

Ministry Reaches Out to Influx Of Prostitutes in Greece

Lost Coin missionaries comb Athens' brothels and night clubs to help women find a way out of the sex trade

A Christian ministry based in Greece has taken the parable of the lost coin to heart.

Drawing its name from the Luke 15 passage in which Jesus describes a woman who swept her house clean searching for one lost coin, Lost Coin combs the streets of Athens searching for women who want help escaping the sex trade.

But because prostitution is legal for adults in Greece and widely accepted, even by many in the church, Lost Coin staff members and volunteers from local churches regularly go to brothels, bars and hotels where the sex trade thrives. They strike up friendships with women, offering them practical help, counseling and a way out. Recently, the two-year-old outreach established a drop-in center.

"One of the most prevalent ways of prostituting in Athens is through small-time pimps who keep women in private apartments," said Lost Coin director Jennifer Roemhildt, an American missionary in Athens. "These girls are completely locked away and really beyond rescue by anyone but God. We offer a bridge to the healing community that the church is supposed to be."

During two years of on-the-street ministry, Lost Coin has assisted about 150 women who were working in prostitution, but

few actually seek new jobs. Roemhildt said that without an effective exit strategy, women who want to escape are not able to. The church, she adds, at times makes it more difficult.

As an example, Roemhildt said that when an Albanian woman or teenage girl trafficked to Greece has been a prostitute, even if by force or coercion, she cannot return to her village because of the shame.

“Most people not only on the streets but even in evangelical churches would say that prostitution is actually a public service,” she said. “They think that it reduces violent crime and rape. We need to work with the churches so that they can bring out the theology of redemption and receive women back who have been abused and used.”

During the Summer Olympics in August, teams of Christians hit the streets of Athens five nights a week. Spearheaded by Lost Coin—the Athens-based arm of International Teams, a nondenominational missions group headquartered in Illinois—these teams sought men and women who work in the sex industry. In expectation of an increased demand for prostitution an estimated 2,000 to 10,000 women had been trafficked to Greece, Roemhildt said. The BBC News reported a similar estimate.

As it turned out, business at Athens’ brothels was not as brisk as it had been during the 2000 Olympics in Australia—which Roemhildt said was an answer to prayer and a huge opportunity to step into the gap and offer ministry.

About 70 volunteers from Lost Coin and several other ministries—including Youth With A Mission, Operation

Mobilization, the Southern Baptist Convention and some Greek churches—made contact with about 250 male and female prostitutes. They offered free bottles of water that had been donated by the Greek Orthodox Church and struck up conversations.

They talked about how the women and men could leave prostitution, and told them how much Jesus loves each of them. Lost Coin was ready to meet needs, including the offer of temporary shelter, help in returning to a person's native country and prayer.

One contact was a Russian woman who received her first Bible. Another was a high-ranking representative of the Union of Greek Prostitutes. She was open to further discussion about how women who suffer in prostitution might be helped.

Roemhildt estimates that about 10,000 women work in the Greek sex industry even without the increase for the Olympics. Ninety-five percent of those have been trafficked and come from five language groups.

Women and minors have been forced or coerced away from Albania, Moldova, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria and Nigeria, among other nations.

Beyond the direct outreach, teams of intercessors gather as support. And in Thessalonika, a major transit point for women trafficked to Athens, missionary Whitney Brown leads prayer walks.

"Satan is thinking that he has a good thing going," Roemhildt said. "He is seeking to steal, kill and destroy, but God wants

to bring women into a place where they can come to know who He is and that He cares for them. And He is doing it.”

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