

## **The Signature of Young Life**

*(Adapted from articles by Neil Atkinson, Dick Langford and various other Young Life veterans)*

Contact work is the foundational principle behind Young Life's ability to communicate the Gospel to disinterested teens. It is the platform from which uncommitted adolescents can experience the Gospel. Contact and Young Life go together like a hand in a glove.

Yet for both experienced and new staff alike, contact work can be a difficult, even frightening experience. It is a term that is used handily, but many are not quite sure what it means, or know conclusively that they are doing an effective job of it.

Contact work builds a bridge of unconditional friendship that often stretches from a concerned adult to an "I couldn't care-less" adolescent. It is the movement of an individual into another's life for the purpose of bringing an awareness of God's love.

Unfortunately, many avoid doing contact work, saying, "I don't have the time," "That's not my gift," "I don't relate as well at the school as I do at club," "Let's just concentrate on making club great," "We'll have Campaigners do it -if each Campaigner would reach just one person." These excuses ultimately lead in the wrong direction. Club attendance either declines or, worse, becomes a youth group filled with evangelised teens who are looking for something more attractive than their local church.

Contact work is the beautiful gift God gave to Jim Rayburn and passed on to the rest of us who have been called to be a part of Young Life. It is what has made Young Life unique and has served as a model for several other ministries. Developing relationships with adolescents in their world is a key element of Young Life.

### **What is contact ministry?**

The name contact work does not seem to be a fitting title for the job we are going to discuss. Actually, it is Christian leadership, and every minute we spend in this work we spend as Christian leaders. Paul set the norm for our contact work in 1 Thessalonians 1:5b-6 (The Message), "You paid careful attention to the way we lived among you, and determined to live that way yourselves. In imitating us, you imitated the Master." We intend to lead young people to the place of following Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour.

### **What is the aim of contact ministry?**

The ultimate aim is to lead each young person to the Lord Jesus Christ. The intermediate steps in this plan are:

- Winning the right to be heard.
- Building a bridge of friendship and trust.
- Identifying with people where they are.

- Understanding and penetrating a culture. Demonstrating Christ's love for people.
- Active listening.
- Being the instrument God can use in another life.

Ideally, we go to young people for the same reason that Christ came to humanity: to reveal God to them with no strings attached. To love them in order to get an opportunity to preach to them is a string. We should love them because they need love, because God loves them and wants to love them through us. This concept is one we may have to grow into, but it is included in the idea that with Christ in us the incarnation is still in process in the world- today.

Contact work reminds us of our dependence upon Jesus Christ. If it weren't for Him, we would stay in some comfortable setting with friends our own age. But Christ says go and we go in His strength, with His blessing. "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you," John 20:21.

"Jesus will not allow true religion to exist in comfortable little circles of its own. The new quality of life is love in action, and that may mean coping at firsthand with the difficult, the messy, and the unpleasant." JB. Phillips

### **Personal preparation**

1. Our walk with the Lord is paramount. A close relationship with Christ and with His people is essential so that when we are with young people our actions, words and attitudes will be His.
2. A growing spiritual understanding of what it means to go to a person who is without, such as Jim Rayburn envisioned, as God taught him:
  - Walk in wisdom toward them that are without.
  - Have a good rapport.
  - Judge not.
  - Walk honestly.
  - Walk in love.

Acceptance by young people depends primarily upon our love for them and our ability to communicate this love non-verbally and verbally. But physical appearance and health should be carefully observed. First impressions are often formed by physical appearance. Leaders do not have to conform to teenage styles, but rather should observe the styles of their own age group.

### **Neighbourhood and School Research**

1. Get to know the school and community in which you will work.
  - Size of school.
  - Intensity of school spirit.
  - Economic, social and racial strata within the school.

- See who the school leaders are. Read the school paper or yearbook, and be sensitive to changing or new areas – positive or negative -where leaders are involved.
2. Learn as many names as possible. *Keep a list.*
- Follow the athletic programs in the local papers.
  - Check to see who on the faculty might be sympathetic to Young Life.
  - Learn any special ground rules for visitors on the campus.
  - Get the school calendar of events and activities.
  - Find out what other clubs are operating, especially other Christian organisations like Scripture Union and Youth Dimensions. Meet with them to determine if there is a need for Young Life as an additional ministry.
  - Be aware of any local high school customs or local slang words and their meanings.
  - Invite local congregations and individual Christian people to begin praying for specific students. And by all means, have your own prayer strategy!
3. Public relations contacts.
- Make sure local law enforcement agencies know of your work (local Police).
  - Call on school administrators with staff and local committee members or adult friends. Be positive and open to them. We are there to give information, not to seek their endorsement. Answer their questions concerning purpose, support, endorsement, church relations, program, and personnel.
  - Find out what other agencies and churches in the community are at work with young people. Get to know and pray with the leadership of these groups if possible.
  - Carefully plan to meet the parents of the students whose friendship you make in the early stages of club development, explaining the program and answering questions. Also, check out your own attitudes toward parents. Are these open? Respectful?
  - By showing them the proper respect, seek to get to know school officials, coaches and sponsors as friends so they understand why you are frequently there.

### **Guiding thoughts**

1. Keep clearly in mind that our goal is that every young person should have the opportunity to see and hear of God's love for him/her in Christ through what we do and say.
2. We must be aware of influential teens within different groupings. If we touch these students, we may have the potential of touching others. If we ignore them, we may automatically ignore many who would have been influenced by them.

The key teen concept was based on a sound theological principle. It also has been the target of much criticism over the years. Our call first and foremost is to every young person and we must use whatever strategy possible to reach every teen for Christ. In some schools, the teens who traditionally would have been Young Life key teens are actually the objects of ridicule and scorn. We should love teens unconditionally and offer Christ to all.

3. Most important of all, we must seek to be led of the Holy Spirit. The Lord will often lead us to people who do not seem to be key teens. Many times these will turn out to be the real disciples.

4. You are representing Christ before teens; therefore, it is essential that you are not always with the socially "in" crowd. To spend quality time with all sorts of young people and groups is good. This example is worth a thousand words at club. Your treatment of the "least of these" will prove who you really are.

5. Adult volunteers who come to club but do not do contact work are not Young Life leaders. They might be "club specialists," but the required behaviour to be a Young Life leader is *contact work*.

