



Modern-Day Slavery

“It has been unanimously considered that it cannot be permitted in any wise by the church, that a member should or could purchase negroes, or keep them as slaves.”

—Brethren Annual Meeting Minutes, 1782

We the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren reaffirm our denomination’s historic opposition to slavery. We understand the scriptures to reveal that God abhors slavery and that the gospel of Jesus Christ mandates our unwavering resistance to and action against all forms of slavery.”

—Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, 2008

What do you mean, “modern-day slavery”?

For many of us the term “modern-day slavery” simply doesn’t make sense. When we hear the word *slavery*, we think of an institution that doesn’t exist anymore—right? After all, *chattel slavery*, the system in which human

beings, mostly Africans, were kidnapped, brought to this country, and bought and sold and treated like property, was outlawed in 1865.

For thousands of years, slavery was generally accepted as a natural outcome of war and conquest, of debt, and presumed social or racial inferiority. But our standard of morality has risen over time. Slavery is now illegal all over the world. Today, no one declares publicly that it is acceptable to own another human being.

Unfortunately, while public opinion unanimously agrees that slavery is wrong, enslavement is still a fact of life for millions of people in the world. The most conservative estimate today is that there are at least 12 million enslaved people in the world; 27 million is a more realistic figure.

Global population increase, along with rapid social and economic change, has made millions of people around the world vulnerable to enslavement. Worldwide poverty creates desperation that assists those who trick others into slavery. Kidnapping and the unlawful sale of individuals, often children and women, is widespread and is a multibillion dollar enterprise worldwide.

There is no decent person who will advocate for slavery today, but there are still millions and millions of enslaved people. How can this be? And how can so great and terrible a problem be so invisible?

Why didn’t I know about this?

Slavery has always taken numerous forms, and the chattel slavery with which we are most familiar has only been one of those forms. Often today the word “slavery” is not used. Enslavement goes by many other names: forced labor, human trafficking, debt bondage, contract labor, child soldiering, and forced prostitution. It is generally not based on race or creed or nationality; victims come in all colors, ethnicities, and religions. It doesn’t depend on ownership. Exploiters control others through intimidation and violence without even the nominal responsibilities of “ownership.” But when people are tricked or taken by force and made to labor for another by violence or threat of violence, receiving little or no compensation, they are not free, they are enslaved.

What forms of slavery are most common today?

Bonded labor/debt bondage. In many cases, poverty induces people to accept loans which they promise to pay off with their labor. The “lender,” however, has no intention of ever allowing the loan to be paid in full. This sort of slavery is most common in South Asia, where an estimated 15 to 20 million people are enslaved in that way. Debt bondage, however, exists all over the world, including in the United States.

A former brick kiln owner in Pakistan reported that “the brickworkers are completely dependent on the owner’s will. Wives and

The Church of the Brethren Study and Action Guide on Modern-Day Slavery

is posted at www.brethren.org/slavery and includes pieces on:

- Modern-Day Slavery
- Biblical Teachings on Slavery
- Church of the Brethren Statements on Slavery
- Resources for a Worship Focus on Slavery
- Suggestions for Action on Modern-Day Slavery
- Resources on Modern-Day Slavery
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*daughters will be repeatedly assaulted by the kiln owner and his thugs, and no marriage can take place without his consent.... To intimidate [the workers] the owner just comes along and smashes all the freshly made raw bricks, a whole day's work—for no reason.... If a young worker lifts his head or causes trouble, they will put his leg in the kiln oven for a second to burn it. This is common. They make the other workers come to the kiln and they make them watch” (Kevin Bales, *Disposable People*, 1999, p. 158).*

Contract slavery. This type of enslavement can also be a form of bonded labor. In it, people are offered employment but the contract they sign is just a way of entrapping them into slavery.

*Beatrice Fernando, a 23-year-old Sri Lankan woman, signed a contract to work as a housemaid in Lebanon. She ended up in the home of a wealthy Lebanese woman. Her workday began hours before sunrise and continued past midnight every night. Her food was scraps from the children's meals, and sometimes what was in the kitchen trash. Her employer beat and kicked her, striking her with brooms, pans, and mops, and banging her head against the wall. She was locked in and the guards were given instructions to shoot her if she tried to escape (Jesse Sage and Liora Kasten, *Enslaved*, 2006, pp. 81-111).*

Forced labor. In the United States, forced labor—often prostitution, domestic service, agriculture, factory, restaurant, or hotel work—is a fact of life for tens of thousands of people. Foreigners are trafficked into this country from at least thirty-five countries, but most often from China, Mexico, and Vietnam.

*In April 2005 a 14-year-old Guatemalan girl was rescued from a landscaping business in Cape Coral, Florida. She had been enslaved for three years, forced to cook meals for the landscaper's employees, and abused sexually by the landscaper and others. A neighbor filed a police report but nothing was done. A year later, a community coalition succeeded in getting the police to intervene. The trafficker was arrested and he and his sister were imprisoned. “Finally, someone believes my story,” the girl said after the raid that freed her (David Batstone, *Not for Sale*, 2007, p. 267).*

Sex trafficking/sex tourism. Possibly the most heinous form of slavery today is the trafficking of children into sexual slavery. A 2005 UNICEF report estimated that “1.2 million children are sold into sexual slavery every year and 2 million children—mainly girls, but also a significant number of boys—are believed to be part of the multibillion-dollar commercial sex trade.” Many women, and some men as well, are also victims of sex trafficking.

“On this trip, I've had sex with a 14 year-old girl in Mexico

and a 15 year-old in Colombia. I'm helping them financially. If they don't have sex with me, they may not have enough food. If someone has a problem with me doing this, let UNICEF feed them” (retired US schoolteacher).

“Maria is...prostituted by her aunt. Maria is obliged to sell her body exclusively to foreign tourists in Costa Rica, she only works mornings as she has to attend school in the afternoon. Maria is in fifth grade.”

(Both accounts from the US Department of Justice, www.justice.gov/criminal/ceos/sextour.html, May 5, 2008.)

What can I do?

An invisible problem will never be solved. Make slavery visible by telling other people what you have learned. Support laws and organizations that help those who are vulnerable to enslavement and make it more costly for those who would enslave them.

For other ideas, see “Suggestions for Action on Modern-Day Slavery” included in this Study and Action Guide.