Hoshon Tama-Sweet has learned that for every coffee shop and independent bookstore in Portland, Oregon, there is a dimly lit backroom where children are sold for sex. “The Bedroom, Good Times, the Five Dollar Pub—that’s a huge joint—and the high school’s across the street,” he says as we cruise 82nd Avenue, Portland’s prostitution “track,” on the eastside. “You’ve got the church on the corner, Rite-Aid Pharmacy, and JD’s Bar and Grille, the pink-lettered strip club.”

Like many Westerners, Tama-Sweet, 36, had long considered trafficking an overseas problem. When doing development work in the coastal town of Mombasa, Kenya, he’d see teenage girls standing on the docks, waiting for tourists. “I’d read about trafficking in places like Cambodia and India,” says Tama-Sweet, the son of hippie atheists. “I really didn’t imagine it was a problem here. It just doesn’t fit the idea of what Portland is.”

That idea—of green parks, copious bike lanes, and a bubbling arts scene—recently landed Portland the tagline, “Where young people go to retire.” In 2005, Tama-Sweet and his now wife left the grimy City of Angels for the City of Roses. Stephanie had just completed a master’s in intercultural studies at Biola. The couple had considered missionary work in the 10-40 Window, but Portland’s “sense of optimism and opportunity” drew them, says Tama-Sweet. “It attracts a lot of young people who want to change the world.”

His own optimism, however, faltered when the couple moved to Cully, a neighborhood south of the airport littered with strip clubs and porn shops. “I would see prostitutes walk down my street Sunday morning when my wife and son and I were getting in the car to go to church,” he says as we drive through Cully. He points to a “juice bar,” a new establishment for an 18+ crowd who can’t drink but can watch porn and nude dancing. “So if you’re a high-school student, welcome to the Sugar Shack. They’re open 24/7.”

“When you have this evil—people who enslave another human being’s body and turn it into something sexually exploited on a daily basis for financial gain—this is the antithesis of what God wants. This is the antithesis of a beloved community.”

Yet it is precisely this community that Tama-Sweet—in a network of Christians...
living in one of the least-churched states—has loved enough to begin transforming. Under Tama-Sweet's leadership, the Oregon Center for Christian Voices (occv) has in four years become Oregon's flagship nonprofit for passing laws that make it harder to sexually exploit children. In the same four years, two Christians in Portland's leading assault advocacy group and police department have created a unique model for assisting underage victims. Their model earned their county a $500,000 federal grant that created a special committee on CSEC (“commercial sexual exploitation of children”). Around the committee table are several committed Christians.

International Justice Mission (IJM) says these believers signal a trend among American Christians, who are wedding their longstanding emphasis on direct ministry to preventative efforts. In courtrooms, police stations, and the meager offices of tiny nonprofits, these Christians labor to end the vicious cycle of child trafficking before it starts.

LEGALIZED LICENTIOUSNESS

Portland’s trafficking problem goes back, inadvertently, to Oregon’s 1857 Constitution, which contains one of the most liberal free speech clauses in the country, says Mike Hogan, IJM’s Pacific Northwest director of church mobilization. For decades, legislators have interpreted, “No law shall be passed restraining the free expression of opinion…” to block all attempts to regulate the adult entertainment industry. Free from zoning restrictions, strip clubs and other “creative expressions” are peppered throughout the city, often near schools and parks. Joslyn Baker, a CSEC specialist with Multnomah County, says 65 percent of all Portland schools are within a mile of a strip club.

“We’ve had trainers come and say, ‘Show us your track. Show us where your sex industry is.’ I say, ‘I have to drive you around the whole town.’”

- Joslyn Baker, Multnomah County CSEC specialist

at the intersection of 82nd Avenue and Fremont, he points across the street to Honey-suckle’s Lingerie, which looks like a decrepit one-bedroom house with a fenced backyard. Tama-Sweet believes it’s a trafficking point. He tells the story of a 13-year-old who was driven from Washington State across the Willamette River to Columbia Boulevard, near the I-5 Corridor, the West Coast “track” running from Vancouver to Tijuana. She was raped out of a van behind strip clubs during her middle school's lunch hour. Then, she was driven back to catch the bus home.

“In Oregon, it’s illegal for an 18-year-old to serve a cup of coffee if she doesn’t have a food handlers card,” says Tama-Sweet. “Yet that girl can be hired as an ‘independent contractor’ and strip in a private room that’s deadbolted from the outside, at 3 a.m., with no oversight, no class, no license.”

Such grave imbalances compelled occv four years ago (then led by Gordon-Conwell graduate Stephanie Ahn Mathis) to make trafficking its advocacy focus. OCCV’s first victory came in 2009, when the legislature passed a Victims Confidentiality Bill, keeping victims out of Portland’s public Internet database (and the hands of pimps). Then in 2010, it won permission to send orange stickers listing the National Human Trafficking Hotline number to all 11,000 liquor-serving and-selling establishments in Oregon.

IJM, which began partnering with occv in 2009, says the six-year-old nonprofit has helped Portland’s Christians do much more than send money to IJM. “Knowing the local legislation and being able to have events in Salem to get people to do something—they’re a phenomenal partner,” says Hogan.

Stacy Bellavia, 32, started volunteering with occv in 2009, when she returned from an IJM project in India. She testified in Salem, the state capital, on behalf of the hotline bill. “I’ve learned how much power constituents have. The fact that I can testify before a human services committee on behalf of a bill is wild. There’s enough information for all Christians to speak passionately about it.”

OCCV saw three more of its bills become law this summer. The first increases fines for purchasing sex from a minor from $800 to $10,000. The second outlaws the “age defense” in court (“But she said she was 18” is no longer a legitimate defense). And the third changes the very definition of prostitution. It used to be that “a 50-year-old man and a 16-year-old girl were technically guilty of the same crime,” says Tama-Sweet. “We separated it out, allowing us to treat victims as victims and help shift the psychology around prostitution. This is not an egalitarian transaction 99.9 percent of the time.”

ESCAPING THE ‘EPICENTER’

For weeks, Sergeant Mike Geiger was peeved at Dan Rather. In a 2010 Dan Rather Reports series dubbed “Pornland,” the seasoned anchor led cameramen along 82nd Avenue to expose the “seedier side” of the “model American city,” labeling it the “epicenter of child prostitution.” Other reporters, including Diane Sawyer (who called Portland “the national hub for child sex trafficking”), repeated the e-word.

“As you can imagine, that generated some attention,” says Geiger, who says he spent weeks taking calls from shocked Portlanders. A wiry, straight-shooting police officer for 22 years, Geiger spends his days behind a
desk leading Portland’s trafficking unit, one of the few of its kind in the U.S. The Rather series spotlighted his detective unit, which is currently working to find Portland’s 150 known or suspected underage victims.

Geiger was frustrated that Rather overlooked his department’s innovative response to victims. In early 2009, Geiger campaigned to move prostitution out of the bureau’s drugs and vice unit into the sex crimes unit. So where buying a prostitute used to be a “vice”—and the john and prostitute were equally guilty under law—the shift turned soliciting sex from a minor into a major crime for a detective to investigate. And a simpler crime, since only the john was now pursued.

“Gone are the days when you view a child as complicit—‘she engaged in consensual sexual conduct in exchange for a fee,’” Geiger says. “Our children are not complicit. It’s not just a policy shift. It’s a whole shift in thinking.”

After a series of institutional changes, Geiger’s detectives now work closely with the FBI to track down victims throughout Oregon and match them with advocates and shelters. In the past month, his team has identified four underage victims on BackPage.com, a Craigslist-type site that doesn’t screen ads for illicit content, and rescued one 14-year-old the month this article went to press.

Tama-Sweet says the Portland Police Bureau is “way ahead of the national average” thanks to Geiger’s leadership. “I view myself more as a father than a police officer,” says Geiger, the father of three. “When we talk about these vulnerable people, my faith dictates that we protect and nurture them. Jesus’ warning about the millstone highlights the inherent value of all children.”

Esther Nelson, 29, is program manager of the human trafficking division at the Sexual Assault Resource Center (SARC), Portland’s most respected advocacy group. She says Portland has earned the “epicenter” label precisely because “our service provision has done a great job,” which has “skyrocketed” the number of victims.

When she joined SARC in 2008, Nelson and Geiger created a victim-centered response model: Every child brought in off the streets receives (1) a detective to track down the pimp; (2) a child welfare specialist to find shelter; and (3) a SARC advocate who helps victims leave their abusers.

Having an advocate changes everything. “When we interviewed them as a victim of a crime, reframing their information as ‘you’re a survivor,’ the outcomes were so different. The kids stopped cycling, and some of them got into shelters where they stayed put,” says Nelson. (Due to the trauma bond pimps create, most victims return to abusers immediately.) “The kids had different directions put in place because they were afforded rights as victims.”

With bursting caseloads under the model, in 2010 Portland Police and SARC received a three-year federal grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. That $500,000 created the CSEC Committee, where the FBI, district attorneys, child welfare, Nelson, Geiger, survivors—and, most recently, the church—work to ensure Portland never becomes an actual hub.

**THE CITY WELCOMES THE CHURCH**

For three years, Nelson kept her full-time job under wraps at Portland’s best-known evangelical church. Meanwhile, Imago Dei Community, pastored by Rick McKinley, wanted to “fight trafficking” but didn’t know how. Little did they know a direct link to a citywide conversation was sitting in their pews.

“There were no places of engagement,” says Ken Weigel, 31, Imago’s pastor of ministry development. “We’d watch all these movies and host events . . . getting a few thousand people riled up for no purpose.” Imago had run Scarlet Cord, a Friday night

Street Activist: ‘Our lives are so busy, we avoid these realities,’ says Martin French, who convened the Exile Poster Project this spring. ‘Art causes us to stop.’
dinner for prostitutes, since 2009. But like the dozen or so other direct-service ministries in Portland, it was disconnected from the CSEC Committee and social services.

Until the city needed the church. Last summer, Nelson asked Weigel to meet her at Three Friends Coffee House, around the corner from Imago. She needed counsel on how to better live her faith in a non-Christian workplace. As they talked, recalls Weigel, “I’m figuring out what she does, and I’m like, ‘One of the leading people on this goes to my church. This is crazy.’”

Nelson invited Weigel to join the CSEC committee, making Imago the first church at the table. A surprising number of believers are on the committee, but Weigel has become the bridge linking city and church.

“I’m much more about us going in and blessing” what’s already working, rather than building something new, says Weigel, who relocated SARC’s trafficking unit to Imago this summer. “People of salt and light [should be] infiltrating every one of these institutions. We want to be part of the solution, as opposed to coming only if we are leading the discussion.”

One solution came from Imago’s sizable artist community. Martin French is an illustrator whose client list includes the Olympic Games, Nike, and *The New York Times*. He moved to Portland in 2005 to teach at the Pacific Northwest College of Art. Right away he plugged into Imago, because “engagement in the city is much of what I moved here for.”

After hearing McKinley preach through the Book of Matthew this January, French was struck by the theme of exile and landed on the Exile Poster Project concept.

“Portland is a poster-oriented town, a huge music scene,” he says. “But I wanted to go deeper into what was going on in the city—a very non-Christian city—to create dialogue.”

In talks with Weigel, French decided that the project’s theme would be trafficking; victims are often exiles from their home countries and families. French invited professional artists, designers, and six of his students to contribute 20 unique pieces. The Exile Poster Project debuted this April in Imago’s art gallery, located in the hip Pearl District. Now several are posted along 82nd Avenue and other troubled streets, and more went up in schools, City Hall, and the Capitol this fall.

One poster reads like a giant sticky note delivering a to-do list for Portland: “Be bike-friendly.” “Make coffee roasting cool.” “Open a million food carts.” “Stop having sex with the kids.” Only the last item isn’t crossed out.

“If that can elicit an emotional response,” says French, “that can lead to that viral, person-to-person change that says, ‘We’ll do this fundraiser. We’ll go and help this nonprofit.’”

“That’s what’s going to change Portland, because city government has been clear that their mechanisms aren’t making much change. It’s going to take individuals.”

**MORE THAN A BED**

Anti-trafficking insiders hope that churches’ engagement goes beyond mercy ministry. To varying degrees, Tama-Sweet, Nelson, Geiger, and Baker are wary of Christian ministries providing victim services, such as on-street rescue and psychological counsel. About a dozen such ministries operate in Portland.

Tama-Sweet says such ministry has its place but “has to be linked to structural changes. Direct service falls into a historical charity model that churches understand and do well. But it’s just half the picture.”

That’s where Weigel comes in. After the poster project, Weigel says, the CSEC committee asked him to spearhead a new subcommittee on prevention. Besides rebranding the decidedly boring “CSEC Committee,” Weigel is now creating prevention education for schools, churches, and businesses to use by early 2012. This August, he organized a breakfast where pastors of black, Hispanic, and white congregations could ask Senator Ron Wyden, a leader in anti-trafficking legislation, “What can we do to help?”

“With sex trafficking, unless you are a trained social worker, FBI agent, or DA, there’s not much for you to do on the front line,” says Weigel. “I’m creating places where people don’t insist that they have to be on the front line, but still see they are helping.”

Insiders are eager to see churches provide kids mentors and a sexual ethic that emphasizes their God-given dignity.

“The church is in the best position to take the lead on morality issues in a way that government can’t,” says Baker. “At the end of the day, we put the bad guy away and get [the girl] clothes and health treatment. But who loves her? Who tells her a story other than, ‘The only thing you’re good for is selling your body?’”

“When girls think they have no value to where they are selling themselves, something has been missed along the way,” says Geiger. “This is something the church can do.”

Rep. Andy Olson (R-Albany) has worked with OCCV to try to amend Oregon’s Constitution. A Christian, he calls trafficking a “family values issue.” “When a 12- to 14-year-old runs away from home, and next thing you know she’s on the train—you have to ask, why did she run away from home?”

Meanwhile, Bellavia has found ways to engage fellow Christians at Mosaic Church, located in the Hollywood District. Bellavia was appointed Mosaic’s anti-trafficking organizer last year, and is putting her experience at OCCV and TTM to work. She and other members regularly visit a K-8 school and a high school in Cully, with hopes that role models will bolster students’ sense of self-worth, thereby adding a layer of protection against pimps. She also leads training sessions at Mosaic on how to organize meetings with politicians, testify in Salem, write op-eds, and raise awareness through social media.

“It’s not just about rescue, it’s also about prevention,” says Bellavia. “Sometimes that’s hard because it’s not exciting or notable. But you’re having a long-term and probably more significant impact investing in a 9-year-old boy who doesn’t have a good role model.”

“If it’s just about building a shelter, people think the only way to contribute is financially. I’m encouraging the faith community that they can be involved, even though it doesn’t look like it’s directly involved.”

“The church has something special: We have the Good News,” says Tama-Sweet as we leave Popeye’s so he can join his wife and 2-year-old at home. “We have a vision of the way the world is supposed to be. And it doesn’t include the rape of children on our streets.

“When you realize that God loved every victim when they were born, that he’s with them every day they’re traumatized—it’s incumbent on believers to protect them, to help them become whole, and to insist that, in our society, we are not going to tolerate the antithesis of God’s beloved community.”

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