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Tulips & Trafficking, 2018 Discovery Trip



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Reflections from Kate Ulmer, who traveled from Fargo (ND) to join the team of eight women in Amsterdam.

April 2018 saw several wonderful women participating in a Discovery Tour of Amsterdam. Our Global consultant for human trafficking, Rev. Dr. Luran Bethell, arranged our trip. My older brother and his family had lived in the Netherlands a while ago and I visited them several times. I dreamed of going back. Last fall, I received an email announcing the 2018 April trip. It didn't take me long for me to say "Yes, I'm going." and signed up. In looking at our schedule, I knew that a week in country would not be enough for me. I started planning a vacation to coincide with the trip. I arrived a week before the other participants. The following is comparison of my vacation and the Discovery tour

After arriving in Amsterdam, my list of museums I wanted to see was long. The Netherlands has more museums per square kilometer than anywhere else in the world. I walked a lot those days but with no Apple watch or Fitbit, did not realize how far. When the group was together, an Apple Watch told us several times that we had walked over 15,000 steps those days. One of the museums I visited was the Rijksmuseum, which is the Dutch national museum. I was one of the first 50 people in the building that morning. In several of the rooms, I was the only person there. I had plenty of time to gaze at the artwork and read the many descriptions of the artwork. A week later, the group of us attended Keukenhof Gardens. The seven million tulips, daffodils and hyacinths fill over 32 hectares and they were in full bloom. The Flower Parade was that day and over 60,000 people had entered the gardens. What a contrast!

I was able to spend three days in Amsterdam and found enough to do that I did not have to walk through the Red Light District as a tourist. There are so many other things to enjoy about the city that one can easily avoid the District. When the other women arrived, one of our goals was to learn more about the Red Light District. While walking through the District during the day, it had a carnival-like atmosphere. It seemed like the tour groups were saying - "Come see the bearded-lady" "See the three-legged man." These groups showed no compassion nor understanding of what is really going on. It seemed like the occupied windows were objects and not a person, not somebody's sister, daughter, etc. It was dehumanizing.

Using a 21" suitcase and a backpack for my trip, several people questioned how I would have enough clothes for two weeks. I managed fine. When visiting with the founders of Bright Fame, we heard the story of a sex worker who had been trafficked from Eastern Europe. She felt like a "dirty rag on the trash heap of life." Over time, she was shown Jesus' love and care and became to have self-respect. As her journey continued, one King's Day she found a beautiful wedding dress laying on a pile of trash. She brought it back to the center and tried it on. It was a perfect fit. She is now embracing her faith and claimed that she is Christ's bride.

Several years ago, I had the privilege to participate in a discovery trip to the Philippines. I was interested in seeing the comparison of prostitution in the two countries. While walking along the bars in Quezon City, the women had their children with them. In Amsterdam, though legal since 2000, we learned that there are very few Dutch women who work in prostitution. Some estimates report 50 percent of the women are Eastern European, 30 percent are from South America and the remaining 20 percent are from Western Europe, but a lot of them are from other countries as their country of entry into Europe is where they are

classified. Their families are back home. The statistics are an estimate as the Dutch government doesn't publish numbers. It was also estimated that anywhere from 4,000 to 8,000 women, men, transvestite or transgender people are involved in the trade of prostitution in Amsterdam. The minimum age for the country is 18 but the city of Amsterdam has raised the age to 21. They work an eight-hour shift and pay the appropriate rate for the window depending on the time of day. They have full health care benefits.

When we shared meals, we continued learning about the issues of human trafficking and prostitution. One day the mission group had lunch at Dignita, part of the Not-for-Sale Netherlands. Toss Heemskerk, the founder wanted to help women in shelters who had left the sex trade and give them a sense of community. The Dept. of Education approved their certificate programs: 1) food preparation, 2) housekeeping and 3) hospitality services.

The Dignita restaurant (motto "eat well, do good"), which opened a few years ago started making a profit within four months. They use part of the restaurant as a training site. The second restaurant opened two years ago and they recently acquired a third location where they will be moving the training classes and start catering. Toss believes all trauma is culturally based and work is healing. The women heal in the context of community and they have gotten on with their lives.

Another place we shared a meal was at Second Step, where we were treated to an English High Tea. The thrift store supports the programs of Scarlet Cord, which is the oldest outreach program in the Red Light District. Their philosophy comes from Joshua 2 and the story of Rahab. They have three activities: Prevention – going into schools and presenting information to the students; Fieldwork – pairs of volunteers meet with the women in the windows; and Social work – meeting with the women in the district and their homes. They recently started an online outreach presence. During their presentation lead by a social worker, she mentioned that she had been in Bangkok working with a similar organization. Imagine our surprise when she said "Night Light." We all explained, "That's us. That's one of our programs." The world is a small place.

One evening, we learned about Justice and Care, and met with one of the founders. The organization helps rescue girls and young women and provide legal advocacy to help prosecute their captors. They have many lawyers, social workers, administrators and other personnel in India. They have advisory committees located in India, the U.K. and members from all over the world.

When I was planning my vacation, several people told me I was brave to travel by myself. I had a plane ticket, hotels booked, train ticket in hand and a valid passport. Everything was planned. I wasn't brave. The brave one was the Iranian refugee who sought more in life and found God and Christianity. At his family home, the police came for him. His brother contacted a smuggler to get him out of Iran and leave with what he could carry. While crossing the Mediterranean, the rubber boat started to sink, he lost his backpack and passport to the sea. Arriving on a Greek Island, no one would help the refugees. He walked for 27 hours until his feet bled. He prayed "God, I can't do this. Please help me." By God's grace, a bus stopped and picked him up. He was transported to a refugee camp where they were all Muslims except him. Over the next several months, he was moved from camp to camp; country to country. He was never sure what was going to happen next. However, his faith in God never wavered. Eventually he arrived in the Netherlands. One day when at the airport, he heard God tell him to "stop here, tell the police." With his belief that God was leading him, he did. He was sent to a camp in Terrapel and was able to say without fear "I

am a Christian.” His journey got more complicated. As he tried to process his asylum papers, his translator was Muslim and his story was translated with a lot of errors. He has been denied political asylum twice. He is currently working with a church group to get his status updated. He has remained hopeful. He told us with deep convictions “I have no status in any country, but I have status with God!” He has a shelter in a Christian home and works as a massage therapist.

The highlight of the trip was traveling to Haarlem and visiting the Corrie ten Boom house. While waiting in the ten Boom living room, I admired the piano and the candles on both sides of the music stand. The only original ten Boom item in the living room was the mantel clock. Our guide gave us a story refresher and we proceed to Corrie’s room and the hiding place. There were originally six people hiding in that space for 47 hours (four Jews and two resistance fighters). We had five people in the hiding place and only for a short while with a whole in the wall. What courage they showed. What a testament to God’s love!



I am very glad that I combined the vacation with the discovery tour. The trip was exciting, enlightening, and heart-breaking. The women on the trip will become life-long friends as we shared this week and many experiences. When asked what we can do for the agencies and people we met, they answered “prayer.” Therefore, let us bathe them in prayer and God’s will be done.

