



HARPETH RIVER DISTRICT Hosts Partners in Mission Program on Human Trafficking

The United Women in Faith Unit from Columbia First United Methodist Church, Columbia, Tennessee hosted the Harpeth River District's **Partners in Mission** dinner and program on Thursday evening April 21, 2022. Dr. Richard Schoeberl the U.S. Team Leader for **Hope for Justice**, a global non-profit working to end modern-day slavery and human trafficking was the guest speaker. A large group of UWF members and pastors attended including Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference Social Action Chairwomen Kathryn McLaughlin.

Dr. Richard Schoeberl, a professor of Criminology and Homeland Security at UT-Southern in Pulaski, Tennessee has over 25 years of experience in law enforcement, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency's National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC). Before these organizations, he worked as a special agent investigating violent crime, international terrorism, trafficking, and organized drugs.

Dr. Schoeberl's 45-minute program and PowerPoint presentation was informative and eye-opening to those in attendance. Tackling an issue as big as human trafficking and modern slavery can sometimes feel overwhelming but he shared simple steps to stay informed and signs of human trafficking and exploitation to watch for.

Human trafficking is a crime where one person exploits another for labor, services, or commercial sex, using force, fraud, or coercion (or where the person induced is under 18 years of age, in the case of a commercial sex act under U.S. law).

The crime also includes the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining a human being for these purposes and in these ways. Human trafficking is included under the umbrella term 'modern-day slavery,' where victims cannot leave a situation of exploitation and are controlled by threats, punishment, violence, coercion, or deception.

The statistics shared were hard to fathom including the fact that human trafficking of youth, young people and adults is regularly occurring throughout not only the world and United States, but in all 95 counties in Tennessee. Worldwide about 4.8 million people are in forced sexual exploitation (including one million children).

Some of the information shared included that human traffickers often target female children aged 12-14 through a variety of means such as social media sites, text messaging and even virtual reality headset games. Many of these traffickers groom their victims and pretend to be a boy about the same age interested in friendship. Unfortunately, those vulnerable children who fall for this fraud may become victims.

Anyone from any walk of life can be targeted and can end up as a victim of human trafficking. But people experiencing any of the following things, Dr. Schoeberl noted can be at particular risk: chaotic home environment or recent family breakdown; runaway youth; homelessness; alcohol or drug addiction; mental illness; long-term unemployment; learning difficulties; debts or criminal convictions; fearful of deportation; physical injuries or disabilities.

Tips that Dr. Schoeberl shared for parents/caretakers of children included being vigilant in checking their phones, computers and other devices (deleting the device's History may be a red flag); questioning behavior such as isolating themselves so they can be on their device; loss of interest in school, friends and family; and use of drugs and/or alcohol, among other possible signs.

Additionally, in Tennessee Public Chapter 269 requires that family life curriculum used in public schools include instruction on the detection, intervention, prevention, and treatment of human trafficking in which the victim is a child and requires that each teacher receive a one-time in-service training on the topic.

The evening ended with a question-and-answer period and Dr. Schoeberl repeated that if a citizen sees something suspicious, they should say something. Hope for Justice (www.hopeforjustice.org) has an effective and proven model to address modern-day slavery and human trafficking, including programs for victims, which is replicable, scalable, and widely admired. The website has a plethora of information and downloadable resources and suggestions on how to get involved.

Dr. Schoeberl shared his contact information with the group and noted he is more than happy to speak to other groups to educate the public on this social crisis. He can be reached at richard.schoeberl@hopeforjustice.org or (615)356-0946.

Pictures: Dr. Richard Schoeberl; Kathryn McLaughlin, TWK Conference Social Action chair (left) and Beth Stockwell, Harpeth River Social Action chair (right); Hope for Justice Logo