

I am the Reverend Jennifer Crist, a Lutheran pastor with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

I am also the mother of seven children, four of whom are daughters, ages twenty, eighteen, and twelve year old twins. Some of my children are from Guatemala, where I have established a non-profit ministry that focuses on the health and education of children from an orphanage and neighboring village.

I am what they call a second career pastor. My first degree was actually in neuroscience and anatomy from The Penn State University at the Hershey Medical Center. So, I am aware of what trauma does to the brains of children and youth, whose brains are not even fully developed, as they are experiencing trauma. These children and youth are certainly not capable of understanding or processing what sexual exploitation means for their bodies and their brains.

The vast majority of children we work in Guatemala have experienced extreme trauma, with 95% having been physically abused and 75% sexually abused. One of the programs we began many years ago is a sexual abuse prevention program using the curriculum designed by the PA Coalition Against Rape. Using this program, we work yearly with over one hundred children, bringing the message that their body is their own from the top of their head to the tip of their toes. In a largely patriarchal society, most girls do not hear this message, but rather the cultural message that their body is property of someone else.

I will never forget when one mother came to me in tears at the end of a week of programming telling me her daughter had talked to her about this message, that her body was her own. Her daughter told her that in school, she was being touched and taken aside by one of the men working there for his sexual pleasure. She had been told this is how you get good grades in school. Upon hearing the message that her body was her own, she wondered for the first time if maybe something was not right with how her body was being used.

This young girl was ten years old. I have four daughters. Maybe you have daughters and granddaughters too? While we would like to think we are an advanced society, vastly different from the ancient biblical world, we are not. And lest we think that these stories of exploitation are only from the international realm, they are not.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America publically stands against human trafficking and has documents published for a variety of contexts. We have several documents prepared for our congregations, for our youth, and even for businesses that we frequent as Lutherans. We also have a social message on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, where we publically declare, and I quote:

"All youth and children are gifts of God, dependent on parents and family for care and nurture and on society for protection as they grow into adulthood. Their sexual exploitation for profit reveals the demonic depth of the sex system....Our calling embraces all dimensions of life in society: personal character, family life, culture patterns, commerce, public policy, law and its

*enforcement, and social service and advocacy organizations. The sex system itself varies from place to place. People in diverse places of responsibility bring distinct gifts to fight it."*¹

As Lutherans, we believe that government has a God-given function to protect all persons, including children, from criminal acts through just, fairly enforced laws. In the case of sexually exploited minors, what is just is NOT to place these children in the criminal justice system, but rather to provide them with immediate and specialized services to begin the long process of healing from trauma.

As a holy Christian people of faith, our baptism calls us to bring about justice and peace in all the world. We respond out of our abundant faith as a people who are responsible for seeking wholeness where there is brokenness, light where there is darkness. Sexual exploitation of children is certainly a place where brokenness and darkness are present.

If you were in church yesterday, and I hope many of you were, you likely heard a reading from the book of Amos. Amos was a prophet, speaking God's words to a people who were not living out their faith in the world around them. They were perpetuating a system of injustice that was oppressing the vulnerable.

This particular passage from the book of Amos was also quoted in Martin Luther King Jr's famous "I have a dream" speech. This passage from chapter 5 of Amos reads:

²¹ *I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

²² *Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.*

²³ *Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*

²⁴ *But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

I am here today as a prophetic voice, to name injustice and the oppression of children and youth who are being sexually exploited. Even one case of sexual exploitation of a minor is one too many and completely unacceptable in our society. You and I are responsible to care for and protect the vulnerable in our society. Those who have ears to hear, listen, and then act.

I thank you who have already acted on behalf of our collective daughters and sons to say that there is no such thing as a child prostitute in Pennsylvania. I urge you to talk to your colleagues in the House to also act responsibly for these vulnerable of our society.

The founder of my denomination, Martin Luther, named injustice in his time, declaring: "Here I stand, I can do no other." I say to you today, "Here we must act together. We can do no other." Amen, let it be so!

¹ Editors, *A Message On Commercial Sexual Exploitation* (Chicago, Illinois: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2001), 6-7.