

CHRIST · CONVERSATION · COFFEE

"What's the use of going to church? I went once, and the parson guy out front sang out like he was in pain, and why did everybody keep on standing up and sitting down, and it was like a stupid sort of crazy dream."

Someone who has had only one experience of a church service is likely to talk about it rather critically - especially if he is an uninhibited youth who derides everything he can't understand. And there is a lot that he wouldn't understand in a church service.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of boys and girls who have concluded that church and religion may be O.K. for Grandma but are simply a great big zero on the modern scene, are experiencing something new: at Jacob's Ladder Coffee Lounge, in Gawler Place, Adelaide, they are meeting Christianity in action. In an atmosphere of warmth and friendship, many of them are hearing for the first time that Christ is more than a swear word.

BRIEF HISTORY

"A coffee-lounge as a mission endeavour? Use it to attract the young people of Adelaide and preach Christ to them? And staff it with volunteer workers? Get your feet back on the ground—it'll never work!"

Jacob's Ladder came about as a result of a far-sighted and bold decision of faith in 1970 by the South Metropolitan Zone of the Lutheran Youth of South Australia - namely, to establish a coffee-lounge as a means of bringing the Gospel to the youth of Adelaide.

Strong support by the Dorian Society¹ and the co-operation of the North Metropolitan Zone of LYSA enabled this decision to be carried out. With the aim of providing a reasonably-priced coffee-lounge service in a friendly atmosphere conducive to conversation, Jacob's Ladder opened quietly in October, 1970. There was deliberately no publicity outside the metropolitan Youth Fellowships, and the patrons in the early weeks were therefore almost all young Lutherans; during this period the volunteer staff (drawn from the Fellowships) were able to obtain painless experience in the business of operating a coffee-lounge.

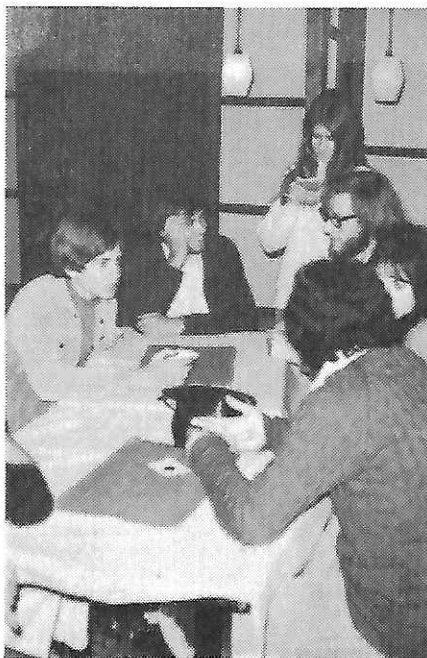
THE CUSTOMERS

"This is the friendliest place in Adelaide. We arrived from Melbourne two weeks ago and have found warmth that we haven't found anywhere else. The waitress actually smiled and talked to us!"

The word soon spread, and now there is no shortage of customers. They cover a wide range of spiritual understanding. A few have a deep faith in Jesus as their Saviour; some have a casual knowledge of the Bible but have never come to know Jesus; there are many more whose knowledge is virtually nil.

Many are youngsters searching for meaning in life. Some of them look for the satisfaction of their needs in their groups; some are lonely; some have stolen or used drugs and been in trouble with the police; many of them have problems with home, school, or society; most are willing to talk and are responsive to real friendship - Jacob's Ladder is where they get it.

What other endeavour associated with the Church in Australia offers such an opportunity to explain Jesus Christ to so many boys and girls prepared to listen, discuss and question? Making the most of this opportunity is a challenge which Jacob's Ladder has no intention of refusing.



Jenny takes an order.

ROUGH AND TOUGH

"I bashed a kid once—he swore at me, so I laid into him and grabbed his money. Then me and my mate tried robbing a man one night, but he knocked us both out with his stick and got the cops."

Not all the customers are prepared to listen when Christ is brought into the conversation. Some are rough and tough, always ready to scoff. Often they come from broken homes or homes where there is no training whatsoever in Christian truths. Often, they will lack even the elementary training in social behaviour that we respectable church-goers take for granted and tend to deride others for not possessing. As these children grow to teenage they naturally become confused when confronted by the complex demands of society; they have neither a sound early training nor wise parents to help resolve their confusion.

No wonder they sometimes run foul of the law; no wonder, when the cold, clinical process of the courts finds them guilty and punishes them in a cold, clinical way, they begin to resent the law and all that it stands for and all who uphold it.

Jacob's Ladder is reaching out to these youngsters - youngsters whose main interests seem to be sex, cars, and getting away with as much as they can - youngsters who talk tough and often act tough - boys and girls who can't understand, and don't quite believe, that the staff of Jacob's Ladder work for no pay, simply to serve others.



God's children.

ATTITUDES

"I'm not letting my daughter work at Jacob's Ladder any more. The wrong sort of people are going there."

These boys and girls are normally friendly and open, but they detest hypocrisy and humbug; they see people playing a game called "church" and they call it phoney.

They have the same basic needs as everyone - the need for love and a purpose in life. When they can't find these things, they protect themselves with a shell moulded in sensual pleasures and material goods and cemented by self-interest.

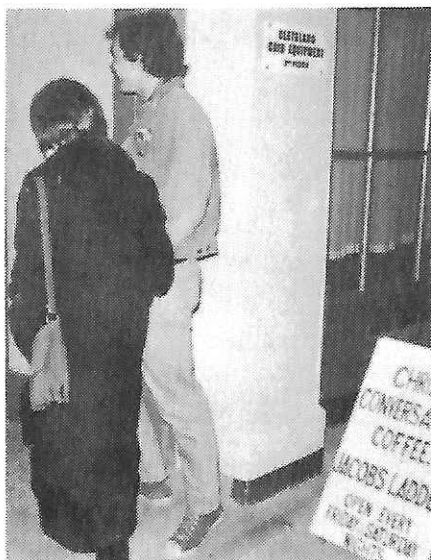
"Who's Jesus Christ anyway? Is he your God? You can't prove to me that there is a God. Marriage is old-fashioned and stupid. Me, I'm going to get my bit wherever I can. What's this jazz about sin? I don't sin; anyway I'm as good as you hypocrites who reckon you're so goody-goody. What's this Jesus' resurrection rubbish? You oughta see a head-shrinker."

It's going to be hard getting the Gospel through the shell. Somehow, with God behind it, Jacob's Ladder will find a way.

CHRIST—CONVERSATION COFFEE JACOB'S LADDER

Anyone entering the coffee-lounge will see this sign outside the door at 102 Gawler Place. It indicates what to expect; any customer should be prepared for Christ-talk.

Posters and placards also help set the stage. Most of them carry a short message (like "Going with



At the foot of Jacob's Ladder.

God is feeling good inside"). One is a painting showing three figures striving upwards; this has a relevance not only to the original Jacob's Ladder but also to the two flights of stairs leading to the coffee-lounge. Either way, it is a talking point.

STAFFING

"Now remember everybody, you are all working here at Jacob's Ladder tonight because you know that Jesus is your Saviour and you want others to know that He is theirs, too. Whether you are a counsellor² or a kitchen worker or a waitress, you are all part of the team. If you have a free minute, pray—both for your own efforts and the efforts of the other workers. Now let's all pray and ask God to be with us tonight, and have faith that He will."

Counsellors, waitresses, and kitchen staff are rostered by the manager as required. Most of them come from the metropolitan Youth Fellowships, Luther Seminary, and Lutheran Teachers College. At least four waitresses, five counsellors, and six kitchen staff are needed every night the lounge is open (at present, every Friday and Saturday).

For any of these jobs, only willing, reliable people need apply. It isn't easy, after a long day, to work from 7.30 p.m. to 1.30 a.m. and maintain interest and enthusiasm.

The main qualification for any worker is a living faith in Jesus Christ.

COUNSELLING

"Geoff, I got to talking to the four kids at table A3 when I was waiting on them, but I got in too deep. I think a counsellor should go and talk to them."

In the relaxed atmosphere, it is usually quite easy for a counsellor to invite himself to a table, and to join in or start a conversation. As the counsellor is someone who really believes that Jesus is his Saviour and Lord and is the answer to all the world's problems, he is ready to seize any opportunity to bring Christ into the conversation. Sometimes this leads to a fruitful discussion and further opportunities to present Christ; sometimes it causes a derisive outcry and mockery.

Counsellors must be prepared for any reaction; as they gain experience they will learn to handle any situation.

PROBLEMS

"Record that in the minutes, will you, Jenny? The damaged chairs will be repaired two at a time, and the landlord will arrange repair of the broken door."

Jacob's Ladder has had plenty of problems.

Getting started was hard enough. A lot of work by a lot of people saw the premises obtained and prepared, equipment bought with loans and donations, and staff sought and trained.

Getting established on a sound operating basis has been even harder. Obtaining enough competent staff every Friday and Saturday has always been a major problem, but this is being gradually overcome.

For a while earlier this year, the biggest difficulty was unruly behaviour by drunken customers (some as young as 14 or 15). There were a few fights and some damage to property, and every night was rowdy; the friendly atmosphere disappeared and effective discussion became impossible.

The management committee has now set standards of behaviour and insists on their observation. Nobody under the influence of drink is allowed on the premises (not because he is not wanted, but because of the disruption he is likely to cause).

The relaxed, informal environment has been restored, and with it the opportunity to witness effectively for Christ.



Getting acquainted with Milton (left).

SUCCESSSES

"Look, all I know is, now that I've got to know Jesus Christ, I've got meaning and purpose in my life. He's got all the answers for this world and the next, if you're prepared to front up to Him for them and really listen to what He has to say to you."

Financially, Jacob's Ladder is gradually getting on top. \$600 of the original \$1,300 in loans has been repaid, and the business is on a sound basis. Donations from friends and supporters have been most helpful.

As for spiritual success, it is difficult to tell. How do you measure spiritual achievements, anyway? Some of the coffee-lounge workers have got to know dozens of boys and girls, regular customers. They know their names, their family background, what they do, their leisure interests, and something of their problems. Some of these youngsters are quite clearly being influenced by the deed and word witness of Jacob's Ladder workers. One boy, who six months ago was one of the rowdiest and roughest, is now a changed lad who seems to understand what Jacob's Ladder is all about. Who knows where these small beginnings might lead?

Even a casual customer, one who visits Jacob's Ladder only once, will at least see the name of Christ and the posters on the wall. Probably a counsellor or waitress will talk to him. Perhaps a seed is sown - who can tell?



Behind the scenes—Minoru Kida, a Christian visitor from Japan, in the centre.

BLESSINGS

"He who sows bountifully will reap bountifully."

A different form of success has come to Jacob's Ladder in a wonderful way. Many of the workers are finding that their faith is stronger, their enthusiasm is keener, their happiness in their faith is more zestful, and their confidence in facing up to life is more abundant. They are going to their Bibles and to prayer with lively purpose, in the confident expectation that God will supply the answers and the strength they need.

Whatever they give to Jacob's Ladder is returning multiplied to them.

THE FUTURE

"This next Jacob's Ladder Counsellors' Meeting will be held at Milton's place on July 7, at 7.30 p.m. Workers will be encouraged to talk about their experiences and problems. We will also be seeking ideas on a follow-up programme."

Some follow-up work is clearly necessary. In a coffee-lounge, it is possible only to break the ice, arouse interest, witness for Christ, and perhaps present the fundamentals of the Christian faith.

What next?

That problem now confronts Jacob's Ladder. The management committee is planning to hold an informal worship service soon at



Bible reading and prayer, David leading.

the coffee-lounge - maybe there will be more. Perhaps Sunday night topic discussions would help to reach people - these too will be tried.

But to make the most of its follow-up work and to widen its outreach, there can be no doubt that Jacob's Ladder needs a full-time worker. To the committee, this is more than just a nice idea. It is a real goal that they are beginning to work for.

With God behind it, Jacob's Ladder will surely find a way.

"This is My commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you."

Some of the workers have opened their homes and given their time to troubled kids. They have visited confused young people, Jacob's Ladder customers, in prison for criminal offences. To this sort of friendship there is a real response; this is the sort of friendship which signposts the way to Christ.

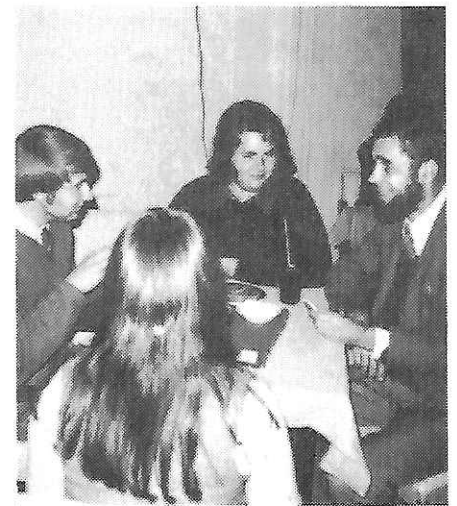
The vital young Christians of Jacob's Ladder are deeply involved. They are in there where the action is. They are eager to serve their Lord by serving others and trying to lead them to Him.

Jacob's Ladder Coffee Lounge, born of faith and nourished by hard work in the power of God, is here to stay.

David Graebner

FOOTNOTES

1. The Dorian Society is an Adelaide group of Lutheran young people interested in communicating the gospel.
2. In the context of this article, a "Counsellor" is defined as a person who engages in conversation with patrons of Jacob's Ladder and tries to show them Jesus Christ as the complete answer to all their needs.



Author, David Graebner, right.