

STUDENT EVANGELISTIC CAMPAIGNS

By the Rev. JOHN HANDLEY, *Motherwell*

IT WAS the eve of the Campaign in the town where I was a parish minister. Over fifty students were arriving in the town by train, bus, bike, and even by car! The local Committee was busy escorting the girls to their appointed digs and the men to their billets in the Church halls. The welcome meal over, the team was immediately introduced to its task. At a briefing meeting held in the H.Q. hall, a local minister highlighted the area of operations; the team leader expounded a suitable passage of Scripture; the whole work was committed to the Lord in united prayer; and the team members, tired, eager, and in several cases not a little apprehensive, made their way to their various places of rest. The Campaign had begun.

The following day, Sunday, found the local pulpits occupied by student preachers (mostly theological students), with others addressing Bible Classes, Sunday Schools, and Youth Fellowships. On Monday the area of activity widened. After briefing, prayer and Bible study, groups of students went to schools, High, Junior and Primary, to factories, offices and mines, while still others covered the area in door-to-door visitation, carrying the Message of Life by word and in print. In the evenings the pace of activities increased. A central meeting for adults, and three area meetings for children claimed the energies of some of the team. Others found themselves assigned to visit the clubs and cafés, the drinking dens and dance halls, and still others to preach the Word in the open air. At all hours of the day (and sometimes of the night) students were to be seen in earnest conversation with men and women, fellows and girls, in the Church hall, in cafés and sometimes in the open street. Not for a long time had there been such a widespread interest in the gospel, especially among the young.

All too soon, the last day of the Campaign arrived, and our student friends took their departure having given of their best, and having gained for themselves not only a circle of new friends, but also a new appreciation of the worth of the gospel, and some little understanding of the problem of communicating it to ordinary folk.

But for us of the local Committee (and this was a new viewpoint for me) the work was in a very real sense just beginning. There was the examination of the lists of those professing conversion, or having shown some special interest, the passing of names of those who claimed some particular ecclesiastical affiliation to their respective pastors; and the personal visitation of all in their homes. The numerical results were at first sight fairly small, but encouraging.

The Campaign was a six-month-old memory when our local group next met to make an assessment. The result was interesting and not a little disturbing. We recalled the crowds of ardent, earnest teenagers in the Youth Meetings. We reviewed the list of those who had made some kind of profession. We surveyed the present position. It seemed that only a small handful of those who had originally shown interest were really continuing steadfast in the faith, and most of these had already been somewhere in the local churches. It was also observed that not a few of those who had been most seriously impressed during the Campaign were now openly cynical when spoken to on spiritual matters. How could we account for such disappointing results? Was this the parable of the sower being enacted in our midst? Without doubt the Word had been declared faithfully. Had there been some flaw in the method of presentation? Too much stress on emotion, too much appeal to the heroic? There was little evidence that this was the full explanation. Could it possibly be that the whole idea of holding special evangelistic campaigns was wrong; that evangelism was something to be done in the context of the church? Was the present tendency in some evangelical circles to deprecate special missions and campaigns finding its justification in the kind of results that we were experiencing? These were the kinds of question that rankled in our minds as we left our 'post mortem' to face again a church situation which showed little evidence of a great evangelistic assault only six months earlier.

Almost a year later, with the question of evangelistic campaigns still not wholly resolved in my mind, I came to my present charge in a large industrial town, the scene of an I.V.F. Student Mission eleven years previously. I had just preached my first sermon and was recovering in the vestry when in came a young married man, an office-bearer in the Church. He introduced himself as 'a convert of the I.V.F. Campaign held here eleven years ago'. Soon after, a school teacher announced that she had found Christ during the Mission while still a pupil at the top end of the primary school. Another local young lady is at present serving in the East as the wife of a missionary schoolteacher. He was one of the student team of eleven years ago! An elder in another church recalled to me in detail the closing sermon of the Mission and spoke of what the Mission had meant to him. A lady tells of how as a worker in the Post Office she used to listen to the student open-air meetings held nightly just outside the building, and of the blessing she received. Various other similar cases have also come to light. For these people at any rate and for a great many others like them, there can be no question of the value of these special evangelistic efforts. As a matter of interest, none of those mentioned above were known to me during the Mission although I was an active member of the student team, and they would probably have remained unknown but for the special circumstances that have since brought me here. On the other hand, doubtless some of those who professed brightly then have fallen away by now. Finding the right yardstick by which to measure the value of efforts such as I.V.F. Student Missions is not easy; neither is the knowing of *when* to apply the yardstick. Perhaps six months after is too soon. Perhaps only eternity will give the full answer.

Of one thing we can be sure, and it is this: the Great Commission still stands. It is still our most urgent task to take the gospel of sovereign grace in the clearest possible terms to the greatest number of people. After experience of at least seven I.V.F. Student Campaigns, as timid team member, as Mission leader, as Parish Minister, and as long-term observer, I am certain that these student efforts, properly geared to the life and witness of the local church, have an important part to play in carrying out our Lord's commission. Personally, in my own preaching and pastoral work I owe a great deal to lessons learned and experience gained in I.V.F. Evangelistic Missions.

Theologs. in particular have much to give to these ventures, and more to gain than perhaps most other students. There is no doubt in my mind that every ordinand should share in the work of at least one Mission before venturing upon the work of the Holy Ministry.

Churches or ministers who wish to invite or to consider a team of students to help in such work as that outlined above are asked to get in touch with the Campaigns' Secretary at the I.V.F. office.