

A
Reader's Digest

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Friendly Neighbor Called "Fish"

"If you need help of any kind"
—this is the watchword of
one of the fastest-growing
volunteer movements in
the world today

CLARENCE W. HALL

IN WEST SPRINGFIELD, Mass., recently, a 12-year-old boy awakened in the night to find his mother in a state of hysteria, crying that she had unbearable abdominal pains. The youngster had the presence of mind to look up a leaflet bearing the message, "When you need help, call this number." He did so, and in minutes a team of strangers was on hand to get his mother to a hospital.

In Anchorage, Alaska, a similar call for help from a family just burned out of its trailer home

brought volunteers who took the family into their own homes, while others rounded up clothing, found an apartment and helped the family furnish it.

When an elderly man collapsed with a heart attack in the village of Old Headington, near Oxford, England, his disabled and desperate wife pushed her wheelchair through the flat until she found an almost forgotten card with a strange symbol on it. She put the card in her front window. A half-hour later, her husband was being treated in the

hospital, and she was being comforted by strangers.

In scores of other communities over the world, volunteers whose slogan is "Love thy neighbor" are responding to similar appeals: temporarily baby-sitting in a broken home, preparing meals and doing housework for the suddenly ill, calming the upset, helping those with serious problems to reach community welfare agencies. These people are members of one of today's fastest-spreading volunteer movements. They operate under the improbable name of The Fish. Their fish symbol is the same as that secretly used by early Christians during centuries of persecution to identify themselves to each other.

The Fish movement was begun in England in 1961, under the leadership of the Rev. Derek Eastman, pastor of an Anglican church in Old Headington, and Dr. Donald Richards, a layman. It was born in a burst of conviction by both pastor and people that one of the prime causes of our time's malaise has been the rapid decline of old-fashioned neighborliness—of caring about others. Challenged by the co-founders to get their religion off its seat and onto its feet, the parishioners came up with the Fish idea.

Volunteers for specific services were recruited from among parishioners; and a card carrying the fish symbol and the instruction, "If you need help of any kind, put me in your window," was distributed to every home in the village. Each

block had a street warden, identified by a metal fish mounted on his gate or door. A card in the window signaled to any passers-by that a neighbor was in some sort of distress which, reported to the warden, would set him into immediate action.

News of this unique way of expressing Christian concern for others spread rapidly throughout Britain, then to West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, South Africa, Japan and the Cameroons. The idea crossed the Atlantic with William Turpin, a friend of the Rev. Robert Lee Howell, of the Church of the Good Shepherd in West Springfield, Mass. Howell promptly proposed it to his congregation. Flyers carrying the fish symbol, the telephone number of an answering service, and a list of Fish services were distributed by his church to West Springfield's 7000 homes during the fall of 1964. Said the flyer: "The Fish is simply a group of Christian people who wish to express their love and concern for their neighbors. There is no charge for any service we provide; you will never be asked to listen to any lecture. When you call the Fish number, a 24-hour answering service will put you in touch immediately with a volunteer eager to help."

Soon after its formation in West Springfield, the Fish took on its present ecumenical character as other churches, Catholic and Protestant, joined in its sponsorship. Though nobody knows the exact

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number, since there is no central headquarters or clearinghouse, more than 100 chapters are thought to be operating in the United States today.

To many, one of the most appealing aspects of this burgeoning movement is its paucity of organization. Most chapters have no officers other than a chairman and a steering committee, and no treasurer. "There are no expenses worth making a budget for," says John C. Marshall, former chairman of the West Springfield chapter. "When some expenditure is needed, such as providing food or medicine, the volunteer taking the call provides this from his own pocket—or a few of us collect a few dollars among ourselves to cover it."

The workings of the average Fish chapter are as direct and uncomplicated as its organization. Each volunteer sets aside one 24-hour period per month during which he either acts as the answering service's telephone contact or is available to supply such services as emergency transportation, baby-sitting, and cooking and housework for the sick. Volunteers include both men and women, with many couples operating as teams, especially on night calls.

Most Fish services require no special talent, no money—just an honest interest in serving one's fellow man. Says Mrs. Lowell Thomas, Jr., a Fish leader in Anchorage, Alaska, "We must be willing to be inconvenienced, even taken advantage of oc-

asionally, and expect no recognition or reward beyond the satisfaction that comes from knowing we've helped someone in time of need." Though many of the services are routine, a few are definitely offbeat—as, for instance, when a frightened teen-ager asked for someone to go home with him to explain a poor report card to his stern father; or when a tearful little girl whose dog had died begged for someone to intercede with her parents to let her have another puppy.

The amount of training given Fish volunteers varies with each locality. With most, training is minimal. Fish leaders do, however, stress "a few ground rules based on common sense." Among them: "Be tactful; avoid appearing officious or 'do-gooding.' Do what is asked of you first; ask questions later. Learn to listen, and what to listen for; listen especially for overtones of an emotional problem that requires professional help. Don't attempt to do something beyond your strength or ability. Familiarize yourself with the kinds of services offered by existing agencies, and learn how and when to make referrals to them. Keep all your activities confidential; people who need help deserve privacy. Remember that we are not lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists or a welfare agency—we are just neighbors."

Because Fish workers carefully avoid areas beyond their competence, official social-service agencies welcome their aid. Often, one of a Fish chapter's first acts is to get in

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touch with all established agencies in its community, explain the purpose (and limits) of its services, and offer its help with those simple human problems that the agencies have neither the time nor the resources to handle.

While Fish policy is geared primarily to providing one-time-only help, it doesn't forsake cases where more protracted care is needed. Special beneficiaries of prolonged Fish care are the lonely, the elderly, the blind, the shut-in. Members of one chapter noted how many callers were in this category and formed "The Fishline"—a daily phone check between people in groups of eight. The first person in each group (the captain) calls the second, the second the third, and on down to the eighth, who calls the first to report "all well with the group." One Fish chapter, the 200-member group in New Haven, Conn., has an advisory committee of doctors, lawyers and welfare experts, and a follow-up committee to take on cases needing long-range attention.

Service with a Fish chapter leads many members into expressing, on their own, what Wordsworth called "little nameless acts of kindness and of love." One volunteer, having an-

swered a call from an old lady in a home for the aged, finally adopted the old lady as her own charge, calling upon her regularly, remembering her birthday, taking her for automobile rides, bringing her books. Another, a retired owner of a radio shop, collects used radios, fixes them up, and takes them to the bedridden and shut-in.

No Fish volunteer is under any illusion that this movement is or can be *the* answer to deep-seated problems that plague our increasingly self-centered society. They do feel, however, that in making their communities warmer and friendlier places, they can help all of us turn back toward the concern and caring for others which our world so sorely needs.

Information on how to set up a Fish group is provided in *Fish—For My People*, by Robert Lee Howell, published at \$2.50 by Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc., 14 E. 41 St., New York, N.Y. 10017. Also, a film documentary, *The Fish Story*, is available for local showings from the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, 815 Second Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

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