

## THE BEGINNING

A letter from our founder

It was October of 2007 that I stepped off the plane in Denver with appreciation in my heart to be safely back home. The trip home had taken twenty eight hours. I had no idea how many miles were covered, that was just geography! All I knew was that I had covered a lot of ground – personally, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. We had just returned home from a week in India, meeting rescued women and children – former victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

It wasn't that long ago that I was one of many people who thought slavery in the world was a thing of the past. Hadn't the slave trade in England been brought to a close through the efforts of William Wilberforce? Hadn't American slavery ended with the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1865?

Three years ago I randomly picked up a magazine and came across an article on slavery in the Sahara. I was appalled. Could slavery still exist today? I went to my computer and Googled human trafficking. I couldn't believe what appeared. Site after site revealed staggering statistics, unbearable suffering. The following is just a beginning of what I learned:

There are an estimated 27 million trafficking victims in the world today.

- The Salvation Army

After drug dealing, trafficking of humans is tied with arms dealing as the second largest criminal industry in the world, **and is the fastest growing.**

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Each year, **more than two million children** are exploited in the global commercial **sex trade.**

- U.S. Department of Trafficking In Persons Report 2007

On and on it went ... I was sick.

It was at that point that I heard the still small voice of God whisper, "Bonnie, you can help do something about this".

My reply was, "No way, it's too big, too huge. What in the world could I ever do about any of this?"

And God's response was, "Don't think about how small you are, think about how big I am."

"But God," I continued, "even if I could help one of those women or girls, what is that in the face of such overwhelming numbers?"

And again, I felt God patiently and gently answer, "To that ONE, it is everything."

My life changed at that moment. And the U Count Campaign was birthed.

Basing the campaign on Jeremiah 29:11, we believe every life counts and that God has a plan for good, hope and a future for every person on this big planet. We believe that we are part of His plan to bring that hope to those who cannot stand for themselves, and to cry out on behalf of those who have no voice.

The campaign was launched at our church (Timberline Church in Fort Collins, Colorado). We made plans to host a Human Trafficking Awareness Conference and partnered with Project Rescue, a multi-dimensional rescue ministry to trafficking victims and their children. Through Project Rescue's Homes of Hope, women and girls are aided mentally, emotionally, and spiritually on their new path toward healing and recovery. We agreed to provide one of these homes in Calcutta, India.

And then my husband, another church staff member and I boarded a plane and went to India.

Even though I grew up in a third world country and have traveled extensively, nothing could have prepared me for our trip. From the moment we landed in Calcutta, I was gripped with raw emotion throughout every experience. We visited Project Rescue's Homes of Hope for daughters of prostitutes. These little girls, had they not been rescued, would have faced being marketed themselves, usually at nine years of age. Some had not been rescued soon enough. These little girls, with radiant smiles, took us by the hand to proudly show us their bunk beds, these whose only former personal space had been the space under their working mother's beds.

We went to Homes of Hope for rescued prostitutes, where the women told us heart-shattering stories of parents selling them into the sex industry when they were little girls, some as young as seven years old.

We visited vocational training centers where former prostitutes are taught new trades. They were so proud of their work!

We served communion to, and prayed for, women at a red light district church in Bombay. Women still slave-owned, unable to leave the brothels, but able to escape their living hell for a brief two hours in order to come worship Jesus, before returning to their lives of imprisonment. Their bodies weren't free, but their hearts were.

I am home now, but forever changed. I had read the stories about these victims and their children before I went; now I have touched them. Slavery is real. I found out that just beyond the thin veil of my own comfortable world, there lies a world of anguish and despair, where a market in human flesh thrives. Not just across the ocean, but down the road, as well. And I intend to do something about it.

I now have a wonderful team of compassionate, committed men and women who have each said, "I can count for someone else, I can help make a difference". Join us as we raise our voices and say, "NO MORE!" Together we can help change the lives of countless victims of sexual slavery. U COUNT!

*Bonnie Northrop*

Founder

U COUNT Campaign