

## **Being a Keeper of the Light** **A Message for Human Trafficking Awareness Day**

*By Barbara Anderson*

Have you ever been to the ocean on a gray, cold, foggy, and misty day? The water is cold, the waves are choppy, and it isn't the warm and inviting place it can be in the middle of summer. The ocean can be an angry place and during a storm your best bet is to be on dry land instead of being out in the middle of the angry waters.

A beam of light from a lighthouse must have been a glorious sight to sailors out in the middle of the dark seas. Years ago, lighthouses served two principle functions. They provided seaman with a fixed point of reference for their ability to navigate in the dark. Lighthouses also warned of rocks, land, and danger. They were guides in the harbor and a light in the storm. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lighthouses had keepers who lived in the lighthouses tending to the duties and shining a light into darkness. Lighthouse keepers were considered heroes as they saved lives. The keepers of the light weren't just men, they were women also.

Abbie Burgess Grant served as Assistant Keeper at Matinicus Rock Light, in a desolate island, fifteen miles off the coast of Maine from 1854 to 1875. Abbie was seventeen years old when she began to fill the lanterns atop the twin towers with oil, trim the wicks, and clean the lenses. This was not an easy job. Her father, who was the Keeper, soon felt comfortable leaving Abbie in charge for several days at a time while he journeyed to the mainland for supplies.

One time when he was on a trip, a major storm—one of the largest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—hit Matinicus Rock. The storm raged for about a month as Abbie independently tended to the lights, continuing to shine light into the darkness no matter how dangerous it was for her to keep those lanterns burning. Through the efforts of dutiful and brave lighthouse keepers like Abbie Burgess, countless lives have been saved and lighthouses have become beacons of light throughout the world.

Like a lighthouse, God is our light in a dark and violent world and he saves us daily through life's temptations and struggles. In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus says that, "*We are the light of the world.*" What does this mean? As Christians representing the love of Christ, we are to bring light into this dark and violent world. We are the "Keepers of the Light."

Our actions will either cause us to be lighthouse beacons, glowing and full of energy, or we can be a burnt-out light bulb. Which would you rather be? Now, there are certainly times in our lives when we are down and feeling like the burnt-out light bulb. But to renew ourselves we have the Bible, worship, Christian fellowship, and prayer. These are vital for us to continually connect with Christ who is our light source, enabling us to continue to be "Keepers of the Light" in our community. Where is our community? Our community can be many places—it could be our home, workplace, school or wherever God call us to be.

We are "Keepers of the Light" in our community, not only as individuals but as a church. We shine by our actions to our neighbors in this community. Are we doing our job? We are the city on a hill that can't be hidden and as the beacon of light in the community, we need to shine 365 days a year. As a Christian community we ..... (*speaker can share the different local ministries the church is involved in.....and their giving to missions so they can shine around the world*). We are the "Keepers of the Light" and we need to continue to tend to the light all year around—not just when it is convenient or comfortable for us. Sometimes we need to come out of our comfort zones to be the beacon God has called us to be in our community. God has shown us there is darkness all around and, as Christians, we need to shine the light.

This brings us to a dark and serious issue that not only affects those across the waters, it affects us here in the United States—even right here in our own community. This issue is so dark and violent that it needs all of us working together; the issue is human trafficking, modern-day slavery.

Victims of human trafficking are subjected to force, fraud, or coercion, for the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced labor. Victims are young children, teenagers, men and women. Approximately 600,000-800,000 victims annually are trafficked across international borders worldwide. Between 15,000 and 18,000 of these victims are trafficked in to the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of State. The United States is the number one country of destination for trafficked victims. What has happened to us being the land of the free and the brave, a land of opportunity? Opportunity for traffickers! Did you know that trafficking generates \$9.5 billion dollars in revenue each year? It is second only to drug trafficking in international crime.

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These statistics do not even represent the trafficking that happens within our own U.S. borders. A child goes missing every 40 seconds in the United States. That is more than 2,000 children a day and more than 800,000 every year. Another estimated 500,000 disappear without ever being reported. For most, these children are never found. What happens to them? Think about it. Traffickers are slick and crafty. They prey on "at risk" teens and runaways. One out of every three teenagers who runs away from home will be exploited and lured into prostitution within 48 hours of leaving home. The stories and statistics on this issue keep getting darker and darker. Where is the light shining on this issue? Where is the light rescuing the victims?

As "Keepers of the Light," what are we going to do about it? The good thing is we are not alone. God is our power source and as Christians, we need to individually and collectively work together on shining our lights on this issue. We need to get our entire community involved and the beacon of light will continue to become stronger and stronger.

This is why January 11<sup>th</sup> is such an important day. It is an opportunity not only to bring awareness and shine our light in the community but it is also an opportunity to remember the victims, especially those still out there. They need to know there is a light of hope and that, through Christ, the light will come to them.

Over \$428,000 has been raised through the American Baptist Women's Ministries national mission project, "Break the Chains: Slavery in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." Through Break the Chains grants, awareness opportunities are being realized, victims are being reached, women are learning skills so they can economically support themselves and families, lives are being changed, and the chains of bondage are being broken one link at a time.

Remember, you are a light keeper and we need to let our lights shine in our community. We are never too old or too young to be a keeper of the light. Abbie Burgess was just seventeen years old when she accepted the responsibility of being a "Keeper of the Light." What about you?

The darkness in this world is not going away and human trafficking continues to grow, but our power source is stronger than any darkness on this earth. We need to keep the beacon of light shining on the darkness. Just as a lighthouse shines the light for ships in danger, we are a light of hope to victims that are still in bondage.

Remember, Christ said, "*You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men...*" Christ is our light and we are called to be "Keepers of the Light." We are to shine our light in our community and beyond.

*Barbara Anderson is president of American Baptist Women's Ministries and a passionate abolitionist.*

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