New Conquest
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Faculty traveled to Brazil to examine the squalid conditions of slave labor that contribute to the production of consumer goods for the U.S. market. Amidst the pain, suffering and sometimes perpetual cycle of slave labor, they found something else.

"While we were there, we saw something much more surprising: the triumph of hope," said Kelly Johnson, associate professor of religious studies.

They met the 39 families of Nova Conquista — New Conquest — a 3.5-square-mile tract of land named in honor of their victory against slavery and despair, and their conquest of a new place in the world for themselves.

With support from the Pastoral Land Commission of the Catholic Church, and despite skepticism from neighbors, they fought through the legal system to gain legal title to land.

They cleared the land by hand, turning the wood they cut into charcoal they then sold. They plan to expand production of charcoal, create a lake and stock it with fish, and acquire goats and more chickens, Johnson said.

The work is sometimes a reminder of a darker employment past, but one thing is different.

"This time, they are their own bosses," Johnson said.

The inhabitants of Nova Conquista may have won a battle, escaping the cycle of slave labor, settling their own land and having the freedom to forge their destinies. But there are more battles — helping others avoid the traps of slave labor.

"They take time to talk to others about what happened to them, so those who rely on migrant labor jobs will watch out for those who would make them slaves rather than employees," Johnson said.

That's important, Johnson said, but what may be more significant is that the residents of Nova Conquista give others hope.

"For those living in poverty, suffering the humiliation of forced labor, this 'new conquest' settlement is a sign a better life is possible. The struggle to change the system, to gain land for the landless is not quick or easy, but it is possible."

Johnson was among five Catholic Relief Services Scholars in Global Solidarity from the University of Dayton who spent 10 days in Brazil in June examining slave labor and trafficking and meeting with government and church officials to map strategies to combat the problem.

The University's scholars, who include faculty from religious studies, human rights, philosophy and sociology, joined other Scholars in Global Solidarity from St. John's University (N.Y.). The Scholars work under the umbrella of Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Church's official relief and humanitarian development arm that serves more than 100 million people in nearly 100 countries.

"As partners, we hope to help advocate for people trapped in slave labor and communicate to people in the United States," said Vince Miller, University of Dayton Gudorf Chair in Catholic Theology and Culture. "We also hope the trip has deepened our ability to explain these issues to our students."

One group headed to a region where the Catholic Church helps poor landowners defend farms threatened by large ranchers and logging operations. These are areas where slave labor contributes to the production of beef, leather and hardwood that end up in American homes, according to Miller. Another group visited a project that resettles trafficking victims. A third group talked with advocacy groups preparing to combat trafficking during the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics.

"We need to speak out on the behalf of the victims of trafficking and slave labor," Miller said. "We want to help people here see the 'real cost.' We so seldom see where the products we purchase come from. There is so much slave labor involved in goods we take for granted."
Johnson said her group found many people fall into slave labor simply looking for a better life. They fall prey to false promises and before long they're working seven days a week under the watch of armed guards, drinking from filthy pools of water and sleeping in nothing more than canvas tents.

"Migrant workers, desperate for work and often illiterate, are vulnerable to exploitation by those looking to enslave workers. The poverty of these workers and impunity of those who use them set the stage for disaster," Johnson said.

Nearly 46,000 people have been rescued from this horror, but some end up in the same trap again, she said, because the circumstances that led them there in the first place don't change, she said.

"Getting 'rescued' is of limited value if the only way to feed the family is to follow another recruiter, risking the same treatment again," she said. "Studies show 60 percent of people rescued from contemporary slavery say they had been in similar work conditions on other occasions and were released only when the seasonal labor ended. Seasonal slavery becomes a cycle for those with no alternative."

University of Dayton's Scholars in Global Solidarity are bringing back many lessons to their students, especially on how to better advocate for the most vulnerable among us. Like the settlers of Nova Conquista, Johnson also wants her students to know there's hope.

"I often speak to students in the U.S. who doubt anything can be done to change unjust economic structures," Johnson said. "They say sin is too pervasive for grace ever to break through, that the problems are too big and the systems too complex.

"The workers of Nova Conquista challenge those of us on the other end of globalization to be as tenacious in struggling for justice as they are."

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