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USING BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES IN WORK WITH VICTIMS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

By: David Sedlacek

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NACSW Convention 2013
October, 2013
Atlanta, GA**

Using Biblical Principles in Work with Victims of Sex Trafficking

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This presentation focuses on integrating clinical social work skills and Christian intervention when working with survivors of sex trafficking. Not all victims of sex trafficking are open to a Christian approach. However, there are many that find God through in the midst of their trauma, and want to draw closer to Him in a therapeutic experience.

Stotts and Ramey (2009) present the following summary of the psychological symptoms presented by victims of sex trafficking related to the daily mental abuse and torture they suffer. “These can include depression, stress-related disorders, disorientation, confusion, phobias, and panic attacks. Victims may be in shock, denial, or disbelief about their present situation. Feelings of helplessness and shame may also be present. Numerous social consequences are experienced by trafficking victims. Victims experience social isolation, which serves as a strategy for their trafficker to control them. While enslaved, children are usually deprived of educational and socialization opportunities.” They develop a distorted sense of sexuality, and see it either as a tool for manipulation, a sense of identity, or a source of shame instead of the sacred gift that God has given to mankind. Their spirit is often broken through abuse and their sense of self is poorly differentiated. They live in survival mode never learning to rest in the security of a safe and loving environment. They are either hyper vigilant or have given up on life and simply exist to serve their “owner” much as did the plantation slaves.

Collins and Collins (2005) have developed a framework they call the ABCDE (affect stability, behavioral adjustments, cognitive mastery, developmental mastery, ecosystem healthy and intact) model. This model of treatment will be explored in the context of healing survivors of sex trafficking. Integrated into the model will be Christian interventions.

Affect stability refers to the need to assist the client in expressing and processing memories and their associated emotions related to the trauma thereby lessening the power that the memories and emotions have over the client. In order for survivors to begin the healing journey, a safe therapeutic environment needs to be created. Given the daily trauma of their lives, a safe

environment will be a strange, difficult to trust, but much needed place of refuge for survivors. The church must cast a vision to create safe places most often a residential environment where survivors can get off the streets and into a place where other women with the same objective are working together supervised by trained caring Christians and Christian professionals such as social workers.

In order for such a ministry to be effective, social workers must be trained as empathic witnesses who convey the message: “I am here for you.” “I’m here to provide comfort and hope.” “I will stay with you until...” The power of their presence says “I am here with you and nowhere else.” It is better to be unavailable than to be inattentive. Social workers are trained to be attuned which is the ability to connect with the internal state of another person. They might say “I feel felt” rather than understood. This type of attunement is truly incarnational. Jesus came into our world and became one of us. He was touched with the feelings of our infirmities in order to take us to a different place through an experience of transformation. Empathy is the ability to attune to the inner world of another. I cannot be empathic with another if I am self-critical. Therefore, social workers must work on their own issues of fear and shame.

One of the first therapeutic interventions that should be done in a safe place is storytelling to process the traumatic memories connected with trafficking. Telling one’s story to others who have had similar experiences can be very healing. To know that one was not alone, that others understand brings both physical and emotional relief. A tool that can be used in this healing experience is the Trauma Heart. In this experiential exercise, survivors are asked to draw a heart and draw a picture of their memories of each traumatic experience beginning with the earliest recollection through the latest memory. They then process these experiences in the safety of the group or with an empathic partner.

Grief work is extremely important in work with sex trafficking survivors. They need to be helped to identify significant losses that they have experienced and to grieve them. In this process, as Christian social workers, we can help them to experience the God of all Comfort who comes us is all of our tribulations (2Corinthians 1:3). Sometimes, a survivor’s guilt and shame prevent them from coming to Jesus for help. Christians who understand grace can gently lead them to experience a nonjudgmental and non-condemning Savior.

It is important to note that the type of trauma work we are discussing here is right-brain experiential work rather than left-brain cognitive work. Trauma is not generally healed through cognitive work according to recent studies on brain science. We are suggesting that Christian social workers are at a distinct advantage because Jesus is living today and interacts with human beings through the Holy Spirit just as He did on earth over 2000 years ago. Below are some guidelines that social workers can use to position survivors to experience an inner healing ministry with Jesus.

It is important to prepare the person by describing what is about to take place. Describe the inner healing process. Remember that Jesus never violates a person in order to heal them, but always works within the confines of their will and choice. It is very possible that survivors have been spiritually abused, and have very distorted views of God. Some work may need to be done in advance to reassure the person that God is safe. Sometimes, during the healing experience, God addresses this issue directly Himself.

The process begins with a prayer ministry in which prayer for protection from the enemy and the cancelation of any assignments he has made to interfere with the healing process about to begin. Prayer is also offered for openness to the Spirit telling God that you want and need Him, that you desire more and more of the Spirit in your life. Confession of any known sin is important at this point as well.

Ask the person to visualize in their mind what a safe place would be for them. It could be a scene on a beach, in the woods in a cabin next to a lake or in a fortress on a mountain. Whatever is perceived to be safe for the person is important. After the person feels safe in their safe place, invite Jesus into the safe place. While there, tell Jesus your heart's desire and your need. (It may have been written in a letter to God previously). Remember that He wants to talk to the person and tell you of His love and care. The social worker's job is to facilitate the process of positioning the person to experience God. This would be a good time for the person to ask God the hard questions such as "Where were you?" and "Why did you allow this to happen?" God has been waiting for the person to ask these questions.

God often reveals himself through pictures that he gives related to traumatic experiences. With the person's permission, God may invite to him to go to a place of pain to see where God was and how He was there. As the facilitator, interact with the person by asking him/her what they see and how they feel. Ask what they might be hearing Jesus say. Use Scripture related to the traumatic experience in order to speak the Word of God into the person's heart. Using Scripture such as Isaiah 63:9 can be helpful. You will know that you are done when the Spirit communicates that to the person and to you. Debrief the experience with the person looking for meaning, new freedoms and changed thoughts. These are some strategies to help with affect stability.

Sex trafficking survivors need support with behavioral adjustments because many of them have not had the opportunity to learn daily living skills in freedom. They have not been around safe people, but are accustomed to being taken advantage of. However, they don't trust others easily either. Challenges for them to be less guarded take time, but grow with safe experiences in the community. Learning to work a "regular" job may depend upon them getting additional education as well as job training skills. Some may even need to learn cooking and cleaning.

Others may need with letting go of street survival skills and instead learn communication and conflict resolution skills. Some may need time for their body to heal from various effects of having been sex trafficked. Although we cannot assume that survivors will be Christians, it is important to ask what does living a Christian life look like in this context?

Cognitive mastery refers to the negative belief systems that trauma survivors learn as victims. Their core beliefs, the meaning of their life and their negative expectations need to be reframed in light of the truth about them found in God's Work (John 8:32 and 36). False beliefs include beliefs about themselves, about God, about other people, and about the world around them.

Developmental needs will vary depending on the client's life stage. Developmental factors might include their age and maturity level when they became a sex slave. The normal developmental tasks of becoming an adult may not have been mastered. The social worker will want to assess each person's current life stage. There may be wide discrepancies in victims, i.e., very developed vs. marginally developed. We would do well to remember that Jesus too grew both in height and in wisdom, and he was loved by God and by all who knew him (Luke 2:52). NLT

Finally, Christian social workers will want to explore the client's ecosystem. Issues of safety and support are paramount. Ecosystem issues might include support from family, friends and church; educational needs and resources; neighborhood safety; employment potential; public policy and politics; and poverty, gender roles, and cultural values.

In summary, Christian social workers can offer a unique set of interventions that can be of immense benefit to survivors of sex trafficking. The ABCDE model of Collins and Collins is a useful framework for looking at how social workers can minister to the needs of survivors of sex trafficking. Not only their presence, their care and their prayers are needed, but there are biblical understandings of comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3), a suffering Savior, and a creative Word (Hebrews 4:12-13) among many others that can speed the healing process for survivors who are open to this approach.