



A New Beginning

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The four young men nodded earnestly in the conference room as they listened to the instructions from their landlord. He encouraged them to call if there were any problems, and everyone made sure they exchanged phone numbers. Then the keys were handed over, and a joyous “yeeee” came from one of the men. It was a new beginning to a journey that had brought only trouble so far.

The four were recently recovered from a labor trafficking situation by our ministry partner UMOS, and their case is still under investigation. For their protection and to avoid interfering with the authorities, I can't share many of their details at this point. Their situation, however, follows a painfully familiar pattern. The four were recruited in Central America to come to the United States for agricultural work, with a proper visa. They were promised \$16/hour for a large job in a nearby state. It would be good-paying, temporary work to supplement their household incomes.

Nothing was as promised. They were transported to different states than what their visas allowed, immediately putting them in violation of their work program. They received half of the pay that had been promised, for entirely different work. Under state and federal law, people who are victims of labor trafficking have protections, because it's recognized that the recruiters or employers are the ones violating the law through fraud, force, or coercion. When workers agree to cooperate with authorities on the investigation and prosecution, they remain in the United States until the conclusion of the case and might be able to receive a work permit during that interval. Because cases can drag out for years, the choice to remain here and away from families can be a tough one to make. Not surprisingly, some will choose to return home and to try to forget the trauma of what happened. Others, like these four men, make the courageous decision to stay and participate in our justice system.

With the help of generous Presbyterians who responded to the urgent call for donated items, we moved furniture and household supplies into the new apartment this past weekend. Thank you, Milwaukee Presbytery, for responding so quickly! These young men repeated expressed their thanks to you as well.

The next several months will be difficult while they await continued presence work visas, but UMOS offers continuing support under federal grants and through donations. One man hopes to find work in his field as an industrial electrical engineer. Another wants to complete the remaining two years on his mechanical engineering degree. The others are willing to work in any capacity free from fraud, force, and coercion.

In Matthew 25, Jesus spoke of those who were naked and needed clothing. In that image, we see people who are vulnerable and unable to care for their basic needs. Victims of labor trafficking suffer those same vulnerabilities. At the hands of exploiters, they are unable to care for themselves and their families. As we explore our call under Matthew 25, I encourage you to consider the Presbytery Moderator's invitation to watch a [condensed version of UMOS' webinar](#) on labor trafficking and to let us know if you're willing to be part of a response team, as people are recovered. Thank you for offering a new beginning to exploited workers in our midst.