

Edinburgh petition to end human trafficking

Thousands of people in Edinburgh have signed a petition calling for an end to human trafficking, a practice commonly regarded as the equivalent of modern-day slavery.

The Stop the Traffik initiative has been backed by the Right Rev Dr Angus Morrison, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, who described the practice as a “great evil”.

The Rev Carol Ford of St Margaret’s Church in Edinburgh, a member of the Scottish Churches Anti-Human Trafficking Group, said many people were unaware that people trafficking happened in cities across Scotland.

More than 4,000 people signed the petition which calls on fashion retailers not to sell clothes made by people who have been forced into slave labour in countries like India.

The aim is to put an end to the practice and introduce a living wage, proper contracts and guaranteed freedom of movement.

Dr Morrison and Ms Ford canvassed for signatures during an initiative aimed at Festival goers over the last 5 days, which included the help of the United Nations Gift Box campaign. The UN scheme saw two large, brightly coloured walk-in boxes created to symbolise trafficking and placed outside St Andrew’s and St George’s West Church on George Street and the Pleasance.

The boxes show the people traffickers promise of a new and exciting life may not be what it first appears. Inside the box the walls are dark and adorned with information and harrowing

first-hand accounts and pictures from victims.

Dr Morrison said: "This is a wonderful initiative because human trafficking, in the form it takes in our world today, is a great evil.

"We need to be doing all that we can collaboratively to bring an end to this dreadful trade.

"The Church of Scotland can encourage all our people to sign this petition that is being promoted by the Edinburgh Presbytery and Salvation Army.

"We call on Britain's governments to do all that they can to encourage retailers to examine their sources very carefully. We hope people will like and share a short video we've created on the Church of Scotland website to help raise awareness. It's already been played more than a thousand times on Facebook since we posted it at the weekend."

Ms Ford said it was "fantastic" that so many people stopped to pledge their support.

"Older people are very concerned about trafficking but young people often do not need any persuasion to sign the petition," she added.

"It is clear there are people living in Edinburgh who do not realise that trafficking happens in Scotland – there is a lack of awareness about the local context of it.

"Sometimes sex workers are taken from one part of the country to another, particularly if traffickers have been found out.

"They have access to migrants in Calais in France where they are setting up camp and bringing them into Britain or countries close by."

Ms Ford said traffickers were often British citizens who had contacts in poor countries around the world who supplied them

with vulnerable people to exploit.

Ms Ford said she would be continuing to collect signatures and would be making the petition available at St Margaret's Church. Human trafficking – which sees people entrapped in enforced prostitution, domestic servitude, forced labour, criminal activities and surrogacy – is being discussed at an event being held at St John's Church on Princes Street, Edinburgh on August 28.

Another initiative has seen the Salvation Army join the Scottish Churches Anti-Human Trafficking Group to set up market stalls selling 'people' as commodities across Edinburgh during the festival. The dramatisation is based on the real life stories of victims.

Hazel Watson, convener of the Scottish Churches Anti-Human Trafficking Group, said: "All human beings have intrinsic value and have the right to live with dignity in freedom.

"This drama, shocking as it is itself, is a way of highlighting the reality of human trafficking that is far more shocking.

"We can all play our part in efforts to combat this horrendous crime." The two organisations have contributed to the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Bill, which is currently going through the Scottish Parliament.

It will create a specific offence of human trafficking for the first time as well as increase the maximum penalty for offenders to life imprisonment.