small scope of this research by Knight and Kagotho, I interviewed three pastors in the Greater Seattle area. These interviews were semi-structured and open-ended questions. Here are some examples of questions below:

1. What role did you perform as a Spiritual Leader? What Church and how long?
2. As a pastor at \_\_\_\_\_, you probably encounter many different types of people who hold different opinions about the church's role in engaging different groups in society. What would you say is the typical reaction or stance someone at your pastoring church would have regarding church provision prioritized to transgender individuals or women in prostitution?
3. Why do you think that is? Is there a **biblical reason** associated with this reaction?
4. Would there be a different reaction towards the church providing services to **women in prostitution** locally versus internationally?
5. Do you think Christians who are eager or disgruntled about helping transgendered sex-workers or homeless individuals could have their **minds changed? What would the barriers be?**

The first interviewee was a former associate pastor at the City Church from 1993 until 2009 and current executive director for City Ministries, a social service nonprofit started by the City Church in 1993. When asked question number one, she responded, “[Transgenderism] was not anything that was even an issue during those days or anything that was even brought up....it is a recent sort of phenomenon.” Transparent with her experience, she recognized the prevalence of this topic now and had much to say regarding the political conversation surrounding it.

Interviewee One’s response focused on what the church should do for a marginalized group: “What do I do for men that do not have food? Or what do I do for kids that do not have food? You don't ask questions.” Here, she asserted that hungry people should be fed regardless of race, color, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. She believed a major barrier to Church engagement to marginalized transgendered groups was the emphasis on the differences we carry rather than the similarities among humanity. She asserted that Christians’ inability to hold confidence in their personal beliefs led them to neglect certain groups out of fear. Lastly, she stated that a lack of exposure to these types of individuals caused people to be unaware of the needs in the community.

The next interviewee was Pastor Joseph Rham, who served as a lead pastor at Eastside Christian Fellowship after serving with his family as Executive Director of Leadership International in Honduras for many years. Answering question one, he recognized that “probably 30 to 40% of our congregation would think...I do not have a responsibility, duty, or obligation because someone is in that situation (homeless, in prostitution, or transgender) due to their own choices.” Rham saw that many of the people he serves are eager to help marginalized groups, but they wanted to be sure that the groups were not continuously choosing to place themselves in

these situations; groups who identify as transgender or participate in prostitution would fall into these brackets.

Throughout the interview, he identified the barriers to the American Evangelical Church engaging marginalized transgender people as not wanting to carry the burden of knowledge accompanying exposure to these groups, a desire for safety and distance from these issues, and the convenience of handing a check. Rham recognized the belief in the “American Dream<sup>7</sup>” was attainable for many congregants, which left them distanced from the realities of a world that did not provide equal opportunities for everyone via racism or prejudices. He linked this mindset to “staunch conservatism.” He concluded this interview with a caution against using people’s emotions through photography to motivate congregations to give to other groups.

The last interview was with Pastor DJ Rabe, who served The House Church in Snohomish, WA. Currently, he was known for his outreach to the homeless population. Rabe has been enthusiastic about developing this demographic in tangible and relational ways. He believed the most significant barriers to the American Evangelical Church engaging missional practices were transactional churches, lack of engagement, exposure, or experience, and Christians not knowing how to have tough conversations. He expressed many opinions on how the churches in the area struggle to reach the poor because they have a transactional structure. Instead, most churches would rather spend their money on marketing for numbers than services for the poor (Rham). He suggested this lack of personal contact with the poor caused an inability to actually give them what they need

While Rham’s main focus of outreach targets individuals experiencing homelessness, he strongly disagreed with vocally acknowledging any gender identifier contrary to the binary view

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<sup>7</sup> The American Dream: a happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful. ("The American Dream")

of one's chromosomal makeup. He claimed his answer to anyone identifying as a transgender person would be to ask, "What even is a transgender?" Rham continued the interview by sharing his opinions regarding women in leadership roles and other discussion points surrounding the topic of gender and sex which revealed other barriers the church has faced.

To summarize, these three interviews aimed to reflect different Spiritual Leaders' understanding on why Christian congregants may not reach these marginalized groups. As these pastors are close to the homeless trans-youth in the Puget Sound region, they can speak to their specific context. Their answers will inform how organizations and outreaches will approach demographics similar to the women I encountered in Belgium and what areas must be addressed in Christian contexts to mobilize efforts.

### Phase 3: The Experts' Experience

The last portion of the research was interviews contributing to the proposed project's bulk. These interviews will contribute to a resource that reveals the passions, dreams, stories, and humanity that God has placed explicitly within the image-bearers who work in prostitution in Antwerp, Belgium's RLD. The interviewees were asked the following questions:

1. What was your childhood like?
2. When you were young, what did you want to be when you grew up?
3. What were you doing before you were working in the district?
4. What is something that you are passionate about?
5. If you could change one thing in this world, what would it be?
6. Have you ever had a best friend?
7. What is your favorite food and why?

Facilitating this space would connect and bless the community of women in the RLD of Antwerp, Belgium, with one another and churches. These interviews would promote understanding, empathy, and action among their local congregations. This research's intentions are inherently copowering since both parties receive a benefit.

## **Relevant Findings**

### **Phase 1**

After compiling all the research, the next objective is to understand which findings are relevant to helping the church empathize with marginalized groups. The first phase of interviews brought insight into the conflicts that arise when funders and supporters of organizations dealing with marginalized individuals do not fully understand the need. Alderman's insights revealed a massive mistrust of religion present in many of these individuals. The fact that many transgendered youth in Tacoma are kicked out of their homes due to religious family members' disapproval indicates they also have a mistrust of the Christian faith. Past religious hurt poses demands on Christian organizations to act as a bridge to this group. For instance, the American Evangelical Church could engage these marginalized demographics through Lederach's framework of CT-peacemaking through relational conflict resolutions. The steps to transformative peacemaking are recognize immediate situations, underlying patterns and context, and a conceptual framework (Lederach 11). Rather than temporarily housing one individual of the trans/ prostituted community, the church must establish rich relationships with these communities to see their circumstances change. Therefore, this suggests the question: How can practitioners educate the American Evangelical Church on the realities of this specific group?

## Phase 2

The second phase of interviews revealed many areas of growth among the American Evangelical mindset regarding marginalized transgendered individuals. Main themes that arose in these interviews were believers acting out of fear, a lack of confidence in the beliefs a Christian must hold, a lack of exposure—intentionally or unintentionally—to marginalized groups, and culture wars used to justify separation from people in need. Unfortunately, these factors do not justify nullifying oneself from the commandments to love neighbors (Mark 12:31), walk in grace towards one another (Col. 3:13), and uphold justice for those in need (Isa. 1:17). These justifications must be addressed for the American Evangelical Church to reach out to groups in poverty. This paper will touch on how these barriers intersect and how to gracefully propel the church toward a posture of love towards people they are called to serve.

## Phase 3

Although only one testimonial interview<sup>8</sup> has been conducted so far, it revealed much about how the Gospel of Jesus influenced a member from this vulnerable group. Similar to Malini Laxminarayan and Benjamin Dürr's work regarding the necessity for sexual assault victims to inform policy, these interviews allow the women to speak up. Rather than viewing these women as victims of crimes, they are the answer to bettering development strategies within nonprofits. BCN can use Jose's interview to assess better ways to facilitate the Gospel to MLATP. All of these findings, insights from nonprofit directors, pastors overseeing congregations, and the women who receive aid from Christian institutions, bring clarity into what the barriers are to effective programs that help marginalized groups.

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<sup>8</sup> Appendix B— Jose's interview



**Analysis: Relevant Barriers**

There are many reasons that American churches would be hesitant to reach out to this demographic; therefore, this portion, informed by the research collected, will specifically address culture wars (recognized through the conversations surrounding gender), individuals acting out of a “disgusted” state and lack of confidence in their foundational beliefs (from a lack of spiritual disciplines enacted), and ignorance to the realities of these type of individuals in need. This section will extrapolate these barriers.

**Gender and sex and theology (Culture Wars)**

As addressed above, Newbiggin suggested that as the West has become more secularized, Christians have held political views above their spirituality. Whether they intended to or not, many American Christians function out of this moral compass; as a result, the division regarding LGBTQIA+ groups and transgenderism signals where one belongs politically. Rather than all being recognized as children of God, individuals are labeled conservative or liberal. Although this project’s scope does not consist of a deeper discussion or theology on this topic, it will address opposing ideas regarding gender and sex within the church confounds.

The first barrier to address is the different perspectives on gender and sex within different churches. When BCN presents its resources to different churches, it must keep in mind the different perspectives on social issues among Christians. One major subject widely contested within the church is sexual orientation and its place in relation to the Christian church. Many groups affirm that a nonbinary sexual orientation within the Church as acceptable, yet many would refrain from interacting with such individuals. In their book, *Understanding Transgender Identities*, James Beilby and Paul Eddy believed the Church experiences divisive views on

transgendered individuals based on scriptural interpretations of Genesis 1-3, gender roles, and hermeneutics (49).

Beilby and Eddy explained that the controversy surrounding Genesis 1-3 developed from how society understands God's intentions for humanity before and after the fall. According to their findings, many believe the experience of transgender identities to be a product of the Fall that should be brought back into alignment with what God deemed "ideal." These authors cite another stance: transgenderism is a consequence of the fall, yet it is not something that needs fixing from human standards. This stance assumes that God will make all things right in the eschaton<sup>9</sup>. Still, others recognize transgender individuals as part of God's diverse creation that is unfolding to reveal His reality. This last belief states that transgenderism is not something to be changed or feared, and it is not a product of a fallen world (Beilby and Eddy 48).

Furthermore, personal understanding of gender roles has factored into the disagreements about transgenderism. When approaching this topic, Christians typically claim to hold a binary view of gender. However, scientific discrepancies are causing a need for clarification between "sex" and "gender." In his essay, "Gender and Sex: Related but Not Identical", Michael F. Bird defines "sex [as] a person's reproductive capacity as male or female" (83). On the other hand, Bird claimed that gender is more than sex. It pertains to the "culturally constructed characteristics and expected behaviors assigned to the sexes and regarded as normative in a society" (83). He recognized the complexity of a binary view of sex when factoring in intersex-born individuals and imposing one's cultural understanding of gender upon another cultural context (82).

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<sup>9</sup> The final age and the consummation of history, including the Last Judgment and the defeat of evil, the eternal blessedness of the righteous, and, in some traditions, the creation of a new heaven and earth (dictionary.com).

According to Bird, one major struggle surrounding gender has been the “largely patriarchal dominance of Western society and the tendency to essentialize gender” (83). This “essentialization” has enabled society to recognize the natural traits of one gender, absolutize them into a negative attribute, and then victimize and discriminate against the inferior gender. The example he used was women being emotional and suited to nurture rather than being rational and capable of leading. This conflation of sex and gender is unfortunate because it causes men and women in every culture to subscribe to one generalized expression of gender. With that said, completely separating gender from sex can lead to the negative effect of gender becoming a “social fiction that can be multiplied almost infinitely” (84). Biology has the ability to highlight differences between men and women. Completely divorcing sex from gender causes us to reject the variety God created and become an androgynous group with no diversity.

This understanding of gender becomes more controversial when factoring in one’s stance of scriptural teachings about gender roles. Excluding transgenderism from the picture, the concept of gender is highly contested which led to the Danvers Statement in 1988. This conference coined the terms complementarian<sup>10</sup> and egalitarian<sup>11</sup>— two opposing views of how men and women are ordained to function in society. Beilby and Eddy recognized the importance of factoring in gender perspectives because having more narrow concepts of gender increases the likelihood of gender dysphoria experienced by individuals who do not easily fall within these set categories (49).

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<sup>10</sup> Complementarian: hold that males and females are equal in nature, worth, and dignity but are given different roles, one implication of which is that leadership in church and family is reserved for men. (Understanding Transgender Identities, 49)

<sup>11</sup> Egalitarians: reject any necessary, transcultural gender hierarchy and, as such, are more open to cultural differences in how gender is expressed (Ibid 49)

The last area Bird, Beilby, and Eddy explore that affects one's perception of transgendered persons is one's hermeneutical convictions—more specifically, how much weight they merit to the human experience when interpreting Scripture. If one has an inerrant view of Scripture (meaning that scripture is without error and speaks Truth), they will try to harmonize the scriptural texts that seem to contradict each other. BCN must keep in mind that all of these areas differ not only among the different churches that support them, but also the individual congregants within each established church. Having sensitivity to nuanced Christian perspectives (interpretations of Genesis 1-3, gender roles, and hermeneutical approaches) of the demographics BCN helps to create real compassion for MLATP which will encourage these churches to see the situation as a whole. Rather than unconsciously holding a bias, BCN can recognize the bias and show how love for these groups must overcome the believer's discomfort of another's life-circumstances.

### **Othering and Disgust**

Another major barrier present in the American evangelical church is its reluctance to help others influenced by fear or disgust. As referred to above, disgust is the initial reaction to something that may corrupt an individual's morality, a social group's purity, or threatens the holiness of what a group deems sacred which causes people to categorize something as “animal-like” (Beck 192). When individuals or groups feel that the purity of one of these domains is at stake, their psychological impulse is to eliminate the hazard. Historical examples include the church shunning and disregarding women in prostitution, people in the trans community, black men and women, widows, and others who need assistance. Beck uses the example of Matthew 9 and 12 to illustrate how the Pharisees' hospitality was impaired when they prioritized their own purity instead of welcoming others into table fellowship (193). More can be said here about

boundaries within a group. However, this goes beyond the scope of the study. Essentially, the concept of psychological disgust and the priority of purity can keep American Evangelicals from extending loving actions towards others.

Though the Christian faith calls followers of Christ to be holy, it also demands that we do not allow this holiness to keep us from drawing near people in need. When individuals allow fear and disgust to drive their actions, they push others away because these people threaten one's holiness. An emphasis on purity creates a spiritual othering effect enabling Christians to deny the physical human needs individuals have (e.g not extending help to transgendered youth in Tacoma or simply offering a check and not interacting with them as humans). Beck states that this "undermines empathy and justice": two things that are essential in the Christian faith. This act either keeps people at a safe distance or it shuts them out completely. However, merely offering financial services to marginalized groups is part of the issue Rabe touched on when he suggested churches do not know what the poor need. Unfortunately, this distance is what allows prejudices continue. Expert in intergroup conflict Jim Everett "suggest[s] that contact between members of different groups (under certain conditions) can work to reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict." This theory requires "equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support by social and institutional authorities" for the greatest results (Everett). An example of this is BCN's Oasis Center. The resource connected to this project will begin the exposure process, yet any organization that desires further exposure must be facilitated through a safe common space like the Oasis Center.

In fact, many organizations share this ignorance. In a study done by the World Bank, they discovered that many organizations misdiagnose poverty. An impoverished woman in Moldova describes poverty as "pain; it feels like a disease. It attacks a person not only materially but also

morally. It eats away one's dignity and drives one into total despair" (Narayan et al.).

Unfortunately, development organizations disconnect social needs from psychological needs diminishing poverty to a lack of physical possessions. If the Church were to engage with the individuals they aim to serve on a relational level, they would recognize the actual needs rather than misdiagnose the needs of the poor: first they must choose to physically interact with these individuals. This poor analysis of people in poverty should not be the case for the Church since its story of change inherently recognizes the complexities of humans. The Church's missional mandate is rooted in fundamental truths regarding the dignity of humans who long for union with their creator.(Lee 1).

Thus, rather than recognizing these groups as a contagion, the church must gravitate toward them. Pushing others away contrasts with the teachings of Jesus which call his people to lift their neighbors out of the ditch, clothe and feed their enemies, and continue seeking others' health and wellness even if there is a financial cost. Examples of Jesus showed that he would reach down to the Lepers of his time that the Pharisees and people of God would cast out into the margins confirm our call to service (Mark 1:40-45). Jesus loved the marginalized and did not allow his holiness and purity keep him from people in need. He also loved them by pointing out their realities and how the people holding power in society (typically religious leaders) harmed the poor (Matt 23:23).

### **Lack of Exposure and the Importance of Story**

Jesus: "Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see?" (Mark 8:17-18)

Another significant barrier to overcome in the church is lacking perspective. Sandra McNeil's writing on reconciliation states, "Two vital components of the [identifying with another] are embracing the stories of others and building empathy. Both are crucial for changing

perceptions and de-objectifying one another. Someone who was once alien to you must be seen and heard in new ways"(66). To facilitate an atmosphere where congregants can develop a collective identity with the one who is suffering, they first must courageously enter into the spaces where the vulnerable are.

While Rham and Interviewee One both recognized fear of the other as the main reason people ignored these demographics, diversity of experiences is essential to compassion. In *White Kids*, Margaret Hagerman describes a mom seeking a vast community for her children. The mother declares, "It is more important that my child knows how to interact with all kinds of people around him and be aware of his own position in the world" (126). Understanding our role in society allows one to become aware of how they can help others; this should be standard within the church that God has tasked to uphold justice.

Adding upon Hagerman's sentiments of societal hierarchy, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda contributed to the conversation surrounding structural and symbolic violence within societies in her book *Resisting Structural Evil : Love As Ecological-Economic Vocation*. She stated:

The first step in enabling critical vision is unearthing the dynamics that impede it. We begin there, probing for factors that cloak structural injustice...The focus here, then, is less on the power dynamics that cause injustice, and more on the dynamics that cause us not to recognize it. (85)

One issue with social inequity is that when individuals are given a greater amount of power, they tend not to see the people suffering below them. Seth Holmes' ethnographic study of Migrant Farmworkers' experience illustrated the horrific circumstances the Trique clan endured while working on farms along the West Coast of North America. His findings reveal deeply ingrained societal assumptions impacting the entire Trique people. All three of these authors set out to

unveil an injustice by expressing the importance of perspective and another individual's story that has been lost due to structural and symbolic power. One way to overcome this unawareness in the American church is by implementing the spiritual discipline of testimony and lamentation. Soong Chan Rah, from the book, *Subversive Witness: Scripture's Call to Leverage Privilege*, explains how lamentation breaks down barriers:

Lamentation compels us to expose what the empire seeks to conceal and deny. It emboldens us to see suffering anew, speak truth to power, and draw near to our neighbors on the margins. When the church takes history seriously, lament will become requisite...when faithfully engaged and authentically enacted, lamentation keeps us accountable to our baptismal vows. It reminds us of our need for God, one another, and the Spirit's guidance. Lamentation is a spiritual practice that shapes our discipleship and missiology; it illuminates blind spots in our lives and ministry, helping us to make our witness more christlike, and our evangelism more contextual, holistic, and responsible. (51, 52)

If American evangelicals were dedicated to remembering a time when they suffered, they could recognize the suffering of others more accurately. Stepping into another's' reality instills a compassion that urges them to act more justly. The American Evangelical Church is losing this practice; hence, the Western Christian faith would benefit from the traditions of its global brothers and sisters who value story as one of the highest forms of learning.

The West lacks in valuing relationships and perspective, whereas African leadership claims relationships (communally and individually) as instrumental practices. One concept of significant impact is *Ubuntu*, translated: "I am because you are." Desmond Tutu expresses this idea as "my humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours" (Lyndon Rego et al.).



This idea of *Ubuntu* is part of a larger way of life rather than being confounded to one episode. It consists of the people expressing care and consideration of the physical and spiritual well-being of the members of their community. For example, asking “how are you?” is not a conversational pleasantry; rather it is a question that requires an identification with the other’s response. Under the ethos of *ubuntu*, leadership theory expands. Organizations that hold a pan-African model of leadership contain regular check-ins, ceremonies that recognize togetherness, and an aspect of story to highlight the individual's soul (Lydon Rego 251). The practice of vocalizing one’s story allows the individual to share their sorrows and successes. This individual telling is essential because while many have gone through circumstances marked with unfathomable pain, they hide their experiences due to fear of rejection, judgment, or even pity from their peers. However, when victims of injustice can assert a public voice, they are marked with strength and resilience rather than pity and weakness (Maxminarayana 269). The power of one’s testimony changes the one giving their story, the community who can see God working in the larger picture, and creates connection among all the members who see into each other’s souls.

### Strategy Formation

On the journey towards transformational peacemaking between these two groups, a nonlinear action research process allows for greater detail built into procedures as complexity increases (Stringer and Aragón 7). This includes implementing teachings within the church on how to love these groups well. The curriculum (like the resource that BCN will be creating) and pieces of training created for the specific local contextual needs should accompany outreaches to communities that resemble transgender women in prostitution or trans homeless youth in Seattle.

The first strategy to implement is how to overcome differences in belief within the church regarding sex and gender. The church must remind the congregation that their biblical mandate is

not to change other people's opinions through shame and discourse. Rather, they must extend help to the marginalized individuals in their community whether or not they agree with each other's perspective on gender or sexuality. Alderman notes that "all of the women know that we don't fully affirm their lifestyles, yet they know that we love them and want to be around them" (Alderman). Overall, BCN's ministry is effective because the women do not feel shamed when they spend their time with the volunteers. They know they will be cared for, receive the help they need, and be invited regardless of their life decisions or experiences. The American evangelical church must exercise compassion and empathy by putting its cultural wars aside and acting in love towards others.

The second barrier to address is implementing missional strategies that reach the people it aims to serve; usually, this takes the form of reestablishing spiritual disciplines that have been forgotten. Whether acting out of fear or disgust, Beck explains how participating in the Lord's Supper is the key to regulating these reactions within the church and externally with one's neighbor (196). One way BCN overcomes this barrier is by showing hospitality to the women in the district. BCN begins the peacemaking process of building trust by preparing a meal and a safe space for the women to spend their afternoon (McNeil 73).

The last strategy addresses the barrier of otherness and the importance of story by sharing testimony and lament. This is not only a biblical practice Christians are called to, but it is also a scientific fact that humans respond best to stories because they are memorable, identifiable, and believable (Dahlstrom and Ho). Hence, BCN will compile the stories of these women in order to instill the compassion needed to overcome many of these barriers. They will use the power of these women's testimonies to influence the personal biases many congregants may be unconsciously harboring. This resource will also be accompanied by the vocal delivery of the

story from the presenter. Neuroscience affirms that hearing a story causes brainwaves to synchronize with the storyteller; this is called “neuro coupling” (Ariel Group). Although it would be much more influential for the women who experienced these realities to share their story, BCN will implement this aspect later on in the reconciliation process. Exposure to others allows people to see the similarities and common ground that they share with people ‘different’ from themselves. Therefore this common ground destroys the fears and biases they may have while simultaneously instilling compassion and connection to the other

### **Reflexivity**

Throughout the journey of researching this phenomenal group in the red light district, I slowly became aware of where my skill set would be most useful. As many of the women were from Latin countries they quickly gravitated towards my Spanish phenotype and opened up about their personal stories. While external circumstances made research in Belgium more brief than I desired, I recognized a need among church members. As a development practitioner I found my presence and role with these marginalized individuals much different than the ground missionaries. My proclivity became sharing the women’s stories and challenging the comments, beliefs, and assumptions that many middle class, Western Christians had regarding migrants, women in prostitution, or transgendered individuals.

As my position became one of telling stories and praying that my fellow Christians would soften their hearts to individuals struggling on the margins, I became a more compassionate researcher through storytelling.

### **Conclusion**

During my time in Belgium the women at the Oasis Center were coming out of a season of mourning. One of the transgendered women in the district named Samantha passed away due to

not receiving the medical treatment that she needed. Samantha developed a cough which escalated quickly; she went to the Oasis Center seeking help checking into the hospital. When she arrived the medical professionals recognized she was a transgendered migrant and sent her home with cough medicine, telling her she was cleared to go back to working in the Red Light District. It turned out that she had pneumonia. Due to the misdiagnosis she suffered many weeks and unfortunately caught COVID-19. The team at Oasis brought her into the hospital rapidly, but while she was there no one would routinely check on her. Her symptoms escalated and she was put into a medically induced, Coma. Emily Trementozzi, volunteer missionary at Oasis Center, reflects on the lack of medical treatment Samantha received, “[the Doctors] said [they didn’t address her needs] because they could not find anyone to speak Spanish, but when I was in the hospital they sent every professional in that spoke Italian. I don’t speak Italian....my husband does, and I have his last name” (Trementozzi). Emily remembers this pain vividly as she recalls one scenario of society withholding from this group of individuals. Many of the women who seek the solace of the Oasis Center have been denied access to common resources.

Whether seeking the solace of the Oasis Center or shelter in Tacoma, WA, many of these individuals have been denied access to common resources. They are forgotten about by a system that does not approve of them, and this is exactly the space where the church must meet individuals. When the American Evangelical Church is able to challenge theology that caters to cultural politics rather than practicing spiritual disciplines, it will joyfully advocate for the underrepresented transgender community susceptible to prostitution. To achieve this objective, the church must see beyond social barriers, embrace exposure to these individuals’ personal stories, and hold a confidence in their own beliefs while carrying incredible compassion for those who do not share similar convictions. Only then will it fulfill the Christian call to love their

neighbors and serve others (Isa. 1:17, Matt. 22:39, Mark 12:31, Col. 3:13 ). To help the church reach this objective, I have partnered with Breaking Chains Network to create a book which readers can see in Appendix A: Project Presentation of Resource for Local and Global Resources.

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## **Appendix A: Presentation of Resource for Local and Global Supporting Churches**

Thesis: My goal is to raise empathy and challenge poor theology that resembles cultural wars (political allegiance) more than traditional orthodoxy (spiritual practices). I will challenge through story and affirm two commandments to love.

Project: An incomplete presentation to churches to support Breaking Chains Network (BCN) and locate marginalized individuals who are transgendered women in prostitution or experiencing homelessness. A book for the purposes of exposing Christians to the realities of this demographic will be available for purchase and all the proceeds go towards programs for the women in the RLD.

### **Context of the Problem**

Modern narratives of justice call forth action not just from the church but also from society. A highly interconnected world has enabled us to see how consumerism and globalization impact the planet and how different groups are disenfranchised or exploited. In our polarized world, the American church must see past political narratives and continue to uphold justice for any image bearer in need (see Figure 1). One critical aspect of justice is reaching out to minority voices that go unseen; these groups include individuals in prostitution, migrants far from home, or even the transgender community (Lee 1-2)

Who are They and Who are We?

An example of these unheard voices is the phenomenal group working in the Red Light District in Belgium. This group entails Migrant Latin American Transgendered individuals in prostitution (MLATP).

Our ministry, Breaking Chains Network (BCN), provides holistic development to this group. Located adjacent to the Red Light District in Belgium, we work alongside Project Rescue to offer help, healing, and a vision to see human trafficking end.

### **Below the Surface**

The first factor is being in their country of origin. Many of these women are born in countries in Latin America. However, using one country as an example is an overgeneralization. Therefore, due to the limited scope allowed in this project, I refer to the European Freedom Network's (EFN) sources to better understand the MLATP's context. The EFN reminds us that Brazil has implemented laws protecting transgendered people, yet "it remains the country with the highest number of transgender people killed in a year." This extreme reaction to transgenderism and prostitution is sometimes linked to religious ideologies deeply ingrained into society. yet "it remains the country with the highest number of transgender people killed in a year" (Moisander 15). This extreme reaction to transgenderism and prostitution is sometimes linked to religious ideologies deeply ingrained into society. Antwerp University student Julie Rausenberger conducted anthropological and phenomenological research on this group. She claimed the cause of their migration is:

intertwined with their gender identity and sexual orientation...mobility then becomes not purely economic, but rather a political, religious and very personal emancipatory motive with a push factor of transphobic discrimination and gender inequality in Latin America, and a pull factor of tolerance and freedom in Europe. (132)

This suggests their migration is motivated by a desire for liberation from oppressive rules.

Working the streets of Antwerp becomes their promised freedom.

Furthermore, Taina Moisander also recognizes the vast majority of prostitutes The European Freedom Network works with come from countries where the police are “corrupt and contribute to the success of traffickers' work” (15). Corruption leaves the victims skeptical and untrusting of authority. Similarly, Shawn Alderman, ground missionary at BCN, recognizes the MLATP’s distrust of Evangelicals. The women who attend the Oasis Center<sup>12</sup> confessed to her that Evangelicals are the ones with nice cars and big diamond rings who take their money in order for them to buy their way to God’s forgiveness (Alderman; Lee 2, 3).

When MLATPs finally land in the Red Light District in Antwerp, Belgium, they have journeyed far to experience a secluded lifestyle. Rausenberger recognizes the discrete nature of these individuals. When she collected information regarding their experience, she faced difficulty. She said, “They often live an anonymous and isolated existence in society. They have limited contact with the local population as they often have long working days and hardly leave the prostitution district.” She explained the possibility of skewed data due to their inability to be registered. She also described their transient character, illegal status, lack of residency, and hidden prostitution work (126). Her descriptions paint a group of unseen and unheard people.

### **What We Do**

The Assemblies of God Church in Europe has successfully established multiple ministries that witness to women in prostitution throughout Europe. But BCN needs your help to continue witnessing to these individuals in the district. We make ourselves accessible to the victims and survivors in the sex trade by offering hope, healing, and co-powerment through

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<sup>12</sup> The Oasis Center: an apartment at the entrance of the RLD. This is where BCN volunteers make meals for the women, teach English lessons, teach jewelry making, prepare coffee for their outreaches, and facilitate a safe space for women in prostitution.

volunteers and full-time staff. In addition, BCN offers shared space, time, and resources to create friendships with the women and men who participate in the sex industry. (Lee 1, 2).

While our goal is to see Human trafficking ended overall, we feel God called us to focus on the MLATPs located in the Red Light district right down the street from us. As of January 26, 2023 we finally bought the building space currently occupied by the Oasis Center where we have been blessed to form meaningful and long-term relationships with MLATP in our community (see Figure 2). By having this space to interact with this community, we have come to know and love each individual's unique story. Fortunately we have been given the opportunity to share their stories (with their consent) in hopes that you also would be blessed to know a small portion of their journey.

### **Proposed Resource**

- a. Visual photo representing the individual interviewed. The photo would be accompanied by a small synopsis of the individual that was interviewed.
- b. Information about trafficking: globally and locally:
  - i. Polaris statistics
- c. Hotline for individuals who realize they know of, or are, an individual being trafficked
- d. A prayer guide that tells readers how to specifically pray for the ministry throughout the week

### **Testimonials**

While Jose has already shared his strenuous story of working in prostitution as a woman, meeting Jesus through the Oasis Center, and feeling the call to de-transition, he also shared with us his perspective on how to engage individuals questioning their gender or identity:

be kind and give love to these people so that they may come to the feet of Christ. Teach them about Jesus, introduce them to Jesus, who is a God who does not condemn. [Teach them] that in the Church, there is no condemnation for this type of person. And to love them above all the things we see, because we do not know that within these people there is a heart that perhaps is a heart that pleases God, despite [them walking] in their sins.

That is my advice; the rest is done by the Holy Spirit (Jose).

As a former woman in prostitution, Jose is an incredible source of knowledge to better our ministry.

### **Current and Future Projects**

BCN has many dreams for future ministry opportunities. Currently, we are beginning an Entrepreneur Academy. During these biweekly sessions, we host a devotional and run English, Dutch, and sewing classes. We are in the process of establishing a thrift store in a building we just purchased. Here, the individuals attending our Oasis Center can gain job experience, with their primary beneficiaries, which fosters relationships with the external community they are in and creates a healing space for the population they aid to integrate into society through dignifying work (Joyaux 167; Lee 1). In the future, we hope to run organized trainings for the church congregations that support us. This curriculum would cover Biblical views of sexuality, trauma-informed care, basic principles of working with survivors of sexual exploitation, and best practices in developing vulnerable groups. The curriculum will utilize teachings from *Love Thy Body*, *Walking With the Poor*, *Cultural Engagement: A Crash Course in Contemporary Issues*, *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views*, and *Generous Justice*. All of these sources are written by experts in their field and contribute to the knowledge individuals must have when ministering to MLATP.

**Conclusion**

Historically, many who identify with these groups have been demonized by the American church. The church now must mend the wounds created in the past and seek out voices that are affected by systemic sin (Lee 1-3). BCN hopes to illuminate the hope of Christ and share the gospel to everyone in their community by resembling a peacemaker between MLATP and the Christian faith. We hope to establish a relationship with your Church and continue to share the things that God is doing in the Red Light District of Belgium, but we also want to encourage you to seek out the unseen groups in your community. Ask yourselves these questions: Who are the people that go unseen in your neighborhood, and how can you serve this group?



## Appendix B

The Christian mandate to do justice: “Many believe that the job of the church is not to do justice at all but to preach the Word, to evangelize and build up believers. But if it is true that justice and mercy to the poor are the inevitable signs of justifying faith....In evangelism as well as spiritual nurture– you will come upon people with practical needs. you can't love people in word only and therefore you can't love people as you are doing evangelism and discipleship without meeting practical and material needs through deeds.” (Keller 135).

**Jerry & April Foster**  
Breaking Chains Network  
Antwerp, Belgium

152 Received  
98 Still Needs To Come In

Please send donations to  
AGWM account: 626920  
or scan below

**The Oasis Center**  
2022 Brick Project

Each brick equals \$1,000  
Total of 250 bricks needed

April: 907-707-3175  
Jerry: 417-522-9273  
breakingchainsnetwork.com

The Oasis center serves as an outreach center and church for the red-light district of Antwerp.

Updated: 09/05/2022  
Deadline: 12/31/2022

Figure 1:

Breaking Chains Network  
Antwerp, Belgium

Each brick equals \$1,000  
Total of 250 bricks needed

Please send donations to  
AGWM account: 626920  
or scan below

**Thank you for Giving!**  
Reminder: Funds Needed by December 31st

The Oasis center serves as an outreach center and church for the red-light district of Antwerp.

Deadline: 12/31/2022

Figure 2: Translated Interview with Jose on 08/16/2022

1. What do you want others to know about your story?

“I would like people to know the testimony about what Jesus did and is doing in my life so that many people can see that God is the same God yesterday, today, and forever. A God who transforms, who changes lives, a God who gives peace, love and above all salvation in Jesus Christ.”

2. Tell us about your childhood?

“I was abandoned by my mother and father in my childhood. When I was three years old my parents went to work in another country, and they left me in the care of some uncles and from the age of three I stayed with my uncles. They only had girls, so I grew up with girls. I only saw the female image. Even my uncle was almost never at home, and I grew up with only the figure of a woman, with long hair and women's clothing. I remember that I identified as a girl at that time, because I grew up among girls at that time. When my mom separated from my dad and came back, I was already 6 years old and had already absorbed, like a sponge, the things that belong to a girl and I got into a role that was not mine, being a boy. That was my childhood in those years. Then I grew up in a dysfunctional family; my brothers were alcoholics, my sisters and my mother practiced witchcraft, there were many fights, insults between them, pornography and I grew up in that dysfunctional family. Until I was fourteen years old where I had a demonic encounter and from that moment my life changed; I began to fall more into perversion and to know what sin was and that is the way how I grew up doing so many perverse things until I was 17 years old.”

3. What brought you to Antwerp?

“What brought me to Antwerp was money, and to be able to prostitute myself, I lived in Malaga, when I was 22 years old I came to Spain looking for money, for work, to change my life and help my mother and my family But the day after I arrived I started to prostitute myself and I knew that my friends, that were transgenders, when they came to Malaga they brought a lot of money, and they offered me to go to Antwerp. I got greedy when I saw so much money, so I decided to go to Belgium to prostitute myself for money, that was what took me to Antwerp.”

4. When did you decide to transition to a woman?

“The day after my arrival in Spain I began to prostitute myself and after a few days I realized that in Spain this type of person was very accepted, very besieged and to obtain more economic benefit, I began to transform myself, I let my hair grow, to dress as a girl, being a boy, I began to put on makeup, to take an identity that was not mine, a feminine identity, I continued prostituting myself and making profits for being a transgender person.”

5. What was this year like for you now that you have been baptized?

“These two years that I have been a follower of Christ and in love with Jesus Christ, have been two years of peace, my heart is full, but it has also been a time of struggles, I have lived many struggles and also, won many battles in the name of Christ, thanks to Him I have had the opportunity to meet many people. I have learned to really know people, to give opportunities to people that in another time, when I did not know Jesus, I did not give them an opportunity, because at that time it was my world, only me mattered, period, but with Jesus, I opened my heart to many people. I thank God because I am a free person. I have freedom in Christ! Things are new and therefore I am happy for this new life.”

6. How do you see the people and the work you were in, in Antwerp? How do you view prostitution?

“When I did the work of prostitution, I was a person full of resentment, hatred, envy, I was a liar, a person who liked to make problems, quarrels, I was not happy, I was an empty person, full of bitterness, that camouflaged it, that hid it through a pretty face, and body, hid my whole way of being and feeling, but inside I cried. There were times when I locked myself in my room to cry, I didn't want to live because I didn't find meaning in life, because my life at that time was only prostitution and money.

I believe, because of life I had at that time, and had the opportunity to meet many people who are transsexuals and work in prostitution, that they are people who are full of pain, full of anger, full of so much filth, so many things that do not allow the person to be happy, so they have to pretend to others that everything is fine, that they don't need God, But they need love, but sincere love. Because even the friendships in that life are of lies, they are of hypocrisy and falsehood. I believe that they need Love, and a sincere hug of love and who like our Lord Jesus who does everything with a lot of love.”

7. What has been your experience with Christian and the church before you were saved?

“At the age of 16 I met some Christian in my country, I went to a church, and I also remember that everyone in my father's family were Baptist Christians, they took me to Sunday school when I was a child, between the ages of 6-8 years old. There I met the Lord by hearsay. And in my mind was engraved the verse: Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. That was the Christians I knew as a child, the environment in my family, but when I arrived in Belgium and started doing what I was doing, there I had contact with Christians, but I didn't want to have much friendship with them, it was my life, only I was important, I didn't want to waste my time in those things.”

8. What is your advice for the church welcoming those questioning their identity?

“My advice to the Church is that God loves us in such a way that He doesn't care where we come from and where we are, or in what condition we are, because He raises up from the vilest and God's love is so great that He doesn't care.

I believe that we must not be a respecter of people as God does not do and be kind and give love to these people so that they may come to the feet of Christ, and teach them about Jesus, introduce them to Jesus, who is a God who does not condemn. That in the Church there is no condemnation for this type of person because I know there is. And to love them above all the things we see, because we do not know that within these people there is a heart that perhaps is a heart that please God, despite being in their sins. That is my advice; and the rest is done by the Holy Spirit.”

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