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Talitha Kum ambassadors in Montreal take part in the activity "Agissons enSable," using colourful sand as a symbol of the vulnerable population at risk of falling between the cracks (Courtesy of IsaBelle Couillard)



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February 6, 2025

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In July 2023, Sr. IsaBelle Couillard mobilized a group of youth ambassadors for Talitha Kum's network in Montreal. Together, they have been actively engaged in breaking the silence on human trafficking and raising collective awareness.

In their first year of activity, the youth were particularly mobilized around the issue of human trafficking as it affects migrant farmworkers in the Canadian province of Quebec. The ambassadors are aged 18-35 and come from different parishes and faith backgrounds.

"I thought it was important to mobilize these young adults so that their faith would be accompanied by a social commitment to fulfill the Gospel's call for our suffering brothers and sisters, " Couillard told Global Sisters Report.

Couillard has been part of the Sisters of Charity of Montreal since 1990. Also known as the "Grey Sisters," their community was founded in 1737 by St. Marguerite d'Youville and was dedicated to helping the poor, the sick and the marginalized.



Sr. IsaBelle Couillard (Courtesy of Talitha Kum)

For over a decade, Couillard worked with a nonprofit supporting the homeless at Accueil Bonneau. She is currently the president of CATHII (an acronym for the name in French meaning Action Committee against Domestic and International Human Trafficking) and became Talitha Kum's regional representative in North America in 2023.

The Talitha Kum network is an umbrella for the work of nuns, priests, brothers and lay partners. It is present on five continents in 60 intercongregational networks in 107 countries according to its annual report from 2023. The network reaches 753,392 people worldwide with direct aid, awareness-raising and advocacy.

"I act as a kind of liaison between the international organization, to keep it informed of the reality of the issues and the emergence of new trends in human trafficking in Canada and the United States," Couillard told GSR.

The Talitha Kum Youth Ambassadors project began in September 2021 in Asia. It was started by Maryknoll Sr. Abby Avelino, the current international coordinator of Talitha Kum.

"We initiated the training with 26 young people in Asia in 2021, at the same time as our network in Jordan. So, right now, hundreds of trained young people globally are protagonists in raising awareness among their peers," said Avelino.

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While the initiative is more recent in Canada, the ambassadors in Quebec have already contributed greatly in their first year through various public actions.

In April 2024, CATHII members and the youth ambassadors in Quebec organized the screening of "Richelieu," a movie that depicts the daily challenges faced by migrant workers from Guatemala. Almost 40 participants attended the screening, which was followed by a conversation with the movie's writer and director, Pier-Philippe Chevigny.

"This conversation was important because it validated the reality of the problems presented and showed us the importance of listening and in-depth research in the fight against human trafficking," Lismabel Sanchez Lopez, a Talitha Kum youth ambassador, told GSR.

A collection of signatures for two letters took place by the ambassadors. One in favor of a provincial plan to combat human trafficking and a second to abolish closed work permits, which tie a worker to a specific employer. The latter was addressed to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the minister of immigration, refugees and of immigration, refugees and citizenship, Marc Miller.



Sr. IsaBelle Couillard with some of the Talitha Kum youth ambassadors from Montreal, Quebec, Canada, during a public action at Métro St-Michel known as "Agissons enSable" in June 2024. From left: Catherine-Laure Juste, Lismabel Sanchez Lopez, IsaBelle Couillard, Sofia-Elena Ranke-Farro and Rhama Desjarlais. (Courtesy of IsaBelle Couillard)

"We asked Canadian citizens to sign the card calling for the abolition of the closed work permit and the introduction of an open work permit that would allow temporary foreign workers to change employers while they are in Canada," Catherine-Laure Juste, a Talitha Kum youth ambassador, told GSR.

Couillard explained, "The closed permit that currently exists in Canada means that if a farmer offers poor working conditions that do not respect labor standards and the occupational health and safety program, the migrant farmworker is forced to stay with this employer or return to his or her country. Often, however, they have gone deep into debt to obtain a work permit, and they need the money to support their

families, who are in a vulnerable situation in their own country."

In May 2024, Talitha Kum Youth Ambassadors participated in a project called "Agissons enSable" (inspired by the Red Sand project), during an intergenerational morning at Saint-Bonaventure Parish in Montreal. More than 100 people attended the first event, which was repeated in June, with a total of 260 attendees.

Participants put red sand in the cracks of the pavements and the street near a metro station in Montreal, which is a transportation hub where many undocumented migrants and temporary migrants gather. They work illegally in conditions that do not comply with Quebec's labor standards and occupational health and safety. The aim was to highlight the existence of a vulnerable population at risk of falling between the cracks of the social safety net.



Talitha Kum ambassadors in Montreal take part in the activity "Agissons enSable." (Courtesy of IsaBelle Couillard)

Although there is no official formation in Quebec, the ambassadors are well-trained under Couillard's leadership through individual meetings, video conferences and reading materials.

Among key figures, the ambassadors have met with Michel Pilon, former director and now legal counsel of the network for migrant farmworkers in Quebec, known in French as "Réseau d'aide aux travailleuses et travailleurs migrants agricoles du Québec" (RATTMAQ).

Charity Sr. Aurore Larkin, Couillard's superior, spoke highly of her work with the youth, particularly their formation.

"She is very involved in her parish and, by word of mouth, many youth have committed themselves. I think she spent at least two or three weekends to train them," said Larkin, who has known Couillard for more than 35 years.

Some ambassadors are also trained through the CATHII Project — University at the United Nation's training course to prepare them to attend the U.N. Commission on the Status of Women in New York. Others had the opportunity to meet the U.N.'s special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery. One ambassador received international training in Rome in February 2024 and another was a delegate for the special assembly of Talitha Kum with 160 regular delegates from all over the world in Rome in May 2024.



Talitha Kum ambassadors reunite from different countries in Rome in May 2024. (Courtesy of CATHII/Renaude Grégoire)

"I had the opportunity to take part in the week of the International Day of Prayer and Awareness against Human Trafficking, which was held in Rome at the beginning of February this year," Juste said. "The activity was a great opportunity to meet other members of the international network involved in the fight against human trafficking, to exchange ideas, and to create links. I returned to Canada more inspired and motivated."

Additionally, this year another ambassador will begin a one-year Talitha Kum program on leadership in human trafficking cases, offered online with intensive in-person training in Peru.

The sister's impact on the youth in Quebec in their first year of activity is made clear by the way they speak of her and the network.

"My first year with Talitha Kum was a real revelation," Lopez said. "Before joining, I was unaware of the extent of human trafficking in Quebec. Thanks to Sister IsaBelle, I discovered this shocking reality and immediately wanted to get involved."

The feeling of recognition is mutual for the sister.

"I am deeply touched by their commitment, despite the fact that they are at an age when their university studies or the start of their professional lives demand a lot of their time and energy," said Couillard.