

the last word



Jamie Buckingham

THE BULLETIN BOARD in front of the gray stone church was changed every week. This week the slogan read: "There are no strangers in our congregation, only friends we have not yet met." The Sunday morning worshippers glanced at it as they entered the building. "How nice," they smiled to themselves, little realizing they were about to be asked to put it into practice.

That morning the minister put aside his usual cold, formal procedure of welcoming the visitors. Instead he asked his normally reserved congregation to play fruit-basket-turn-over.

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

The shocked people looked at one another in horror. They knew something had happened to their minister, but they never dreamed he would dare try to infect them with his new enthusiasm. 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 to their seats. People spoke to people. They inquired about children. 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 last week when I spoke to the Rotary Club in my home town of Vero Beach, Florida. During the introductions the MC 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 newspaper editor at my elbow, a reserved Presbyterian, 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 be hugged, to be accepted as members of the family of God.

Yesterday I flew up to Louisville for an interview. Ann Gunther, the woman I had come to interview about her healing from mysthenia gravis, insisted I stop by St. Boniface Catholic Church to meet 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 robes.

Suddenly the barriers were down and 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.