

From England's pews, a quiet abolitionist finds his voice on slavery

A collaboration between Catholic churches and police officers holds promise for British efforts to combat trafficking, and is being adopted in other countries. Part 3 in a series on solutions to freeing victims of labor trafficking around the globe.

By [Sara Miller Llana, Staff writer](#) November 9, 2015



Oli Scarff/AFP/Getty Images



Richard Clabaugh/Staff

Clitheroe, England — *This story was written to be viewed on the Monitor's long-form platform. [Click here to view that version.](#)*

When it comes to hunting down human traffickers, Detective Chief Inspector Sion Hall knows the ropes. If he sees a window sign offering cheap rents in cash, no questions asked, he follows up; when a new girl's photo appears on a prostitution website, he checks that she is not working against her will.

But ask him about his most effective new tool in the fight against modern slavery in East Lancashire and he cites an unusual weapon: Anthony Brown, a soft-spoken, retired Catholic churchgoer.

A series on human trafficking: [How to free Modern Slaves](#)

Mr. Brown has founded an organization in Our Lady of the Valley parish whose name is as plain as his manner: the Combating Human Trafficking Group. Its job is simple as well – to make locals understand that modern-day slaves inhabit their surroundings, and to turn these volunteers into eyes and ears for the police.

Britain has been quick to pass laws against trafficking, and dedicated resources to prosecute offenders and help victims – who could number as many as 13,000, according to officials. But first they need to find the slaves, who tend to lead lives below the radar of cops like Hall, often out of fear.

“We could wait here for the next five years for someone to call and say, ‘I’m a victim of trafficking,’” says Hall. “We’d get some, but not many... Human trafficking will never be resolved by the police or any government agency alone. It’s everybody’s problem.”

Hall and Brown, the cop and the pensioner, make an odd couple. But they came together by force of a higher alliance between the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) and London’s Metropolitan Police Service, or Met.



Pope Francis has spoken out frequently against human trafficking and said all nations have a moral imperative to end the practice. Alessandra Tarantino/AP

The basic idea of the Bakhita Initiative is that the church brings with it a global network of believers, a commitment to care, and often under-utilized buildings. It includes a safehouse, research center, and a slew of other collaborations between churches and law enforcement. For the police, it can provide more intelligence, more access to testimony, and ultimately more means to convict traffickers – which is notoriously challenging. “You bring those two things together and you have a really formidable force,” says Britain’s new Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner Kevin Hyland.

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Named after St. Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese woman enslaved and trafficked to Italy where she was freed and became a nun in 1896, the initiative is centralized in the heart of London. But in just 18 months it has spurred police-church initiatives from Nigeria to Poland. And it could ultimately have the most impact harnessing the power of single individuals who apply its principles – awareness/prevention, pastoral care, multiple partnerships – anywhere from Rome to the Ribble Valley, where Brown and Hall live.

As he kneels in the pews at his local church, Mr. Brown says his goal is clear: “We see ourselves as bottom up,” he says, “trying to do what [the Bakhita Initiative] is doing, at the local level.”

The 'golden hour' of brothel raids

Joining church and state together in the fight against trafficking can make for an uneasy relationship, with mistrust on both sides. In the UK, it began to take shape under Hyland, when he headed the Met’s trafficking unit. In 2012, he decided to take Catholic nuns who were already working with prostitutes in London on police raids of brothels. The sisters “were doing visits but the intelligence wasn’t getting into the police,” says Hyland. So traffickers operated with impunity, simply replacing rescued victims with new ones.

They each gained. The police helped the nuns realize that in order to lock up traffickers they needed victim testimony, especially in the “golden hour” after a raid when police have the best chance of shutting down an operation and identifying the traffickers.

Cecilia Taylor-Camara, a senior policy adviser in the migration and policy office at the CBCEW, says the sisters helped the police focus beyond criminalization, to see that women were potential trafficking victims. “The [sisters] said, ‘You know what? Look again,’” says Ms. Taylor-Camara.

Hyland’s work at the Met directly inspired one of the key elements of the Bakhita Initiative, the Santa Marta group, which brings together police chiefs and bishops from around the world. Already under their umbrella new alliances have been forged between bishops and authorities. Hyland recently returned from Nigeria’s Edo State, which is the prime source of all Nigerians trafficked for sexual exploitation, according to UN and Nigerian government statistics. He is now trying to help foster a link between the Catholic sisters there and local law enforcement, modeled after his work in London.

He says convictions in the UK remain too low. But in the past five years they’ve gone up. In 2013-14, there were 226 prosecutions involving human trafficking, double the 103 counted in 2010-2011.

Hidden in plain view

Human trafficking is not rife in the terraced housing of the old mill towns of East Lancashire, today teeming with immigrants. It’s even less common in the region’s picturesque villages, where sheep and dairy farms spread up and down the green hills and valleys.

But then there are cases like that of Jumoke, trafficked from Nigeria for the European sex trade, or Abena, a Ghanaian who escaped forced exploitation in a food shop in Manchester, an hour’s drive from Clitheroe. The two women, whose names are pseudonyms, are at a safe-house in the region run by the Medaille Trust, an anti-trafficking charity that runs seven such houses for victims nationally, including two in northern England.

On a recent morning the staff was preparing for a new resident, placing toiletries like shampoo and toothpaste next to her bed. Abena, dressed in a pink nightgown before getting ready for her new job as a bagger at a grocery store, says she was legally adopted by her aunt at age 16 with the promise of a top-rate education in Britain. Only when she arrived did she realize her aunt’s intent: She worked for six years, 13 hours daily, in her aunt’s store. “I never went to school,” she says, her eyes misting.

Jumoke says the plan to traffic her into Europe fell through at Heathrow Airport. While she feels safe, she says her family is not: Traffickers have called her mother and threatened her for the money they say her daughter owes.

These aren't the kinds of scenarios that Brown, the Catholic pensioner, comes across in his daily to-and-fro in Clitheroe, where he grew up and returned to after retiring from his job as an occupational psychologist in Leeds and Sheffield. But it was exactly the shock – that modern slavery happens everywhere, even here – that has turned him into the driving force in the area fighting for victims like Jumoke or Abena.



Anthony Brown with his wife Mary Brown who works with him on the Combating Human Trafficking Group. Sara Miller LLana/The Christian Science Monitor

He originally thought the best he had to offer was fundraising. He plays rhythm guitar in a local band that performs Irish folk ditties as well as Lancashire songs that either poke fun or eulogize local life, like the region's disused cotton mills, depending on their mood. In the fall of 2014 he produced a "Traffik Jam" concert to raise money for the cause; this is how he met Hall.

But when the Bakhita Initiative was created last year, Brown says, it hit him like a quiet revelation. "The police need us," he says.

A dogged man reaches out

Tall and bespectacled with a graying beard, Brown is shy and contemplative. Tucking into a Sunday night roast at his sister-in-law's house, he barely speaks, while at mass he cuts a discreet figure. But he can be dogged; he calls himself "pushy."

Last fall he began to network with anti-trafficking groups and to volunteer for the Medaille Trust. But he wanted to set up a group in his parish. Together with his wife, Mary Brown, he began talking to parishioners, who include a charity director, a local journalist, a teacher in a Catholic school, and, crucially, Hall, the detective. The parish priest then encouraged them to meet with the bishop of the Salford diocese.

The group's latest project is a poster and leaflet campaign to highlight common signs of potential trafficking. Brown cold-calls Catholic head teachers to gauge interest in information packets they've received. He gives talks on human trafficking. He has signed up 70-some people to his e-mail newsletter.

On a recent Sunday morning before mass, Brown's doorbell rings: a woman from the local Quakers picks up a flier for the Q&A they are organizing for Britain's Anti-Slavery week in October.

Mark Wiggin, chief executive of Caritas in the Diocese of Salford, says he felt some hesitation at first at joining Brown's circle. "A little group from Clitheroe, what can we contribute against an illegal international trafficking organization? It's like getting into the illegal arms business," he says. Indeed, their fliers can feel out place, vying on bulletin boards around Clitheroe for advertisements for afternoon tea and singles nights. "Isn't this a bit beyond us?" he wondered.

Hall has convinced them it's not.

A papal message to slavery victims

Pope Francis has firmly supported the police-church collaboration of the Santa Marta group. Its inaugural meeting took place in the papal residence in Rome, in April 2014, where he called trafficking a crime against humanity.

And he supported the work again on Oct. 30 when the group, which includes 170 representatives from 28 countries, held their third meeting outside Madrid.

"With God's help, and your collaboration, the indispensable service of the Santa Marta Group will be able to free the victims of new forms of slavery, rehabilitate them, along with the imprisoned and the marginalized, unmasking the traffickers and those who create this market," Francis said in a statement.



Anti-slavery activists rally outside Parliament on October 18, 2013 in London. Britain holds an annual anti-slavery day to draw attention to the issue. Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images

It's perhaps no coincidence that Britain is leading the effort. Its empire became the world's most powerful on the backs of slaves, traded between Africa and North and South America, which in turn fueled the plantation economies of the new world. It has a long legacy fighting it too: abolitionist William Wilberforce campaigned nearly 50 years until Britain banned slavery outright in 1833. However, its textile mills – dotted across valleys in Lancaster – continued to import cotton from southern US states until the Civil War and a Unionist blockade of southern ports cut off their supply.

For many, Britain's Modern Slavery Act of 2015, which came into force this summer, is considered groundbreaking legislation that builds upon that abolitionist legacy. It gives more powers to police and provides more victim support, as well as placing requirements on large businesses to disclose how they ensure their supply chain is "slavery free." It also created Hyland's position as the independent anti-slavery commissioner.

Convincing victims that they are victims

The new law is crucial for police, as it strengthens their hands in cases that are more difficult than drug busts, says Hall, the detective. With trafficking, lines blur between slavery and exploitation; in court it's often one person's word against another.

One of the biggest challenges, he says, is that many victims don't see themselves as such – whether because they've been brainwashed, have mental illness, or simply because, while they may be exploited, at least they have a roof over their heads.



Detective Chief Inspector Sion Hall stands in the terraced housing of Blackburn, an old mill town in East Lancashire where he heads the anti-trafficking unit. He says cheap rents - with no questions asked - make these housing units hotspots for sex traffickers. Sara Miller LLana/The Christian Science Monitor

On a recent day he drives to his office in the old mill town of Blackburn, pointing to a home where his team recently kicked down the door to rescue a Romanian sex worker after an online ad raised an alert. Many of the women listed on the website came from Romania, one of top countries of origin for trafficking into the UK. So the police began to dig and to gather evidence to arrest a suspected trafficker at his home in Blackburn. But when they went to the house, three months ago, the Romanian woman, who was there, began to defend him and call him her husband. It was only after Hall built a rapport that she told the truth.

The new law is intended to create as hostile an environment as possible for traffickers to operate, says Fiona Cunningham, a former adviser of the Home Secretary who worked on the 2015 act. "It's about making it harder for traffickers to go about their business, to make them think, it's too hard now," she says.

A national rise in trafficking referrals

Hall says Brown's group is essential to his anti-trafficking drive in East Lancashire. Given the challenges to root it out, "it's much easier to prevent it, to disrupt it," he says.

Across the country, awareness is growing of a crime whose slippery edges can be hard to grasp. The number of victims being identified is growing, by police and the public alike. There were 2,340 victims referred via a national system last year, up 34 percent from 2013. In 2009, the first year of the referral system, only 535 victims were counted. Of these referrals, more than four in ten were ultimately classified as trafficking victims.



Police stand guard in front of a property in London on Nov. 23, 2013, where three women enslaved for 30 years had been freed from their captors. Luke MacGregor/Reuters

Many believe the increase does not show an uptick in crime, but that it's coming out of the shadows. "Human trafficking happens on your doorstep," says Wendy Adams, a trainer for Stop The Traffik, an organization in the UK that trains communities to spot signs of modern-day slavery. "Likewise, the answer lies on your doorstep."

For Hall, the civic engagement is paying off. The police were able to rescue a Polish couple from a backyard shed this summer "where you wouldn't keep a dog," he says. The tip-off came from a municipal worker: A Polish woman, who was inquiring about her child in social services, looked nervous and underfed. She kept looking outside where a man, clearly not her husband, was waiting.

Radars up in Ribble Valley

The Combating Human Trafficking Group in Clitheroe has been in operation for less than a year, and so far they haven't led Hall directly to any cases. But their radars are up. One member alerted authorities at the Manchester airport after she saw two scantily dressed women in the bathroom, an older gentleman waiting for them outside. Authorities told her it turned out to be a traveling dance troupe.

Does it all feel a little futile to Brown? He nods. "Sometimes I've asked Sion Hall, are we actually achieving anything?" Brown says. "What he says to me is, 'if we can rescue one person [as a result of]... public intelligence there is a reason for this.'"

And since then they've drawn up a three-year plan that looks beyond the Ribble Valley. In Year Two they aim for other parishes in the diocese to establish similar anti-trafficking groups; in Year Three for other dioceses to look at theirs as a model. "We are going from the parish to deanery to diocese. We are going the other way than the Bakhita Initiative," Mr. Wiggin of Caritas says. "Maybe we'll meet up in the middle."

It seems likely they will. Hyland, the anti-slavery czar, says that they are now creating a national version of the Santa Marta group, linking bishops in the 22 dioceses around England and Wales with the various police constables.

Hyland hadn't heard of Brown's group in Clitheroe, but when he did, he says it's exactly in the spirit of the Bakhita Initiative.

“It doesn’t always end up with people being arrested ... or great big operations. But what it does seem to always end up with is vulnerable people being supported,” he says. “I think that this model is something that will actually start to be an antidote to the issue, provided we keep going forward.”

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