

Riding The Waves

The Newsmagazine of the

Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada

CAUGHT IN TRAFFIC

by Sharon Tidd

The Olympics are coming to Canada once again. Have you, like me, always dreamed of being part of the excitement and energy of the Games? Not as an athlete necessarily, but certainly as a spectator. Well, our time has come and that's reason for celebration. But sadly, for many a visit to the 2010 Olympics won't be cause for celebration. Experience tells us that many women and children will be coming not as spectators or athletes, nor by choice, but as victims of human sex trafficking - a known reality in Canada; one experts anticipate will increase with the hosting of the Games. Their destiny won't be the stands or the medal podiums. Their destiny will be the brothels, massage parlours, hotel rooms and streets of Vancouver where they will be bought and sold in BC's sex trade. The Christian community is working to prevent this. With dogged determination we are saying "No" to increased sex trafficking.

In Fall 2008, The Salvation Army British Columbia launched its "The Truth Isn't Sexy" Campaign to raise awareness of this injustice. The Campaign will continue through 2010. The ads portray trafficking realistically from the victim's perspective. These are women and children subjected to physical beatings, starvation and drugging. They are pimped repeatedly each day, exposed to life-threatening infections, traumatized, and trapped in debt-bondage. What if they were our own sisters or brothers, daughters or mothers? Would we be silent?

Canadians need to rise together in protest against this crime against humanity. Canadians need to protect the women and children trafficked domestically (many from First Nations reserves) and internationally for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

A Citizen's Summit on Trafficking and the Olympics comprised of faith groups, academics and social service providers presented to government and community leaders on March 26th at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. Their joint message was that one victim of trafficking is one too many. Each agency, in turn, shared their determination

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to see the end of human trafficking in Canada. The hosting of the Olympics is proving to be a catalyst for change. It is creating unique opportunities to increase awareness, to push for action, and to establish the support systems needed by those escaping trafficking. The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's April 2009 Report, "Human Trafficking - A Report on Modern Day Slavery in Canada", calls for three responses to this social injustice: prevention, prosecution, and protection. These same needed responses were the primary demands of the Citizen's Summit.

The Summit is continuing to meet with and appeal to known stakeholders in the fight against trafficking.

The *More Than Gold* network (churches and agencies planning for outreach and service during the 2010 Games) is also focusing on this issue. On May 22nd, 2009 an awareness campaign called "Buying Sex is NOT a Sport" will be launched in Vancouver with t-shirts, buttons, posters and postcards. Forums will be hosted in churches, universities and community centres to provide citizens with an opportunity to learn more, hear first-hand stories from those who escaped from sex trafficking, and respond with positive action steps intended to reduce the demand and increase the opportunity to free and care for victims.

Many Christian organizations already offer safe houses for victims of trafficking and that will increase as February 2010 approaches. These safe houses offer care and compassion to victims coupled with practical, holistic supports like translation services, legal counsel, immigration services, medical treatment, trauma counseling, drug detoxification, healthy meals and a good night's sleep. Enhanced partnerships with police, immigration and border services personnel are helping to connect victims with these advocacy services.

There doesn't have to be a dark side to the hosting of the Olympics! The Christian community is pushing for a Games that is free from the stain of sex trafficking. As Major Brian Venables of The Salvation Army says, "We want to tell visitors that when they come to Vancouver, they'd better be here for the Olympics, because if they're here for illicit sex, we're aware of it - and we're going to protect those women and children."

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