

How One Brave Pastor Is Fighting Child Slavery

Pennsylvania pastor Bruce Ladebu pays up to \$500 each to free children from cruel exploitation.

My friend Bruce Ladebu is a pastor, but he has never been comfortable behind a desk or a pulpit. A former adventurer who has explored Arctic islands and tracked timberwolves in the Canadian Rockies, he prefers to take his faith outside the American comfort zone. That's why he ended up in Central Asia two weeks ago on a daring 12-day mission to rescue children from slavery.

Bruce's work is not for the squeamish. He has watched 4-year-old children work 14 hours straight in 120 degree heat in crude brick factories or fabric mills. Some of the children are chained to looms and forced by their owners to urinate in pots so they won't run away. On his most recent trip Bruce met a boy who had been burned with acid by his owners. The child had developed an infection and was given no medical care.

This boy was burned with acid by his owners. He was rescued from the factory two weeks ago.

"We saw kids in rope factories and cigarette factories," Bruce told me. "They have no access to clean water. They bathe in pools where the bricks are made. These kids live and die there. And every girl we encountered, some 9 and 10 years old, had been raped by their owners."

So what does an American pastor do when faced with such unspeakable cruelty? If you are Bruce Ladebu, you take a team of five American guys into the factories. Like spiritual

commandos, the men (one is a former cop) confront the slave owners and negotiate a price to buy the children. It costs as much as \$500 to free one child.

During his most recent mission, Bruce and his team freed 87 children and turned them over to Christian pastors who provided food and clean clothes and placed the kids in secluded safehouses. Most of the children helped by Ladebu's ministry, Children's Rescue Initiative, get enrolled in school as well.

✖ This entire family was rescued from slavery during Bruce Ladebu's mission. Often families are enslaved to pay off debts.

According to the International Labor Organization, 55 million children under the age of 15 are exploited as laborers. Some work in coal mines in Colombia or in match factories in India. Others toil in carpet mills in Morocco or in toy factories in Taiwan. But the problem is particularly extreme in Central Asia, where children from Christian families are targeted because they are a religious minority.

"Once I begin negotiations we have to do everything properly, because they will persecute the local Christians if I do something wrong," said Bruce, who pastors Victory Family Worship Center in Conneaut Lake, Pa., "But I get very firm with them. These people are sadistic. They don't understand any other language but that of intimidation."

In one case Ladebu negotiated for 20 minutes to buy freedom for 38 children in a brick factory.

In another case, they rescued a group of three 4-year-old girls who were scheduled to be sent to a brothel. In some instances, Bruce just takes the children rather than

bargaining for them.

Bruce is a tough guy, and so are the men who accompanied him, but he admits that seeing such nightmarish child abuse was too much to handle. "All of us broke down at some point," Bruce said. "I broke down more times than I ever have, and it is still difficult."

The most emotional moment of the trip: When more than 100 runaway slaves learned where Bruce and his team were staying and came to the house to beg for protection. All the slaves were starving. Bruce added: "One old lady, who was about 75, was blind. But she had walked with everyone else for five hours. She begged me to take a baby."

The joy of freedom: 
This girl would have been sent into forced prostitution, but today she is sheltered in a Christian orphanage.

Such scenes are uncomprehensible to well-fed Americans, who—even in a faltering economy—are shielded from the harsh realities of the developing world. Bruce compares the slave owners to modern Pharaohs who believe buying and selling children is their right. "We've been told that some kids were actually thrown alive in brick furnaces" in order to punish them, Bruce said.

How does he find the courage to do this work? For Bruce, the Holy Spirit's power is not for goosebumps or charismatic sideshows. He takes Isaiah 61:1 literally: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me ... to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners."

He expects the Spirit's supernatural anointing to help him every time he ventures into today's slave fields to challenge injustice. I pray we all will discover that courage.

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