

EVANGELISM AMONG HIPPIES AND OTHER SUB-CULTURAL GROUPS

Ron Munstra

Mr. Munstra, the Hague, Netherlands, has worked extensively with drug addicts, hippies, and Jesus People for several years.

Writing about evangelizing hippies is not so easy since the words hippie, sub-culture, etc., have different meanings in different countries. The hippie-culture in the U.S.A. differs widely from the culture in Europe, and furthermore in our country (the Netherlands) today's youth-culture greatly differs from that of a few years ago. This is why it is hardly possible to compile an instruction booklet for evangelizing among hippies in all circumstances. However, we will give you our own experiences in this paper. Our group has worked amongst young people in the Netherlands, Belgium, and the Ruhr area in Germany.

Anyone beginning with evangelizing work should not be disheartened too soon. In the beginning we had one disappointment after another. We knew nothing about hippies or drugs, we only had a compassionate heart. The youngsters we took in our home at first seemed to be more interested in a warm bed and a good meal, than in the Gospel. It was not until a few really converted people from that sub-culture came to us, fully prepared to serve the Lord, that we saw positive results in this kind of work.

Initial needs

One of the first requisites when a hippie accepts the Gospel is to move him out of his environment, otherwise he will never be able to break the bonds of his former life. A reception center, therefore, must be available. If the hippie is an addict he will have to be freed from his addiction in the first place. It sometimes happens that a person is freed as a result of a single prayer, but more often than not the person will have to go through a weaning period. We believe that, for a person who has accepted Christ, the best way to get rid of drugs is by way of the "cold turkey" cure. This is the only way to get absolutely free from medicine, since in many instances the medicines (drugs) given to drug addicts to free them of their addiction have an enslaving effect themselves (e.g., methadon), or make the patient drowsy (valium, librium). A quiet room is required for giving a person the "cold turkey" cure, as this cure often brings with it paranoid symptoms. Very often the patient is in great pain. Someone has to watch by the patient constantly, for the "cold turkey" can be dangerous. It has happened that an addict has died in prison when his supply of drugs was suddenly stopped. In such a critical stage a Christian can pray to the Lord, but if he has not enough faith he should see to it that he can always call a doctor.

Keeping watch over a patient is also necessary since the patient's body, during this "kicking-off" period, occasionally yearns for drugs so much that he cannot but run away to satisfy this strong desire. This does

not mean that the addict does not "want" to get freed, and so for his own sake he should be stopped at all costs. We have often experienced that we could not hold him — at this stage an addict often has the strength of 10 men — and so we went down on our knees to ask the Lord to do it for us. And soon the runaway would come back very quietly. It is then that we see how mighty the Lord is. It is of great importance to tell and addict from the very beginning that it is Jesus who can help him, and to teach him how to pray. Very often such a desperate prayer is answered by the Lord in a wonderful way and the addict knows that Jesus lives and that praying really helps.

The "cold turkey" is only the beginning. The former addict will have to begin a new way of life. This is not at all easy for though he has been taken away from his old circle, very often his old life exerts an extremely strong pull. His old friends will do everything in their power to get him back to the "scene." Moreover it will not be at all easy for him to resist the temptation to take drugs.

Joining a group

The best surroundings for receiving an ex-addict is a group of young people of his age who positively serve the Lord. Here he meets conviviality, real friendship, love, a kind of a home. This is very important, for the background of many addicts is a lack of love. The former addict will feel happiest if there is a person in the group or among its leaders with whom he can get a special relation of trust. In the beginning this trusted friend will be most important to him, but it is the main task of this friend to point to Jesus, so that He will take the friend's place more and more.

Further, the ex-addict will have to learn that he forms a member of the group. At first, one is inclined to view the addict as a patient. This, of course, is wrong. If you treat him as a normal person and a full member of the group he will not behave like a patient, but do his best to live up to expectations.

Anyone asking for help to get rid of his addiction is taken into our center. We give him a probationary period of three weeks. In those three weeks he can "kick-off" and recuperate if necessary, and prove that he really wants to start a new life. Then he will have to start working, unless his health is poor. If he cannot work he has to be kept busy with all kinds of odd jobs in the home. Those who have been addicted to amphetamine (called "speed"), cocaine, etc., can best "kick-off" while at work, since they have to get rid of an enormous quantity of unnatural energy. To be busy at work is most important for all ex-addicts as it takes their thoughts away from their former life; and because they now can provide for themselves they need not be dependent on others.

The best way to help a newly converted person is to make him share his experiences of the Lord with others. More and more, it has been our aim to bring young people to discipleship, for discipleship is the only way to save a person permanently. The sooner a convert has learned to do something with his newly found faith and finds that his faith is confirmed — e.g., when he sees that former friends to whom he has born a witness, have accepted the Lord or when his prayers have been answered —

the more his longing grows to experience the working of the Lord and to give up all the things that stand between the Lord and himself. Each member of the group must learn to build up a personal relation to the Lord and should not be afraid to bring his faith into practice. By this the group has become most important for this work. If an ex-addict is having a difficult time he can turn either to the leader or to his friends in the group for a talk or for prayer.

It is essential for a group that there are a number of positive young people who act as a foundation to the group. They have to set an example of living with the Lord, they must be able to help when someone in the group has problems, and they must have a good relationship with the staff. These positive people have to keep their eyes on everything that happens in the group. It can happen, for instance, that there are a number of negative persons (e.g., some ex-addicts who are not yet very strong spiritually) in the group who always stick together, which clique will easily pull down other "weak brethren." Too much association among such brethren should be discouraged. It is better when strong persons take care of them and help them to grow in the Lord.

Bible reading, Bible studies, preaching, and prayer are the bases on which the group is built. It may seem strange to them, but many young people find the answer to all the questions, which often have brought them deep into trouble, in this old Book. To play up to a person, "acting popular" and gentle preaching have no effect at all. But the straight Gospel appears to be a two-edged sword that cuts deep into the souls of young people. Young converts, coming out of deep distressing circumstances, often have a great hunger for the Word. By hearing and reading the Word, the mind of young people is renewed, and their thoughts turn more and more to the Lord and less to the world. Other things the group is doing for the Lord are edifying for all concerned. When we started witnessing in the streets as a group, suddenly everyone experienced that when you hand out something of the Lord you receive much more in return. There was a new need to read the Bible, since it proved that knowledge of the Bible is most necessary when talking to strangers in the street.

Origin of the group

Up to now we have talked about "the group" and taken it for granted that the group is so important. Now we will relate how the group was born. Originally our aim was to work among the "hippies" — whatever that may be! There are no real hippies in this country however: we could call them drug addicts, scene-people, or the like. We did contact them and took them to our home, but results were poor. It was not until a number of young people gave their full time and attention to the job that things started moving. We then contacted "hippies" and also an entirely different kind of young people. These were boys and girls with leanings to the "hippies," but who hadn't sunk so deep. Some of them had taken drugs, most of them were still at school or had taken a job. They gladly accepted the Gospel and felt it to be much better than the life they had hitherto led. They did not need the kind of help drug addicts needed.

They lived at home, but attended the services, joined the group for witnessing in the streets, and frequented the center whenever they could.

Gradually more and more people of different backgrounds came, many of them from the schools, older and younger working-class youths, even parents and grandparents. Since the group combined so many different people, almost everyone felt at home. The boarders ("interns") are those who are in trouble (drugs or otherwise) and those who want to work for the Lord and to receive practical training. This training entails that one learns in daily life to put into practice all that the Bible teaches. You are incorporated in the daily work and learning all its facets, e.g., preaching, giving Bible readings, praying for one another, helping addicts, coaching the newcomers and the weaker members of the group, visiting parents, etc.

During the period of internship, the individual's character is molded, because he has to live together with many people and has to take account of every one of them. In daytime everybody has to work, but in the evening attention is paid to spiritual things. There is a program for every night of the week, two normal services, Bible studies, witnessing, pastoral care and prayer.

The people who are not interns belong to the group, too, of course. They can come as often as they like and take part in all activities.

We have seen that God does not give his plan to one person only (the leader), but wants to give to the whole group. It often happens that God makes his will known to the staff, but at the same time makes it known to some members of the group too, and this causes a unity between staff and group.

Conducting a "post"

When the interns have improved enough spiritually, they can be sent to a post (a settlement of our own "organization" in another city). Naturally not everyone is fit to lead a post. In the first place he has to be called, and he has to be a person who wants to know more and more about the Lord. This has to be so because he has to preach, give Bible studies, take pastoral care, etc. In all this he can't rely on anything but his Bible and his contact with the Lord.

We start a post by renting a house that fits our purpose. It has to have room for services (a large living room will do) and it should be built in a way that we cannot cause too much nuisance to the neighbors because of singing during the services. A house in the center of the city is ideal. We send a few people to the post who find ordinary jobs and together pay the rent and the other living costs.

In the beginning there sometimes is a full-timer who is occupied daily with evangelizing and prayer; after a while everybody is working and the spiritual work is done in the evenings and at the weekends. If there are converts at the posts who are fully prepared to serve the Lord, they are sent to the center to be trained. People in need of help often are sent to the center too. On the other hand, ex-addicts or people with other problems at the center, who need change or some rest, are sent to one of the posts for a while.

At the center as well as at the posts we found that a group needs a father and a mother. The people we are dealing with often have much trouble and need someone with whom they can talk. Therefore every post needs a girl who can do this part of the work and do also the other domestic work.

To found new posts is not only necessary to reach as many people as possible, but also to keep the home-group alive. The home-group gets new things to pray for every time a new post is founded. The strongest people are sent away every time, and this will force the people who stay behind to be more spiritual and take a greater part in the work. Movement and flexibility is necessary. For this reason we do not have too many written rules. Of course, there are some domestic rules, and we forbid the use of drugs and smoking in the house. We also forbid interns to listen to music from their old life, for this can be propaganda for the use of drugs. Sometimes music has left impressions during the use of drugs that are evoked again when they hear the music. Other rules, as the Bible teaches us, are not obligatory in the group. In Bible studies and sermons the importance of these things is pointed out. If it strikes home to someone he will live by it.

One of the things we have not talked about is that the young people, who often come from a lawless, "democratized" atmosphere, must learn to submit to leadership. There is no spirit of dictatorship in the group, but everyone has to learn to accept the guidance of a leader. One of the young men is in charge of every post and also of the main center. He leads the group when they go out, organizes the work around the house, and is responsible for all that happens. He can only be a good leader when he himself has learned to listen to what the group has to tell him.

To return to the posts-center relationship: the ties between the posts and the center remain strong, because there is a fairly regular contact, as well in the human level as in the organizational level. Several times a year, meetings are held in the center. Everyone from the posts can come on such an occasion, and all the leaders will be there. During such weekend gatherings, specialized Bible studies are held. There are ordinary services, often baptismal services are held, and there will be a communion service. The whole group will go out in the street together to witness and sing there. Between all this there is a lot of time for recreation. During the weekends everybody gets to know each other a bit, old friends meet again, and the converts from the posts feel that the center is their center too. Apart from these weekend gatherings, which often are held during great feast days (like Christmas, Easter, Pentecost) or during the school holidays, the leaders of the posts often come to the center to talk things over or just to relax.

Every month the posts have to send their accounts to the center, where the bookkeeping of the whole work is done. During the holidays it is possible for those who are not yet interns, to stay a while at a post or in the center to learn more about the work. While there they are expected to assist generally. The leaders usually never stay longer than seven months at one post; after that they switch to another post or come back to the center for a while. Once in a while, the founder of the work comes to every post to preach.

Evangelizing hippies

To reach the people, one has to evangelize of course, but there are many ways to do that. You have to adapt the way of evangelization to the people you want to reach. To reach hippies you have to go the places where they are to be found. Most of the time we go there with some tracts, and start talking to a boy or a girl. We have learned that in Europe it is no use to approach "hippies" with would-be hip slang. It will be just ridiculous to them, because you are pretending to be someone you are not. If a well-dressed shorthaired, middle-aged person tells a hippie that "Jesus is the best trip," it will not be accepted. If there is no such pretence, one stands a better chance of a good talk.

A former addict or drug-user who has been converted and is spiritually strong enough will be the best witness to his old friends. The changes in his life, the happiness he has from the Lord, etc., will show them that Jesus can help them too.

A method of evangelization which reaches a great number of people is for a large group to take guitars and other musical instruments and sit down to sing. Sitting down is very important because we are more visible than when we stand and there is no distance between the people who stand and listen and the group that sits and sings. The singing attracts the attention.

When there are enough people standing around the group, one of the group gets up and tells them about Jesus or gives his testimony, then he invites everybody to drop by our center or to come to a service. During the singing, some of the group hand out tracts and sometimes start a talk with people in the audience.

When we cannot go with a group big enough to sing we usually take some tracts and hand them out to the people in the street and try to start a conversation.

Apart from these methods of evangelization we often get invitations from schools, youth clubs, children's homes and even the youth prison to tell them about our work and our faith, and to sing.

The singing is very important to us, not only as a part of the service, but also because we get a lot of invitations by it. Naturally, everyone's testimony must be affirmed by his personal attitude, and the fact that we always have to bear testimony of our Christianity in word and deed makes us feel how much we need the Lord.

These are our experiences in the work with young people. Though we started that way we would never advise to aim at hippies only. We believe that it is best to have a group of people with all kinds of different backgrounds and ages in which everybody feels happy — a kind of very large family. But this is only our opinion, and our experience. The Lord will do new things even in work that is started. The only good way to do a work for the Lord is to do it his way.