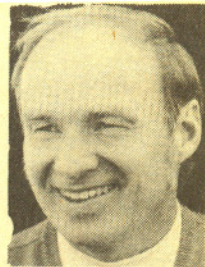


# Perspective



By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

The church bulletin board carried the intriguing slogan, "There are no strangers in our congregation — only friends we have not yet met."

That Sunday morning the minister put aside his usual cold, formal practice of "welcoming the visitors," and asked the normally reserved congregation to play fruit-basket-turnover.

"I want you people to get up out of your pews and go speak to someone you don't know. Okay," he said, looking at his watch, "you have five minutes. Go to it."

The shocked people looked at one another in horror. Church, to them, was a place to put your body when you didn't want your mind to think. A place to be seen (oh, yes, certainly to be seen) but not heard. Now their spiritual leader was telling them to get involved. Some were angry. Others terrified. All were uncomfortable.

Slowly, though, they rose from their pews. Timidly at first, then with increasing enthusiasm, they began to speak to one another. And in the process they made a great discovery. They actually liked being friendly. In fact, they liked it so much it took the pastor 15 minutes to get them back in their seats. People spoke to people. They inquired about children. And offered to help with problems. One man even shook hands with an associate on a long-pending business deal. And a daddy put his arm around his son. It was religion at its best.

I was thinking about this a couple of weeks ago when I spoke at the local Rotary Club. During the introductions, the emcee asked the Rotarians to introduce their guests. As each visitor stood he was welcomed by a chorus of hearty shouts "Hi, Charlie!" "Hi, Abraham!" None of that formal Dr. Jones and Mr. Goldstein business, just Charlie and Abe.

All this was accompanied by a lot of laughing and

shouting. It bothered me at first, especially since the reserved newspaper editor I was sitting beside was hollering along with all the others. But by the time the introductions were over, I was joining in the chorus of greetings, laughing and shouting at my new friends. "Hi, Fred!"

I left the Rotary meeting thinking if Christians were only half as friendly as Rotarians, a lot of things would probably be different in our country.

Despite the claim of sociologists that people like to be anonymous, I believe men and women yearn to be recognized as brothers and sisters. We like to be loved, to belong to a family.

Last week I flew up to Louisville for an interview. The woman I had come to see insisted I meet her priest at St. Boniface Catholic Church, Fr. Decklan Thomas. "He's read some of your stuff and would love to meet you."

I stood in the parking lot while she dashed into the huge, fortress-type building. Moments later she was out, followed by a black-robed Franciscan priest. All kinds of thoughts ran through my Baptist head. How do you greet a priest? Do you kneel? Cross yourself (I never could remember whether it was left to right, or right to left). Kiss his ring? I settled for sticking out my hand.

"Come on," the burly priest laughed, brushing aside my hand. "We're brothers, Jamie." And with that he threw his arms around me, engulfing me in his robe.

Suddenly the barriers were down. No longer was I protestant and he Catholic. No longer strangers. We were just brothers who had never met.

Love always brings down barriers. And that's the way it's supposed to be.

