Rescuing Women from Sex Trafficking

Part 1 of 2: Helping Women Escape Sex Trafficking
with Darrell Bock, Katie Pedigo, Linda Tomczak
Release Date: February 2014
Welcome to The Table, where we discuss issues of God and culture. And our topic today is human trafficking. I’m Darrell Bock, executive director for cultural engagement at the Hendricks Center at Dallas Theological Seminary, and I have two very special guests today to discuss this area and the aspect of ministering in this area. We’re not gonna talk theoretically about human trafficking today as much as talking about how ministry can be done in this area. And I have Katie Pedigo with me, who’s from New Friends New Life, and welcome, Katie.

Thank you.

And Linda Tomczak, who’s actually on staff as a graphic designer here at the seminary. She works on the floor below me at the – in the Hendricks Center building, but she volunteers her time in ministry, dealing with girls who have been trafficked. And so, in the midst of our conversations over the last year, this topic has come on my radar, and – thanks to Linda. And so I thought it would be appropriate to have her in, so we’re glad to have you, Linda.

Thank you very much.

Let me just begin with some information on what New Friends New Life is all about, ‘cause it does a good job, also, of introducing our topic. It says, “New Friends New Life serves women who have been exploited in prostitution brothels and clubs. Some are part of over the over 300,000 women and children trafficked in America each year.” That, already, is a surprising sentence, ‘cause I think most people think that human trafficking is something that happens mostly elsewhere. “Some are society’s throwaways, some are runaways; many are enticed by supposed ‘friendships’ and easy money. The sex trade in this country is quickly becoming as lucrative as the illegal drug trade.

National research shows 90 percent of women in the industry were sexually abused as children. The average age that women begin to work in prostitution is 13 years old. While each woman in our program – we call them protégés – has a unique story, there are common threads. Single moms with literal or no support systems, childhood sexually abuse, family violence, teen pregnancy, other traumatic experiences, women who want better lives for their children but lack the tools and the skills to provide a safe and nurturing environment.”
Well, that’s an interesting introduction to New Friends New Life. It’s – the little logo here or motto is, “Transforming the lives of women and their children.” And Katie, how long have you been involved with New Friends New Life, and how in the world do you get involved with something like this?

*Katie Pedigo*  
Well, I’ve been the executive director at New Friends New Life for about three and a half years, and I started my career as an attorney, and so I say I’m a recovering attorney.

And so –

*Darrell Bock*  
I’ve met very few of those people.

*Katie Pedigo*  
Yeah.

*Darrell Bock*  
No, go ahead.

*Katie Pedigo*  
I am going through rehabilitation as we speak.

*Darrell Bock*  
Yeah.

*Katie Pedigo*  
So I practiced law and just really always wanted to be in human rights, so it always interested me. I feel like God really put that on my heart, but I wasn’t sure, as you said, where in America you can do human rights law.

*Darrell Bock*  
Now, what kind of law did you practice?

*Katie Pedigo*  
I did employment law, contract law, and business law.

*Darrell Bock*  
Okay.
And so, I had children and stayed home for a while. When I came to the workforce, I wanted to be in something where I really felt my passion and my God calling. And so New Friends New Life really let me know that they needed a director with that type of experience, and so it was a perfect fit. So I’ve been there for three and a half years, and I have been the one, truly, that has been blessed to be able to be involved in that.

And you’ve been learning on the job, then, that means, ‘cause you certainly –

Yes.

– didn’t learn about this in law school, right?

No, no. I mean, you definitely can learn some of the logic – some strategy. You can learn, again, some of the legal issues that come with governments and running a non-profit, but certainly I’m – we’re all learning together – for sure.

Wow. And Linda, how did you get involved in this kind of a ministry? What got you – so I mean, I think of a graphic designer as sitting in front of a big computer screen most of the day, and that’s where I see you most of the time. So how did you get started ministering in this way?

Several years ago, just randomly heard a radio program on human trafficking, and I’d never heard of that before, and I was just, I mean, kinda stunned. I mean – and I thought, “If that happens to people, I have to do something.” And I didn’t know what to do. There wasn’t much to be found at that time and much information, so I thought, “Well, if I were a doctor and I were treating a disease, I would learn everything I could about it.”

So I just kind of started learning, and the more I learned, the more I realized that young girls were being trafficked. And then I heard of a ministry called Alert, and they go into juvenile detention where a lot of girls who are actually trafficked are arrested as prostitutes, and they wind up in detention. And the juvenile justice system is intended to rehabilitate, not to punish, and they want Christian groups to come in and talk to the people that are there – the girls and boys.
So we have a ministry with the girls, and we find out a lot of kids don’t even realize that they’re trafficked. They have a boyfriend who is actually a pimp, and they are arrested for prostitution or they’ve been trafficked and didn’t realize it. And so, we are able to share with them – we do a life skills class, and it’s great. The girls are awesome, and just – we love them and they love us, and it’s been a blessing. So –

**Darrell Bock** So Alert is the ministry that you work with here in Dallas?

**Linda Tomczak** Yes, I volunteer with them, mm-hmm.

**Darrell Bock** Okay. And so – so how old – I’m just curious, how old are these ministries? How old is New Friends New Life?

**Katie Pedigo** New Friends New Life has been around for – coming 16 years coming this spring. And it really started with one woman, and she came and was – went to a Bible study and was surrounded by eight other women who – and she said, “I’m in the sex industry and I want help. I want out.” So this was 16 years ago, before we used words like human trafficking.

**Darrell Bock** Was this in Dallas?

**Katie Pedigo** It was in Dallas. And so, then her story started unfolding and we started learning more about the abuse that she had endured and what she had experienced in her childhood. And so then she started getting help and started having the hope that came from being restored.

**Darrell Bock** So she happened to show up in a Bible study and that was the start of this?

**Katie Pedigo** That was the start.

**Darrell Bock** Wow.
The Table Podcast  
Rescuing Women from Sex Trafficking

Katie Pedigo  
That was the start. It started 16 years ago with this one woman named Amy, and then she started getting healing and help and started inviting her friends. And so it grew from that to – the one woman 16 years ago to then over 650 last year, where we’re able to help women, and young girls, and then their children so that we can break the generational cycle of abuse and trauma that comes with that.

Darrell Bock  
Now, 600 – so 650 women work with the ministry? I just wanna be sure –

Katie Pedigo  
Right – no, so we helped –

Darrell Bock  
– or volunteer?

Katie Pedigo  
– 650 –

Darrell Bock  
Oh, you helped 650.

Katie Pedigo  
– yes, last year.

Darrell Bock  
Okay. Oh, wow.

Katie Pedigo  
So that comes – we go into the Dawson State – it used to be Dawson State Jail – now Lewis Darret Jail, and we work with women that are in there to get them a Bible study and let them know about resources so when they leave prison they know that they have opportunities outside of being trafficked. And we also help women to – that come to us that want help, and want mental health services, and spiritual support, and job training. We have a program called Second Chance Jobs, where we put them into an internship so that they can get conventional employment.

And then 82 percent of the women we help have children of their own, and on average, two children. So we have a full-fledged children’s program so that we’re working with them on their mental health and –

Darrell Bock  
Oh, wow.
The Table Podcast  
Rescuing Women from Sex Trafficking

*Katie Pedigo* – because, you can imagine they’ve experienced more and seen more in their little lifetimes than anyone should, and they’ve seen men coming out of their – in and out of their homes – perpetrators. And so the – we have a program for them where we’re working on their healing and their restoration; and helping them in school, and with their homework, and teachers. And then we also go into the juvenile detention centers, and we take in licensed professional counselors that go in and then do sexual abuse recovery for those same girls, 12 to 17.

*Darrell Bock*  
Yeah, ‘cause this is a long-term –

*Katie Pedigo*  
Right.

*Darrell Bock*  
– transformation that we’re talking about.

*Katie Pedigo*  
It is. And it really stems, as you said earlier, from the early onset of abuse. I mean, when I came to work here, that was the first thing I had to wrap my head around, was, “How can this happen? What could lead a woman or girl to this place – to this” – I just couldn’t understand. And I wanted to figure out, is it race; is it economics; is it the area of town that they live; what is it that is the genesis or the nexus to this? And what we found was that sexual abuse – early onset of abuse where the young girl – it – something triggers there that, “This is what I’m made to do. This is how my needs get met. This is how I get my attention,” and they don’t realize at 4, 5, and 6 that there’s anything different than that.

But then, as they start going to school and they get older, they realize, “I am different. This isn’t happening to every little girl that’s around me,” and then they wanna escape that. Well, that’s when we get the runaways or the throwaways in our cities. So that’s why, when you say the average age is 13, that’s they age they wanna run – they wanna escape that abuse in their home, and so that’s where we’re targeting them. I love the ministry that Alert does and putting volunteers in to really mentor them and to care for them. And then for New Friends New Life to bring in the licensed professional counselors who really work therapeutically to restore from that sexual abuse is key.
Darrell Bock  
So the difference between these two ministries is that you all really provide kind of the support and logistics necessary to help the person transfer out of where they’ve been to, hopefully, landing in a better place. And Alert is helping by providing volunteer and just person power, and care, and that kind of thing to bring support – personal support beyond professional support to the girls. Is that right? Well, actually, Alert works with both boys and girls, right?

Linda Tomczak  
We are starting to work with boys. We’re just a very small grassroots organization, so – but we work mostly with – we work with girls. I work with girls, and then I think New Friends New Life works with older women, too, who have – who are trying to get out of the industry, and we’re working with teens. So –

Darrell Bock  
I see.

Linda Tomczak  
– both in detention, and then we provide ways for them to follow up with us. We can’t contact them when they’re out ‘cause they’re minors, and so – but we give them all kinds of contact – ways to contact us and ask them please to –

Darrell Bock  
Stay in touch?

Linda Tomczak  
– yes, because we love to continue mentoring them on the outside, but they have to initiate it.

Darrell Bock  
I see. So you only have access to them while they’re in jail, basically? Or –

Linda Tomczak  
Yes, but the girls we work with in the group I’m with are in drug rehab, so we know we’re gonna have them for about three months. So we get a good – and they really enjoy coming to us. We’re like a reward. So they tell us, “We – we’re so excited ‘cause you all are coming tonight,” and we develop a close relationship with them, and learn a lot about them, and help them. So –
Well, for a lot of people, this is just – I mean, like I said, I think most people, if they hear human trafficking, they’re thinking Asia, or Africa, or something like that. They don’t think about how prevalent this is in the United States. So the natural question is to ask, how prevalent is it in the United States? Obviously, if Dallas has two organizations that are working with this, it’s here, but it – I listened to a tape of a broadcast yesterday in preparation for this with – that was dealing with human trafficking in the state of Michigan. And – so I guess we could say it’s everywhere?

It’s everywhere.

It’s everywhere.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So the state department estimates, as you said, 300,000 women and children in a year. We know from Polaris Project, who is the national trafficking hotline, that Texas is number two as the state that receives the second highest number of calls from that national trafficking hotline, so we know we’re a hub in the nation for this. As you said, it does happen everywhere; in every city – big city, small city – in our country, and – but Texas is a hub, and we believe that’s because the access to the interstate system – it’s easy to get in and out – the access to Mexico, and to – through Texas, and it’s so central that you really can – a trafficker can take a girl from the west coast to east coast to wherever the demand is in a very quick, efficient way.

So, is California the largest?

It is the largest.

Okay, okay. And I take it New York would be up there as well?
Katie Pedigo: It’s up there, right. And within Dallas we know it’s a huge issue. I mean, we – the Dallas Women’s Foundation did a survey, I think it was two years ago, and they said on any given night, there will be between 400 and 700 girls being actively marketed online – young girls – minor girls: we’re talking girls 12 to 17 years old on the Internet. And so – and this is happening right here in our city.

Darrell Bock: So this doesn’t happen just on the streets?

Katie Pedigo: Correct.

Darrell Bock: I mean, I – we – anyone who’s been around the seminary knows that when I was a student here in the ‘70s, just a few blocks over on what was Brian Street was – had a notorious reputation for being one of the most walked streets in the city, and there’s been some effort, I think, to clean that up. But still, most people, again, when they think of human trafficking, they’re gonna – they’re thinking, “Oh, well, that’s someone walking the streets.” We’re not talking about just that level of contact.

Katie Pedigo: No, it’s gotten very sophisticated since the ‘70s. I mean, now we have such access through Internet, whether it’s through Backpage or whether it’s through other sites that – literally, the statistics show you can buy a girl within 90 seconds for $90 in our city. And so it’s just extremely prevalent and it’s easy access for those – for the Johns who wanna buy that.

Darrell Bock: Well, let me walk through a sample of the experience of one girl that you all have on your New Friends New Life pamphlet here, ‘cause I think it kind of gives a sense of kind of what you’re dealing with and how long and deep a cycle this is. It says here, “At age 7, Emily’s drug and alcohol-addicted parents divorced. At age 8, Emily was molested and exposed to pornography by various relatives. At age 16, Emily was raped. At age 19, Emily gave birth to her first child. By age 19, Emily had three children and married an abusive, non-working husband, and she entered the sex industry as a means of survival.”
And this is her own words: “My turning point came when I was driving to work again, and I just pulled over and asked God to help me and save me from this life. I was exhausted being someone I wasn’t meant to be. I wanted to be who I dreamed of as a little girl. I wanted to be a better mother for my boys. I wanted to make them proud. I was disgusted with myself and hated who I was,” and then it talks about being introduced to the ministry, and feeling liberated, etc. That’s not an unusual story, is it?

Katie Pedigo

It’s not. Unfortunately, that’s the common story, is that it starts with some type of abusive or trauma within that childhood or that early onset for that girl. And it’s – triggers where she never feels really worthy, she never feels like she can be more than that, and it’s a long cycle of abuse.

Darrell Bock

So it’s an abuse, and, on the other side, if I can say it this way, it’s an attempt to survive, isn’t it?

Katie Pedigo

Right, very much. They – the statistics show over 90 percent of women – adult women in the sex industry report wanting out. So they – they’re desperate to get out, but they don’t feel like they have hope outside of that. They don’t feel like they can survive outside their trafficker, or their pimp support, or the work that they’re doing. And so that’s the kind of good news that we have to offer, is that there is hope, that there is a way out, that there are resources for women and girls who want to be healed and want to find transformation.

And that comes through knowing God and knowing Jesus and his plan and purpose for their lives, but it also comes in very practical ways, as you said earlier. It comes through education, job training, learning how to get employment, maintain employment, learning how to be a good parent to your children: there is hope outside of that, and that’s the message that we want to give.

Darrell Bock

So I take it that the way you discover this is – is it in the midst of these contacts that happen when someone’s in jail? Can – do they come to you? What’s – ‘cause I’m imagining in the back of my mind that if a girl wants to get out that one of the things that she might fear is retribution for trying to get out, because this is a means of commerce for the people who are holding them.

Katie Pedigo

Right.
The Table Podcast  
Rescuing Women from Sex Trafficking

**Darrell Bock**  
So how exactly does that work, Linda? I mean, I’m sure you run into this when you – when you’re ministering to them in the context of the jail. How do they contact Alert? I mean, how do these girls get started? Do the – does the jail help with this, or how does it work?

**Linda Tomczak**  
Well, we have a program there that we go in, and so we meet the girls because we’re there doing our weekly life skills class. So as girls come out – there’s 10 girls in a pod. As girls leave, then new girls come in who are needing to go through drug rehab, so that’s how we meet them. The problem is with the underage girls, ‘cause lots of times they don’t have a safe environment to go home to, and there aren’t very many safe houses for them to go into if they aren’t in a good home environment. And so a lot of kids will run away, and that’s how a lot of kids survive, is by selling their bodies.

Pimps look for runaways and throwaways, which are kids that are kind of forced out of their homes or they’re not wanted. So that’s how we meet them. It – a lot of them, too, go into foster care and they’ll run from foster care systems, because a lot of the foster care systems, especially for girls who have been incarcerated – one girl who had no where to go, she said, “I don’t wanna go into foster care. The only people that take girls like us are the people that are doing it for the money, and I’ll run. I swear I’ll run.” So then they’re just prey on the streets if they do that, so –

**Darrell Bock**  
So there really is a cycle, almost, that’s going on with these girls in terms of, they come to jail, they think their only way out is to go back and take care of themselves, when, in fact, foster care may at least be a means of getting out of the cycle, and they don’t recognize that. Now, how much of this is distrust in the sense of – I imagine – and I’m thinking off the top of my head here, but I imagine if you’ve been abused most of your life and can’t trust the people around you that there’s a high level of distrust so that the idea of someone really wanting to do something for your good is actually a very hard concept to embrace. Is it –

**Linda Tomczak**  
It’s true.

**Darrell Bock**  
Is that part of what you’re also dealing with?
Absolutely. That’s the first step, is knowing that there is somebody who actually loves you, and cares for you, and wants to help you and provide for you. And we –

Without asking for anything back?

– without anything in return. And I’m asked that, really, on a weekly basis, is why? We’ll help someone with their rent, or we’ll help someone with their childcare, or provide the mental health services they need, and they’ll say, “Why are you doing this? What can I do? What – why are you doing this?” And I get to take a deep breath and say, “Because He did it for me.” I have not earned any blessings that I have. I just, by the grace of Jesus, have been given some opportunities and some blessings, and He did it for me.

And because of that, I do it for you. I’m an agent of His transformation. That’s why I’m here. That’s why we’re able to help you with your rent, or give you a grocery card, or do the different things you need to get out and stay out, is because there is love, and there is respect, and there is value. And it only comes and flows through His love for me, and that flows to you.” And it’s just the most – I’m a preacher’s kid, so I grew up – I have two strikes: I’m an attorney and a preacher’s kid.

So here comes the – so the organ is playing, and here we go.

And I never ever thought I would go into ministry. I had no, really, desire or understanding of how I could. And now, every single day I get to live that out, and it’s the most powerful experience of my life to be able to really live out my faith and be able – not because I’ve done anything good or can do anything good, but I have opportunities because they will give trust, and they will surrender, and they will accept the gifts that we’re offering to them – and not just as a gift, but take it as a real investment that, “Okay, if you’re going to help me with my car so that I can get my kids to childcare, and get to this job, and make a life, then I’m gonna prove you right. I’m gonna prove that there’s something good in me and I’m gonna prove that I can do some really remarkable things with this passion I’ve found.”

Now, how do you – how do people get in contact with New Friends New Life – someone who’s in the industry who wants to get out? How do you discover who these people are?
Katie Pedigo

So the vast majority of our referrals come with word of mouth. So just like that one woman that we helped 16 years ago, she started telling her friends and they started coming. The same is true today. So the vast majority of women that come to us are because they heard about it from someone else who started coming, started getting help, started seeing a transformed life; but then there are other ways.

Now, our program is 100 percent self-select, so we have no part of our program that’s court mandated, or – we just have found that that’s not really the best use of our resources. But we do reach out with law enforcement, to judges, to other social service agencies through our media – lots of different areas where we can, with other partners that we’re working with in the city, to say, “Here’s our resource. Here we are in Lewis Darret Jail just to tell you what’s available to you when you get out,” and do some outreach like that.

But the number one key is that they have to make that choice, and they have to make the phone call or go online. Our website’s newfriendsnewlife.org, and we get e-mails on a daily basis that says, “I want help. I think it’s time. What do I do?” And so we can, once they make that choice and once they take that step, we’ve got a 16-year plan that we have really worked to get best practices to help a woman transform her life, but she has to ultimately make that choice and take that step.

Darrell Bock

Now, Linda’s working primarily with teenagers from what I understand, but you – your ministry, I understand it, also works with the older women as well. What’d be the – is there an average age that you all –

Katie Pedigo

So, our adolescent program in 12 to 17. The average age there is about 14 years old – that we offer sexual abuse recovery to them.

Darrell Bock

That strikes me as amazing, but go ahead. It’s so young.

Katie Pedigo

It is.

Darrell Bock

Yeah.
Katie Pedigo: It is. And then our adult program goes from 17 to any age; I mean, there’s no age limit there, but the average age is around 32 years old. And so our goal there is to go earlier in the process.

Darrell Bock: Right.

Katie Pedigo: So we wanna go back and turn off that faucet so we don’t have such long lives of abuse and trauma. And then, at that point – many times there’s addiction and other things that go with that criminal background.

Darrell Bock: And if you’ve got 32-year-olds, then I imagine you’re working with a lot of women who do have children who are single moms.

Katie Pedigo: Right. So 82 percent of ours have children of their own, and they’re all single moms. So we’re working with – and with the children it’s a unique opportunity, because they, as we have said, have been in very volatile homes – high-risk homes of their own, and they have only seen men in a negative way. Well, 50 percent of our kids are boys and young men, and all they’ve seen are negative images of men either coming in to perpetrate on their mom or even law enforcement coming to arrest their mom. And so they have a very negative image of men and what it means to be a man.

And so, for us, a key part in our children’s program is to show them what good men look like, and that’s a unique way to volunteer, is to come and play basketball, or come and serve food, or come and help with homework. But to show these young boys what a good man talks like, acts like, looks like; that he doesn’t raise his voice; that he doesn’t hit his mom; he doesn’t disrespect women. And so that’s a really important program, because this is really the only avenue that they may have that opportunity to see.

Darrell Bock: So how does the support come for your ministry? I take it you’re a non-profit.

Katie Pedigo: We are.

Darrell Bock: And so are there churches that support you? Foundations? Where does your support come from?
Katie Pedigo

Yes. So we are faith-based 501(c)(3). We get our support from many churches – local churches, non-denominational across the board. We get our funding from individuals who are extremely generous, from several foundations in our city who have this as their mission and their purpose, and then we do three fundraisers a year that we work very hard to do: one is a spring luncheon where we have over 1,000 people come and have a luncheon. Last year we had Barbara Bush come and speak. We had the attorney general there. The First Lady was there.

This coming year we’re gonna have Sally Field come and speak about women and what that meant in Hollywood, but what it also means in our community. And then we also have a golf tournament where men and women can get together and in a fun afternoon raise some much needed support, but also hear about the mission and why it’s important. And then what’s just coming up in December is a holiday home tour, which – we have four amazing homes in Highland Park and Preston Hollow that – again, ticket holders can come and see the architecture, but always hearing about the mission and hearing why it’s important.

In all of our events, we talk about a pledge that we ask our supporters to make, and that’s a pledge to not buy a commercial sex act and to tell people why you pledge not to do that. And we think it’s really important in our community not just to volunteer and support financially, but also really make that commitment that I’m not going to go to that club, and I’m not going to go to the brothel, and I’m not going to go online and buy that young girl; and I’m gonna tell my peers, and my friends, and my coworkers why I’m not doing that.

I’m not doing that because she was an abused girl and this is abuse and trauma for her, and it’s not just. And it’s a modern-day form of slavery, and it preys on the most vulnerable, and it’s the young girls. And so we ask everyone that we meet to make that pledge and to tell people why you’re doing that.