

# Sparkle.

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## Diamonds.

We're all just little lumps of coal, running around on two legs. Where ever we go we seem to leave dirty little smudges as we bump up against each other and this once pure world. Dirty little marks everywhere.

But if we choose to, we can run and jump in to our heavenly father's hands and he will change us.

We will feel the power of his love and the pressure of his hold on us. We will become diamonds.

From coal to diamonds. That's what putting your life in God's hands is like.

Does it hurt? Yes, sometimes.

Will it take long? Yes, your whole life long.

Is it worth it? Well, coal is for the fire, but diamonds are forever.

### Reflection.

Use some clay or modelling dough. Make sculptures in response to the story.

In what ways is God putting pressure on you lately?

How have your beliefs shaped your life for the better already?

What things have you had to sacrifice to become a better person, that were hard to let go of?

## Jesus And Satan Go Surfing.

The battle between good and evil has taken to the seas. Satan surfs! I've seen him. You probably have too. Satan's the guy who acts all friendly on the beach when he wants to scab some wax off you, and then out in the surf he's never seen you before. Satan's the guy who gets more than his fair share of the waves, not because he can read the sea better than the rest of us, but because he's always snaking around and doing the big aggro tough-guy intimidation gig.

If you're paddling over his wave to get back out, he extends his cutty just that bit longer, just so he can slash his fins out at ya, moon you with the bad boy butt logo and spray shredded water in your face.

He catches the wave of the day, carves all over it and then on the way back out he's snarling like it's the worst wave he's ever been forced to catch. If he goes for a wave and misses it, he turns red with rage and curses it all to hell. Satan sucks the good vibe right out of the air and turns it to poison. It's evil! Why does a guy like that surf if he hates it so much?

But hey, Jesus surfs too. Jesus is the guy who yells, "Go for it!" when that big wave is yours and he's read some hesitation in your paddle. He hoots when you make it. Jesus is the guy who's lookin' at ya down the line while you're in the tube, and the smile on his face is bigger than yours.

When Jesus catches a wave, he rides it like he can walk on water – he's glued to the board. His surfing is miraculous. But you know what makes it really special? He loves it. He's having the time of his life, hooting, laughing, going for it, taking ridiculous risks, and when he wipes out, he comes up laughing. Him and the creator and the sea have got it going on. And somehow, everybody out there is swept up in that contagious joy of surfing, all over again. Soon everyone is hooting and having a great time. Jesus is your soul surfer, and God bless him. More power to the forces of good and the soul surfers, I reckon.

**Reflection.**

Which are you more of... a snarler or a hooter; ...a whinger or an enjoyer; ...an evil dude or a Christ like person; ...a, the glass is half empty/ the glass is half full/ or, hey, I don't like water anyway, sort of person?

Chosen your place on the scales? Okay, so how's that working out for you?

Where are the thrills in life for you?

Are your thrills causing anybody else the spills?

And if they did, what's your care factor on that..0 – like the whole universe revolves around me anyway; 5 – yeah it matters to me how I treat others; 10 – oh yeah, it totally matters.

## Of All God's Good Gifts.

If I had to choose, and I could choose only one, of all God's good gifts, I know what it would be.

Would it be the moon shining in the night, embracing the warm light of the sun, nursing the warmth to itself, and then delivering it gently to the Earth, as sweetly as a blown kiss?

Or would you choose instead the myriads of stars twinkling, sparkling, shining, bursting with glorious light, like sparks from the fire that have ascended into the heavens to be frozen forever in time and space?

No, neither.

Would it be the waves of the sea, crystal blue-green clear, triumphantly charging in uniform rows of fluid motion to pound themselves upon the sandbanks? Or would you choose instead the dolphins that ride those waves, creatures so sleek, so fast, so playful and full of fun with their crazy acrobatics and their cheeky grins.

Ah, how I love the sea and all that's therein, but no. If I could choose only one from all of God's good gifts, I would have to let these go.

What then? What would you choose? Diamonds and jewels, precious and rare, as clear as liquid, as cool as ice, but as solid and heartless as any other rock. Or perhaps you'd choose the flowers, caressing us with their colours and their perfumed scents, surrendering themselves completely to any who would pick them, without complain nor resistance, giving themselves up like the true gift that they are?

No.

Waterfalls then? Would you choose the waterfalls, cascading down the mountains, recklessly throwing themselves over the cliffs with total

abandon, crashing on the rocks below, disintegrating into spray and mist, only to surface again in the cool calm pool below, as if nothing had ever happened.

Or would it be those cotton wool clouds, puffing and whispering around in the sky immaculately blue? Or maybe the rain pouring on us like some bucket in heaven being tipped, like some kind of water fight joke on a cosmic scale, spilling from heaven like God's love itself...invigorating, refreshing, cleansing and giving new life if only we will take it in?

Is that it? No?

What then? What would you choose?

If I could choose only one thing, it would have to be this.  
Friends like you.

#### **Reflection.**

What are some of your favourite colours? Favourite taste sensations? Favourite touching sensations – eg, silk on your skin, sand running through your fingers...Favourite smells? Favourite sounds?

What are the five most precious gifts from God in your life?

Who do you think of when you read this story?

Turn the story into a poster, and do illustrations all around the border. You could give it to a good friend. You could put it up in your house and when friends visit, ask them to read it and tell them that's how you feel about them.

Visit, ring up, email or write to some of the people you love, just to let them know you love them and appreciate them.

Give thanks to God for all his good gifts to you.

## Professor I.M. Alouzar.

The word is out. Professor I.M Alouzar, the recluse from the South Pole, who is currently holidaying in a biosphere at the bottom of an unspecified Aotearoan boiling mud pool, has got a new idea.

He has developed a genetic cocktail which, when injected you know where, relieves people of any need for other human beings. Professor Alouzar claims it works predominantly on one's emotions and thoughts. It is reported to be completely harmless with absolutely no known side effects.

"It works like a dream!" he told us over the phone from his secret biosphere. "It cuts out any risk of pain or emotional distress from hurtful relationships, rejection, jealousy, broken hearts and the like." The Professor went on to say, "You can't even feel loneliness, because with my new wonder drug, 'Alouzar's Way', who needs friends?"

Alouzar's Way will be available from the shelves of your local shopping centre, or from the internet, sometime next winter.

**Reflection.**

Make up a story about the professor's teenage years, which may explain why, to this day, he wants to avoid relationships.

Jesus had incredible powers and gifts, but Jesus still needed friends, often in much the same way that we need to be able to count on people. Check out these passages.

Jesus needed friends to lend him things. Mark 14 v12-16; Matthew 21 v1-7.

Jesus needed friends to help with a cash flow problem sometimes, (ie. he needed to borrow a few bucks sometimes). Luke 8 v1-3

Jesus needed help with his work. Luke 10 v1-9; Matthew 28 v16-20.

He needed some close friends to know him for who he truly was; to know the real Jesus; to understand him. John 14 v6-12; Luke 9 v 18-22.

Jesus needed friends to confide in; to share his secrets with; to listen to the important things that he couldn't tell to just anybody. Matthew 13 v9-17; Luke 10 v21-24.

Jesus needed friends to trust him and believe in him. John 14 v1-3; John 3 v12-18

Jesus needed his friends to tell him they loved him. John 21 v 15-19.

Jesus needed the support and prayers of his friends through the tough times. Matthew 26 v 36-46.

He wanted commitment and loyalty from his friends. Luke 9 v 23-27 & 57-62; Luke 12 v 8-9; John 6 v 60-71

Jesus needed to hang out with just his friends, with no body else around. Luke 9 v 10-11 & v 28; Mark 5 v 35-42; Mark 14 v 32-34.

Jesus, the perfect person, God in human skin, needed others in these ways. How does that speak to you?

## Living In The Land Of The Long Weekend.

It's Monday morning. Mervin awakes to his radio alarm. The radio is on full blast. Harry the FM man is giving us the news.

"First the good news, all you listeners out there in radio land – it's going to be a fantastically beautiful day." Harry yells. Merv groans.

"The sun is shining. It's a toasty 36 degrees. The sand is hot and the surf is up, up, up! The waves are cool, clear and pumping. Yep, it's a great day on the beach. And now for the bad news listeners – it's Monday morning and its back to work, school or college you go. To brighten up your day though, here's a little ditty to get you on your way..."

Mervin grabs his axe and takes aim. The axe arcs high in the air. Smash, crash. Mervin's radio is slammed to the floor. The blow up, air-axe pillow, gives a couple of pathetic bobs and falls beside the radio alarm, which will live to see another ugly morning. It has survived the axe attack many times before.

With another groan, Mervin slowly dresses. He scoffs down some brekkie. He grabs his bag and heads out the door, looking as sad as a basset hound.

Meanwhile, Barbie, his neighbour jumps out her front door and launches herself into the day. Her knapsack's full. Her bobby socks are pulled up and looking perfect. Her head set's on and she is singing along with FM Harry's song. As she skips down the path, her "I Love Mondays" badge glistens in the morning sunlight. Merv wishes he had his air pillow handy again.

Well, we're all different I guess. How well we cope with going back to work or school or whatever varies for each of us. Some of us can enjoy

life no matter whether we are at work or at play. That's a great way to be. For others of us, the weekend's no sooner over, and we're hanging out to get our teeth in to the next one. And when that weekend's all gobbled up, we're watching out for the next one, in five long days time.

When you think about it though, it's no wonder so many of us end up living for the weekends. Living in this country means you're living on a beautiful island surrounded by surf, bays, coves and other islands. Inland, we've got the most humongous rocks on planet earth, deserts and rivers, rainforests and waterfalls, mountains and lakes. The list goes on and on. If you gave yourself a year to travel around the Land of Oz, think of the travel inventory you could write yourself. Start at Surfers Paradise, head north to Noosa, norther to the Great Barrier Reef, even norther up to the Daintree, across to Darwin, down to Ayers Rock, across the Nullarbor, over to Rottenest, back to the cities, into the mountains for some snow, over to Tazzy for some wilderness. Then, when you've covered Australia, beautiful New Zealand is just a hop, skip and a jump away. God has given us a great world and it's all there for us to enjoy and appreciate.

God made this planet a good one and He made it for our pleasure – all because God loves us. Being in the great outdoors can remind us of how great our Creator is. That's one of the many reasons why I'm so into God – because God's such a fantastic creator.

You know what else I love about God? Well, lots of things actually, but let me tell you about this one just now. I love how God tells us to take it easy, sometimes. God commands us to take some time off and enjoy the gifts he's given us, and while we're at it a bit of worshipful appreciation sent his way would be fitting wouldn't it!

Now there's the kind of God I want to be with. A God who tells us not to work all the time; to make sure we are using a sensible percentage of our time to play, recreate, rest and relax ... Yeah, alright God, sounds good to me!

It's good advice and we all know it. But we don't always follow it. Work is good. It's a gift to be appreciated too – just ask any one who's been long term unemployed against their will. But, to work all the time, is a sin. And like all sin, it is soul destroying. Workaholism will makes you sick in one way or another, sooner or later. Some of the possible symptoms include stress, emotional breakdown, relationship breakdown, loss of interest in life itself, losing sight of the big picture, and even that disease where you become a drag to be around – boringpersonitis.

There's no good excuse for it either. Here we are in a holidaymaker's heaven, with time off every week, heaps of long weekends and at least four weeks annual holidays. What to do with that leisure time? The options are endless. You could get into surfing or snow skiing, wave jumping or water skiing, fishing or just fooling around, abseiling or art. If that all seems out of reach there's always the good old video parties with your friends on a Friday night, the local church group socials, cruising the streets, meeting your mates at the mall or a coffee shop, or lazing around with a good book or magazine. Sure, limited spending money can restrict your leisure options. You don't need to have cash to have fun though. While it can be tough when you can't afford to go out to the latest movie with your friends, there are probably others in the same boat.

Instead of sitting at home wishing you were elsewhere, why not choose someone who's in the same boat as you and pay them a surprise visit? Expand your leisure habits by mixing with a different crowd, doing something out of the ordinary, or even, dare I say it, spending time with your family (gasp!). Get yourself out of a rut by being creative with the way you use your spare time.

The world's your oyster, but don't forget there's the pearl of great price within it. Enjoying ourselves is great. It's important. It refreshes us. It renews us. God wants us to enjoy our time off. But with so many exciting things to do, we can get so caught up in the spectacle of life, that we forget the Giver of Life. If we do that – if we leave God out of our leisure time – we're missing the whole point of life itself. Enjoyment and

fun are God's gift to us. If we are so wrapped up in the presents that we don't even notice the giver, then we're losing the biggest thrill of all. Those times when we realise that the good things we enjoy come from God can be really exhilarating. What's more, God is right there beside us, enjoying us enjoying his gifts!

To know God and to feel God's love for me – that's the ultimate thrill. I'd rather have that than the perfect wave – and that's really saying something coming from a surfer! But the great thing is, I don't have to miss the perfect wave to catch God's love. As a matter of fact the perfect wave has within it the perfect love of the Creator. While I'm out there surfing I'm with God and God is with me, we can enjoy each other's company out there as much as we can at the Bible Study group. That doesn't mean forget the Study group! It means that whatever it is that you are into, God's there with you. Enjoy God's company! Enjoy his gifts. Come on get in to it!

#### **Reflection.**

\*Take some time soon to do one of your very favourite things in life, and be in conversation with God as you do it. \*Read Genesis 1 v 31 – 2 v 4 & Exodus 20 v 8 – 11

\*Our leisure time presents us with the opportunity to get closer to God in some excellent ways. Having free time on our hands can also present us with plenty of temptations. Are we honouring God in the use of our leisure time? Eg. \*Do the videos/ movies we watch use violence or sex in ways that degrade or exploit people? How do we treat our opponents when we play sport? \*Do we ever take foolish risks or endanger others under the guise of having fun? \* Are we being responsible in our use of money spent on leisure? Etc.

Get out there and have some fun! Enjoy your God given presents. And while you're doing it, remember, (in the words of Peter Garrett from Midnight Oil), be green, clean and serene, you know what I mean.

## Silly Man.

There once was a man who lived in an extraordinary place. The man himself however, was quite ordinary – except for one thing. He loved excitement. He thrived on excitement. He looked for excitement as often as he could. He read book after book in his search for it. He had a whole library full of adventure books. He would often stay up late in to the night reading his latest one. He would regularly search the inter net, hunting down stories or computer games for adventure and excitement.

He would also watch T.V. when there were exciting movies on. He often sent away to video libraries to hire the most exciting latest releases. You see, there were no video shops where this ordinary man lived, for he lived in a most extraordinary place.

He lived in a jungle, on the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea. Pirate ships often sailed by, in close to shore, right below his house, hiding their treasures in the caves at the bottom of his cliff. Sometimes, rival pirate bands would have sea battles right in front of the man's house. The sounds of the cannons would disturb his reading and he would grumpily jump up and shut the windows to muffle the noise, and then return to his adventure book.

From his house on the cliff he also had a great view of the beach where the golden, tanned, natives lived. They were a friendly band of people who played games by the sea and would ride planks of wood on the rolling waves. They could do all kinds of amazing tricks on their surf boards. At night, they'd light fires on the beach and sing wonderful, lilting love songs.

If the locals sang too loudly, the man would turn up the volume of his T.V. set to be sure he wouldn't miss even one exciting moment of his exciting movie. Sometimes he had to turn the volume up really loudly to hear, especially on the nights when wild beasts from the jungle roamed close to his back door and were roaring at each other.

Sometimes, just sometimes, he would get bored with his books, movies and games. He would walk to his window, glance out, sigh a sigh of boredom, and return to his lounge room. There he would sit and wonder, "Why is life so boring? What can I do now for some fun?"

And if he thought about it long enough, he'd start to get angry - angry at God. He'd shake his fist at the sky and say, "God, why have you made my life so dull, Dull, DULL?"

And outside his house, the locals sang, the wild beasts roared, the pirate ships sailed by, the surf rolled in, and the stars twinkled in the night sky.

### **Reflection.**

\*Pretend to ring the silly man up and try to straighten him out a bit.

\*If you like drawing, how about illustrating the story or doing a cartoon version of it ?

\*Do you take time out to enjoy life, creation, people, God?

What are some of your favourite ways to do that?

Say a thank you prayer to God for this great world.

Plan a day soon where you deliberately set out to appreciate God's gifts and life's opportunities. Get out there and live some adventures !

\*Try not watching T.V., not using your computer and not reading books for a week.

With all the extra time you have, go out with some friends, try something new, take up a hobby, get out of the house... the possibilities are endless.

\*Do a report on how life was different for that week.

## Origins.

Where did humans come from? From the apes.  
Where did the apes come from? They came from the monkeys.  
Where did the monkeys come from? From single cell amoebas originally.  
And where did those amoebas come from? God, I don't know!  
Obviously.

### Reflection

Consider the Big Bang Theory as an explanation for the starting point of all created life as we know it. Contrast it with the six days of creation that many Christians believe in literally. Is either theory less fantastic, less miraculous, than the other? If so, how?

What's more important for you, knowing how the world was created or knowing why the world was created?

Read Genesis chapters 1 & 2; Psalm 8; John 1 v 1-14

## Absolutely.

"There are no absolutes!"  
"I beg your pardon?"  
I said, "There are no absolutes."  
"Sorry, but could you run that by me one more time?"  
"Certainly. There are no absolutes."  
"Are you sure?"  
"Absolutely!"

### Reflection.

Some times we doubt our beliefs. How sure are you of the things you are sure of? Some times we doubt our doubts. How sure are you of the things you don't believe in?

When is it good to have an open mind? When is it good to have a closed mind? Atheists ask Christians for proof there is a God. What proof have atheists got that there isn't one?

## Thou Shalt Not Covet.

It was a good swell. One and a half to two meter, glassy conditions and breaking cleanly with long walls and tubing on the take off.

The sets came in three waves, with a few minutes lull in between, giving you plenty of time to paddle back to the take off spot without getting hammered on the inside. It was the kind of day many surfers would call perfect.

In the lull, a surfer paddled back to his take off spot, and while he waited for the next set, he sat on his board looking at the luxury high rise units towering from the headland. He saw the people on their balconies looking out over the sea. He saw then man on the balcony of the penthouse unit, sipping a drink with his beautiful wife by his side.

"That guy has got it all" the surfer thought. "What I wouldn't give to be in his shoes. Just imagine waking up every morning and being able to walk out on your front veranda and check the surf all down the beach. The money that guy must have! A rich guy, living in his penthouse, with a beautiful wife, probably a flash car and all the luxuries money can buy, living right on the point. Right on the headland! Unbelievable. Here I am with not even a thousand dollars in the bank and a dead end job. Man, my life sucks."

The sets came in and he took off on the biggest wave. The take off was good and he was straight into the tube, the section evened out and he shot out of the green room and gave a big aggressive carving cutback towards the foam, then slammed off the white water to turn back along the wave. Another steep section now just right for a vertical off the lip and as the wave closed out down the line he arced up to the top of the wave and floated across the breaking section then went down with the white water, keeping his balance right to the end, then tearing into the

white water and diving under it to paddle back out for more. His surfing seethed with resentment.

On the balcony of the penthouse, the rich guy watched the surfers ride. "Wow, did you see that one?" he asked his wife. "That guy is hot! What a great ride. What an excellent surfer! You know, a guy like that has got it all really. Young, fit and healthy, with his whole life ahead of him. What I wouldn't give to be in his shoes. Just imagine waking up every morning and being able to race down the beach, have a morning surf, go to some cruisey, low stress job, then at the end of the day leave it all behind you at the office and head right down to the beach again for another surf. The level of fitness that guy must have! And see how well he rides – he just defies gravity all the time. A young good looking surfer, living the simple life, with a beautiful girlfriend out there surfing with him, probably driving some old bomb that cost a few hundred bucks and not a care in the world. Unbelievable. Here I am working my guts out for all the expensive toys money can buy, but no time to enjoy them and too stressed to ever really live – wondering what's the point of it all anyway. Man, my life sucks."

He shook his head, sculled the rest of his drink and turned to go inside. Time to get ready for another long day at the office.

### Reflection

Counting your blessings is an old idea with timeless application. We can get so busy concentrating on the things we don't have, that we never appreciate how much we do have going for us. So, give it a go, count your blessings! Think of all the good things in your life.

Given that we are constantly bombarded with advertisements, do you suspect that there would be a direct correlation between people's level of satisfaction and their level of television viewing, magazine reading or even visits to shopping centres?

List some of your recurring whinges about life, or recurring wishes. Now imagine telling them to a person from a third world country. A group activity could be built around dramatising this idea.

One of the Ten Commandments warns us against coveting, (Exodus 20 v 17). Why might a loving God warn us against this mistake?

Some passages to reflect on.

You think you've got it tough? Read 2 Corinthians 11 v 23-33. Think about Christ's sufferings and compare them with your feelings of being hard done by.

Give up a prayer of thanksgiving for all the good things in your life.

## Amazing Grace.

What is "grace" anyway? They say, "It is the undeserved favour of God." Great.

What does that mean?

This is what I reckon grace is like.

You've just kicked someone in the shins and then you realise you've lost your bus money. You're desperate so you ask the person you've just kicked if you can borrow \$2.

They say "Sure. In fact, let me give it to you rather than lend it to you. In fact, here, take \$5 in case you need more". That's amazing grace.

This is what grace is like. You've just broken – well, smashed actually, a friend's favourite toy and then you ask them if you can see their brand new birthday bike. They say, "Sure. Would you like a ride? Would you like to borrow it for a day?" That's amazing grace.

This is what grace is like. You've taken a week off uni because the weather's beautiful and it's so nice on the beach and the waves are up. You go back to uni the next week all prepared to face the music. One of your lecturers bumps into you in the car park and asks where your assignment is. The one that was supposed to be handed in two weeks ago, but you were given an extension, which ran out last Monday. You'd forgotten about it. You're in shock. You admit you wagged last week and you still haven't done it. She asks you a few questions about the assignment content. You give your answers. She says, "You seem to know the material. Don't bother about the assignment. I'll give you a pass anyway." That's amazing grace.

This is what grace is like. Your wife has just been out mowing the lawn, washing the car, trimming the hedge, ironing the clothes and painting the house (all before 9am). She comes in and you say to her, "Good morning, dear, how about a cup of coffee?"

And she says, "Sure, would you like me to fix you a roast dinner for breakfast too?" and she's not even being sarcastic. She actually does it! That's amazing grace.

This is what grace is. God gives you the most beautiful planet there is as a gift. He entrusts it and all the wonderful things on it into your care. He even gives you His most treasured possessions to enjoy –each other– and to look after. Then after awhile He sends you His son to give you a few tips on how to make the most of all these gifts. And what you do is, you spoil the planet, hurt the people and kill His son.

Then you realise what you've done and you say, "Sorry", and ask if you can start over. And God says, "Sure. No problem. I'll forgive you. And maybe I'd better give you my Holy Spirit as well to help you with your fresh start. I've bought Jesus back to life and He wants to help too. He'll always stay by your side to guide you, to support you, to encourage you, and to deal with your future mistakes as well. And while I'm at it, why don't I throw in eternal life as well for you. There you go. See how much I love you".  
That's Amazing Grace.

#### **Reflections.**

The story gives several examples of amazing grace, before talking about God's amazing grace towards us. Lengthen the story out by adding your own examples.

This story could be acted out while a narrator tells it.

John Newton, who wrote "Amazing Grace" many years ago, had been a slave trader. He had killed slaves who tried to escape. When he sang about being a wretch, he knew what he was talking about. When he wrote about God's grace, he also knew what he was talking about. "Amazing Grace" is in many hymn books. Try writing new verses.

Think over some of the best expressions of love, forgiveness or generosity you have ever received. Talk these over with God; relive them with Him in prayer, enjoying them all over again, and thanking him for them.

## Psalm 23ish.

God is looking after me. God's got it all under control. Life is sweet. Everything's cool.

God let's me hang out in some of the most excellent places, where I can get my head together, relax and get some peace of mind again; the quiet billabong; the waterfall with its rock pool; under a shady pandanus at the beach with the sea breeze tingling across my skin; even at home at night when I look up at the stars..

As I sit quietly in places like these, I sense God's presence and my world is good again. I can cope again. I am renewed, remade, and empowered – confident that it's all going to work out – because God cares for me.

But even in the tough times, you are there with me, God. When life is hard and I'm really down in the pits, and I can see no light at the end of the tunnel, I know you are with me and you'll make everything work out right somehow.

Even when that Grim Reaper comes staring me in the face, telling me my time is up, I'm not going to panic, because you'll step right on in there and deal with him. You'll hold the cross of Christ up and death will have no power over me. I'm going to live with you forever Lord.

Temptation, Sin, Hatred, Guilt, Death – and the whole lot of that evil gang, they might have thought they were going to get me; but no way! Sucked in fellas. You lose and God wins. God has invited me personally to his heavenly party. I'm going to be there with bells on, singing and dancing, groovin' and going off – just going wild with true ecstasy. Those enemies can look through the locked gates all they want, but I'm safe inside with my God and, "Ha, ha, you can't get me."

God, you have given me every good thing I could ever possibly need and then some extra as well. I know your goodness and love will be with me all my life; both in this world and the next. Wherever you are, that's where I belong too. I am totally glad to be with you.

**Reflection.**

Read the Bible's version of Psalm 23. Have a go at rewriting it yourself, then use it as a prayer to God.

How about trying this with other psalms, like Psalm 1; 8; 19; 37; 51; 63; 103; or 139.

## Psalm 83. A Militant Psalm.

God, how can you sit back and put up with this? Surely you aren't going to take this are you?

Check it out, God. The atheists are raging against you. Those who despise the Christian faith are doing all they can to murder, ( all over again), the Christ they say they don't believe in.

It's no secret or anything. They are proud of their rejection of you. They make it obvious in their disdain for the Church, for faith, for morals, for Christians and even for you yourself God. You can see it everywhere – in the newspapers, on the television, in movies – everywhere.

"Come on!" they say to each other, "We've grown out of those burdensome religious fairy tales. No one really believes them any more. We're sick of the restrictions and advice of the holy rollers. It's time for a new order, where the notion of God has no influence. Forget that God nonsense. Let's do what ever the hell we want to do."

And the rest of our Western society goes right along with the atheists. The other nations who worship other gods rejoice with the atheists at the downfall of Christianity. They watch how our people now read the star signs but laugh at those who read the Bible. They see how we believe nothing, hope nothing, and trust nothing beyond what we can see, feel. Taste or convert to money. So we live for pleasure, work for money, buy more toys, place more bets, get more drunk, do more drugs, do more shopping or visit the therapists to feel okay; or to fail to feel okay – and more than any other countries in the world, the people of the lands that have lost the faith, commit more suicides.

So God, give them what they want – nothing at all to do with you. Let them have their hearts desire. Let them burn with the firewood of their own foolishness for fuel.

### Reflection.

Ooooh! What do you think about that???

## Dust on the Street Directory.

Christians who've stopped reading their Bibles? Really? That's a mistake. Christians trying to live out their faith without referring to the Bible are like this.

A person sets out on a journey of faith. They jump in their faith mobile, and in our story the make and model they are driving doesn't matter because the end result is the same. It could be your trendy, new, exciting, power packed charismatic Porsche type faith vehicle. It could be your well to do, no nonsense, sophisticated, reverent, traditional Rolls Royce type faith vehicle. Perhaps it could be your basic evangelical, let's get from A to B and pick up others along the way as we go, mini-bus. Or it could be your average, middle-class, family, station wagon, built for comfortable cruising and painted in either liberal or conservative colours.

Whatever, it doesn't matter. As I said before, the end result is the same.

Anyway, our non-hero sets off on his faith journey, perfectly clear on the final destination. And he's got a directory to show him how to arrive there safe and sound. But he figures he can work it out as he goes along. So, he won't be needing that good ol' map. He sets off.

A couple of years later he starts to recognise some of the scenery.

It dawns on him with all the sharp, glaring clarity of the dawn on a dark, foggy morning that he's going around in circles.

The fact of it eventually pits its hands on its hips and stares him in the face accusingly. He's a bit embarrassed. He gets the feeling that people driving past have noticed his mistake and might be laughing at him. He gets this feeling because they have and they are.

He gets over his embarrassment when he realises that, the only way these people could be driving past him now, and know they've seen him before is because they must be driving around in circles too!

He feels a bit better when he's worked that out. He's determined not to make the same mistake twice.

So he plans a new mistake. In order to make up for lost time he tries harder. He plants his foot on the accelerator and goes faster. The residue of his embarrassment from the first mistake lingers, so he winds down his window and sings choruses loudly so everyone will know he has got his act together now.

The directory is still there. It waits. Unopened. A few years at that speed and he's covered lots of ground. He's gone a long way. He's left lots of others behind. He's also hopelessly lost.

He doesn't have a clue if he's any closer to his destination or not. Now he's frustrated and depressed. Where is God in all this? Why won't He speak to him and show him the way?

The directory waits, unopened.

He's tempted to get out of the car and forget the whole trip. Plenty of others have. But our friend is too committed to give in.

Another car drives past. He gets a flash of legless inspiration. Why not follow that car? It's a snazzy vehicle. The driver looks confident. He seems to know where he's going. "I'll follow him", he says.

So, he does. He tails the guy for a while and becomes more and more reassured. This guy is obviously a leader. He's so confident and self-assured and assertive. Just look at the way he calmly swerved to avoid the maniac that's now about to crash into his own car! Crash into his car!

He swerves, says some words not in the directory, (not that he'd know), and escapes tragedy.

The maniacs can't see where they're going at all. Their windscreen is cluttered with ripped out, screwed up pages from their directory. They're driving along at breakneck speed busily tearing out pages that they don't like. You know, pages they think aren't pretty, aren't modern, aren't true to their personal experience, the ones too hard for them to believe and so on.

They swerve recklessly on, sending people off the road everywhere.

Our non-hero focuses on the car in front, and thanks his lucky stars, (which the directory wouldn't approve of ... not that he would know), that he didn't fall victim to their stupidity.

This guy in front is so cool, calm and collected! He wonders why the journey of faith is so easy for his leader. He figures the man must be using his directory!

He figures wrong.

They are certainly covering new ground – no going around in circles this time. Just simply going the wrong way.

Something elbows him in his spiritual ribs and he asks himself, "How do I actually know that this way is the right way?"

He looks harder at the driver in front to see if he can pick up any signs of his maps being used. No indication of it. But he's sure got some interesting stickers there.

"God is dead!" one says. Another says, "Be your own God". Then there are others saying, "If God made it, he meant us to smoke it!" "If it feels good do it!" "The Devil made me do it!" "Guru Make-A-Fast-Buck for

me!" "Crystals make it clear." "I was a Viking Warrior in a Previous Life."  
"Transcendental Meditation – Let your Spirit do the Walking." "I survived  
Jonestown."

At this point our non hero thinks he might be in trouble, but he's not  
sure. Meanwhile his directory is giving off the biggest, silent scream he  
never heard.

Well, his adventures go on. You can probably imagine some of the other  
messes he gets into. But, by now, who cares? You and I have the point.

How's our own directory usage?

The directory waits, unopened?

#### Reflections

Check out what the Bible has to say about its usage. Hebrews 4:12; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Romans 5:14; Psalm 1:2-3; Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 119 (especially verses 1-24 and 97-112); Revelations 22:18-19; James 1:22-25; 2 Peter 1:16-21).

What are some of your favourite Bible passages?

How about making a video film clip of this story? Jane Pepper from Bracken Ridge made an excellent video clip from this story, which she used for a Youth Alpha Course. Good on you, Jane!

Where would you put most Christians you know on the scale below?

Most familiar with the  
ways of the World and \_\_\_\_\_  
has a life that  
demonstrates this.

More familiar with the  
ways of God and has a  
life that demonstrates  
this.

Where would you put your church on this scale?  
Yourself?

Your denomination?

## Sparks.

It began as a spark. A spark of truth about God. I'd always believed in God, but now something new was happening to me. I believed what the Christians said, about forgiveness, about God's love, about a life lived with and for God – a good life – a challenging, strong life, that would make me a part of God's solution to the world's problems, rather than being a part of the problem myself.

It was like a brilliant, glowing, warm spark of truth. I wanted it. I grabbed it with both hands and held it to myself until it burned deep within me, so deep that no one and nothing could ever pluck it out of me. And then with that one spark, I set out on my life with God. It wasn't all that I needed to know. I didn't believe, feel, understand all that God was – but I had enough to begin with.

There were more sparks to come, truths about Jesus as Saviour, Lord, Master, Friend and Brother. The feeling that Jesus was looking me right in the eye and calling, "Follow Me." And I did, and the sparks within were fanned into flames.

Then I learned about the Holy Spirit side of God and met God in that way. The spark of experiencing God at work within and through me was powerful and glorious and humbling.

Sparks come regularly. Sparks of love, joy, peace. Sparks about people, nature. Powerful sparks. Some have been too hot for me to handle and I've brushed them off me quickly before they've clung – sparks that would lead me towards an experience of God too awesome for me. And so I rejected them – making myself less than what I could have been if I'd had the courage to take them.

Some sparks I couldn't grasp – they were beyond me – and no matter how much I asked God or tried in my own strength He would not let me catch them – not yet. Illusive fireflies.

So here I am in a galaxy of sparks, seen only through spiritual eyes and a heart open to God. What will I learn next? How will God transform me next? What experiences of Jesus and the Holy Spirit still await me?

Loving Heavenly Father, give me the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the mind to understand, the heart to accept, and the power to live out the truths you present to me.

#### **Reflection.**

You could meet God in a thousand new ways, whether you've been a Christian all your life or whether you're not even sure God exists yet. All you have to do is to be open to the possibilities and be willing to say "Yes" to God when He calls.

Will you open your heart? Will you look for God's message to you in nature, in the lives of the people around you, as you read the Bible and other inspirational books, in the quiet moments you spend alone with God? It's up to you. The possibilities are endless! Talk to God now about your hopes and attitudes towards growing spiritually.

You might like to keep a record of the ways you encounter God and His truth, love, and power during the week. Maybe some of the experiences you would like to tell others about. Maybe some will need to be just between you and God.

## Growing Up.

Sonya pours out her heart over a cup of coffee. Her tears splash on the laminex of Bekky's kitchen table. Sonya lays out her life on the table like the jumbled pieces of a too hard puzzle.

Bekky listens. She cares for her friend. She knows she is going to have to be honest with her. Bekky will have to tell Sonya to "grow up". Maturity is the missing element in Sonya's puzzle of life.

The strange thing is that Sonya and Bekky are both twenty-four. Bekky was grown up at seventeen, maybe even fifteen. Sonya hasn't arrived yet. In fact, she may never get there.

The threads that bind maturity to age are flimsy and elastic. Sixty-five year old professors can act like spoiled brats, and twelve year old students can demonstrate the wisdom of the ages.

Age won't necessarily produce maturity. Experience can't guarantee it. Physical attributes such as size, development, beauty and strength are often irrelevant. Academic ability has nothing to do with it. Fashion consciousness, trendiness, sporting prowess, popularity, wealth, status – not of these mean maturity.

People don't seem to understand this. Well, at least Bekky's friends never did, Sonya especially.

Sonya has spent a lot of time laughing at Bekky over the years of their friendship. It was Bekky who was supposedly naïve, inexperienced, unadventurous- immature. How far from the truth that was!

Take all those parties through their teen years, for example, Sonya, booze in her glass, a smoke dangling from her lips and drugs in her pocket, would look across the crowded room at Bekky and shake her head.

Straight old Bekky, still sipping from the one drink she'd had all night, over in the corner with all the straight people.

Whenever Sonya tried to help get Bekky a little high, Bekky had a standard line for saying no. "Dummies for dummies, but not for me, pal." Sonya never got it. Babies put things in their mouths to feel safe and secure, to test out what things are like. Big babies do the same – they use cigarettes or alcohol or drugs. They're not mature enough to take life straight.

All those times Sonya and her friends were laughing at Bekky, Bekky was laughing right back at them.

And it wasn't just the party antics either. They recalled together a conversation between a group of them at college. They had sat around comparing their sex lives. Bekky was called naïve and immature for her pro-virginity ethics, and yet they were the ones who looked puerile to her.

Bekky was adult enough to be able to say "no", both to the pressuring of her boyfriends and to her own natural desires. The others seemed to be reckless and irresponsible with sex. They spoilt it and made it look dirty. Sonya only did it because she was afraid she'd lose her boyfriends. She lost them anyway.

It reminded Bekky of when Sonya was ten and the class bully regularly demanded her lunch money – and Sonya gave it with no questions asked, too intimidated to say "No".

It was after that conversation that Bekky coined the other phrase Sonya never really understood. Each time Sonya bragged about who she went out with and what they did, Bekky would ask, "I suppose you gave him your lunch money too". It's all Bekky could do. She had tried to explain things to Sonya before.

Sonya never listened to advice – another mark of her rampant immaturity. She always knew best. She could never humbly accept wisdom from others, let alone recognise it.

It was the same when Bekky warned Sonya that her parents would kick her out of home at the ripe old age of nineteen if she didn't start to share some of the responsibilities of the housework.

It's okay for little children to expect their parents to take care of them, to cook, sew, wash, mend for them, to make their beds and clean their dishes – but at nineteen? Come on! If you're not doing your share of the housework, then someone has to clean up your mess. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that's not real fair.

Sure Sonya's slaves, (her parents), ranted and raved and threatened her with eviction. Sonya came to Bekky then, too, crying about her parents not loving her. Bekky saw it as the most convincing evidence yet that her parents did love her. They were trying to make her grow up.

Sonya buckled under and started to help out, not out of consideration for others sadly, but only because she was afraid for herself. Perhaps they really would kick her out. Her parents thought at last she was growing up, but they misread her motives. Doing the grown-up thing out of childish motives doesn't count for much. Being grown up means thinking maturely and then making sure your actions measure up to your beliefs.

That's why Bekky couldn't understand how Sonya could say she was a Christian and actually mean it. Sonya said she believed in Jesus; he was her Saviour, friend and Lord. Bekky never saw Sonya's words match up to her life style- except maybe at church on Sundays where Sonya played "Christian" like a game of charades. But where was Sonya's obedience to Jesus? What sacrifices did she make for his sake?

People with integrity have lives that consistently match their words. Sonya's didn't.

Both girls got married. Sonya love to point out to others that Bekky married a man who played with a toy train set, while her man's toy was a Porsche. What Sonya failed to point out was that Bekky's man's toy wasn't ridiculously extravagant. He also gave a lot of money to charity. He believed that while children got gifts, adults give them. He was old enough to be giving back to others now.

Sonya's husband's toy cost plenty. It cost more than they had. He spent every cent he earned on paying off his toy, (and much of what Sonya earned as well). That's why Sonya is crying in Bekky's kitchen now.

Sonya has just found out she is pregnant. She will have to give up work if she is to have a baby. Then they won't be able to afford their toy, the beloved Porsche.

So now they have a choice. Get rid of the baby or get rid of the toy? If you're not alarmed at this point in the story, wake up now. Sonya has acted like a child all her life so far, even when the stakes have been high. Is she likely to grow up now? Going on her past record, I don't think so. Some people just never grow up. But there's always hope. Better a late start on maturity than skipping it forever.

Now what about you and me? Have we grown up? Are we at least on the way? Or are we still sucking our dummies, handing over our lunch money, avoiding work, thinking only of ourselves, wanting to always get but never giving, saying but then not doing, believing but not obeying?

It's all up to us. No one can grow up for us. Don't be like Sonya. Adults who haven't grown up are such sad specimens of God's human race.

Reflection.

If you were Bekky, what advice or suggestions would you like to make to Sonya? Write her a letter.

What advice would you like to give to yourself?

## Going Against The Flow.

Imagine a picture of all the people in the world, all walking in the same direction, and there in the middle of them, is a guy who is running in the completely opposite direction.

That guy would have to be Jesus. Jesus going against the flow, as if running against the wind, as if paddling against the current, running calmly and confidently, but with a determination born from the knowledge that his way is absolutely right.

The sound track for the picture has a million, million voices saying, "Go this way!" "My way is right!" "This way for sure." "Everybody else is doing it, this must be right." "If you're cool, you're going my way." "Hey, you've got to keep in step with the times." "Believe this, believe that."

Though they point to different things in different directions, they are so blended together as a mass and their horizon and destination is so wide, that really there is only one direction they all point to – the wrong direction.

And through the rabble of all the voices comes a crystal clear call, the call of Jesus. It does not silence the other voices. It does not shout them down, but it's heard because it is so distinctly different from all the rest.

The call of Jesus saying, "I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life. Follow me."

And look, there are those few in the crowd who hear and who obey and who turn right around and follow Jesus.

But see what is facing them – a multitude of other people staring at them, heading against them, shouting at them, “Not that way, this way!”

The odds against Jesus and his team seem enormous. The sight of all the opposition is too much for some of the followers. They lose heart or they are tempted by the lures of lust or lies, desires or greed, by loved ones or by enemies, and they turn back, going with the crowd, being shoved along by the sea of humanity that pushes them further and further in the wrong direction.

Take notice of this great throng of people going wrong and you’ll see some of them fall on the way, only to be trampled by the masses. Occasionally, you’ll see one fall from a drug overdose, one for alcoholism, another from a sexually transmitted disease contracted from a promiscuous life-style.

Occasionally another collapses from the sheer depression of walking along in life aimlessly – with no purpose and no fulfilment. Some go down because they have poured their whole lives in to achieving a goal, and they do achieve it, but then they realise the goal itself was insignificant. All that effort, all those sacrifices – for something that was meaningless.

Yet another falls from heartbreak as the person who had pledged their ever-lasting love now pronounces they feel their love didn’t last forever after all.

But the ones who fall on the way seem to be only a few compared to the others who press on happily, proudly, successfully, heading ultimately for their own destruction in the eternal scheme of things.

In the end, in the very end, the masses are too far removed from Jesus to grasp his out-stretched hand and be wrenched to safety, even if they would reach out to him.

Jesus moves on. Still calling, calling and some turn around and follow.

And you and me? Which way are we going? The way of Jesus – against the flow of popular opinion or are we going the way of the world, believing that people know better than God?

Think about it. Think a lot about it. Be one of the few who do.

#### **Reflection.**

Jesus invited people to get involved with him, to follow him, to journey with him. He did this because he knew he could help them tap in to all the best things this life has to offer.

Jesus is the bread of life that nourishes the soul. John 6 v 25 – 40.

Jesus is the light of the world who can help people see what really matters and what's really going on down here. John 8 v 12.

Jesus used several other analogies to describe his mission. Check them out for yourself and decide what you think he was getting at.

Jesus, the good shepherd, (John 10 v 1 – 18);

The resurrection and the life, (John 11 v 17 – 44);

The way, the truth and the life, (John 14 v 5 – 14);

The true vine, (John 15 v 1 – 17).

Going against the flow..

Compare what modern youth culture says about the following issues with how you think Jesus would suggest we deal with them.

Issue	Youth Culture	Jesus
Money		
Sport		
Sex		
The Poor		
God		

Popularity  
Alcohol  
Losers

## Here's To The Rose Instead Of The Thorn.

Here's to the thorn instead of the rose. The rose has been praised enough. Time for the thorn to be recognised. Strong defender. Clever protector. Perfect in design. Built for a purpose. Set with a mission from God.

The rose you must handle with care, lest you damage it. But the thorn? The thorn you handle with care for totally different reasons. To hurt the rose, you've got to get past the thorn. The thorn. You've got to admire it when you think about it.

And here's to the Remora instead of the shark. The shark has had enough power and glory. Remora, you brilliant fish! That's some work place you've chosen, little fish of courage and bravado. But hey, is there any living thing that's safer than you? The Remora. You've got to admire it when you think about it.

And here's to the bat instead of the dove. Yes, the Bat with its ugly little pushed in face and creepy skin for wings. The crazy thing sleeps upside down for goodness sake! And in the darkest of nights, in the pitch black of the night, in the light forsaken cave, where all hope would be lost for others, the bat sees all. The darkness is as light for the Bat - as it is for God her creator. This wild bird thing with built in sonar, flying through the blackness at breakneck speed. You've got to admire it when you think about it.

So here's to the hippo instead of the lion this time; and to the flea instead of the puppy for once. And, at last, here's to the ugly instead of the cute, the fat instead of the thin, the weak instead of the powerful, the poor instead of the rich, the sinner instead of the saint.

You've got to admire it when you think about it – the way Jesus lifted the lowered and lowered the lifted. Jesus knew what he was doing all along!

For Reflection.

Remember any stories of people that were considered by others as losers, who Jesus loved and elevated?

Hunt through the gospels and find stories where Jesus related to children, women, the sick, the disabled, the deranged, the repentant sinners, etc. So how did he treat them?

Do you know the story of the Ugly Duckling? If you do, tell it. If you don't, find someone who does and ask them to tell it to you. Better still, track a written version down and read this classic story. It's a beauty!

How good are you at seeing the good in others around you? Do you rate people according to the norms of your culture or are you looking at people through God's eyes? Define the difference between the two before giving your answer.

Check these remarkable passages out!

Matthew 11 v 20 – 30; 1 Corinthians v 25 – 31; 1 Corinthians 3 v 18 – 23.

## Old Boat.

The Island is about three kilometres off shore. It only works when the swell is big. On the right day though, it can have perfect waves peeling all the way along both sides. From the mainland you can watch surfers riding classis waves on either side. Today was one of those days, two metres and grinding both ways.

Some surfers have paddled across to The Island but that's the stuff legends are made of. Your normal mere mortal surfer isn't fit enough to paddle the six kilometres there and back, plus put in a solid surfing session for two or three hours in big surf. Your average surfer is also too aware of, and worried about, the shark situation to enjoy a good hard paddle across that expanse of ocean. If you're halfway across and start seeing fins, you still have a real long way to paddle before your feet are on dry, shark-free land, you know what I mean?

That's why the crew on this particular day were loading up the big rubber dingy with surf boards, body boards and some supplies for lunch. The inflatable rubber ducky was pumped up, the motor attached and all the stuff loaded aboard. The gang pushed her out deep enough for the propeller to be lowered then jumped in. The engine was cranked up and away they went, full speed ahead.

There were two girls and three guys in the rubber dingy. They were all pretty excited. This was going to be a great day. Great waves, great company and the sense of adventure that came with surfing off shore.

About halfway across, they saw this old wooden boat heading towards them, coming in from some deep sea fishing trip out beyond The Island.

Now Peter was a bit of a joker, and like to do whatever he could to impress Kate and Sarah. He steered their ducky over closer to the boat and killed the throttle. He signalled to the oncoming boat which responded and drew alongside. Jeff had seen Peter in action before and groaned, "Oh yeah. Here we go again."

The boat was old, really old. So was its captain. His face was weathered from years of sun and salt sea spray. His muscled but tired body was overly brown and wrinkled. A long white beard swept across his bare chest with even the slightest whisper of wind.

Peter said just loud enough for the crew's ears only, "Hey check this out. It's King Neptune himself". They all chuckled. Then to the old boaty he called, "Hey matey, howza surf over there? Pumping or what?"

The old man of the sea ignored the question. He looked along the length of their craft. He looked at each of the young people. Then he called back, "Right about now I reckon you'd want to be getting in my boat, hey?"

The comment didn't make sense to them. John, the master of the big and brilliant come-backs, blurted out, "What?"

The seaman said again, "You'd be wanting to come aboard this boat now I reckon."

The girls looked at each other, and fought back the giggles. Peter at the back of the dingy said, "Oh yeah. We were just thinking that, weren't, we girls?"

The girls cracked and burst out laughing.

The seaman gathered up a coiled rope and motioned for John to catch it when he threw it.

John raised a hand and gave a not very nice hand signal. Peter yanked the engine back to life. As they sped off he called, "Not today thanks, old fella".

Jeff looked back at the old man, the distance between them growing rapidly, but he could still see the concern etched on that rugged old face. Then the man shrugged, giving up, and turned away to go on about the business of running his boat.

Jeff thought about the mainland and how far away it now was. He looked at The Island, still a long way off. He looked at the water around him. It was deep and dark and the deeper he looked into the water the more mysterious it became. Who could tell what secrets were right there beneath them? Who could tell what eyes couldn't pierce? There were bubbles drifting past, coming up to the surface and bursting as they reached the surface. A stream of bubbles. Where were the bubbles coming from? His eyes traced the stream slowly to the front of their dingy. The bubbles were coming from under the front of their rubber dingy. Their rubber inflatable dingy! Jeff moved along to where the bubbles were coming from under them. He leant over the side. He found the source.

The others stopped laughing gradually, noticing Jeff checking the inflatable. He pushed himself back to an upright position and turned to the others. He was pale. His eyes were looking past them, way past them, all the way back to the old man and his boat.

**Reflection.**

If Old Boat is a parable, what do you think it's about?

Can you find a message in it about experience, wisdom, ageism, decision making, salvation, hedonism, the Church, faith, God, humility, the price of tea in China...well, you never know, maybe it's about that!

If you had been in that inflatable how would you have reacted to the old man at first?

Do you reckon the old boaty might have turned his boat around to follow the younguns' in case they changed their minds ..or not? Why/ why not?  
Does God always keep on pursuing us even when we've rejected his wisdom? Does he ever just let us go our own way? (Check out Mark 10 v 17 – 27 before you answer)

## He Ain't Heavy.

(This story is a narrated activity for use with a group – or several groups of about 7 or 8 people.)

My voice is the voice of Social Conscience – or lack thereof; the voice of, "Me first, others if I want to".

You are who you are.

You don't have to do what I say but you can if you want to. As I speak, listen to your heart. See if my words make any difference to you. See if my words make any difference to how heavy your brother feels.

The voice of Social Conscience speaks.

"He ain't heavy. He's my brother. Better pick this guy up. He needs help."

(Have the group physically pick up one of the group members and hold them up.)

"Not bad. I like this. It feels good to help someone. It feels good to be a part of a team that's helping others. I like these people. I like myself. I like this guy I'm carrying too. Don't I? Well, actually, I don't know him. I don't know him from a bar of soap actually!"

"He's not even from my country. He's from the other side of the world. Why do we have to carry him if he's from the other side of the world? Why doesn't someone over there do it? Surely he's their responsibility.

There are millions of people over there –why are we carrying him instead of them doing it?”

“Because all those millions are in trouble too? They need carrying too?”

“Oh.”

“So what are we supposed to do, carry them all? That’s ridiculous. I can’t do that. I can’t carry all those people. This is getting to be a hopeless situation. It’s futile. The problem’s too big. I can’t do anything about it.”

“I’m carrying someone you say?”

“Yes, but that’s only one among millions. That’s not going to change the world.”

“This is stupid. Carrying one guy while millions of his friends lie around him hopeless and helpless. Why should this guy be the lucky one anyway? It’s a bit unfair really.”

“I don’t like this anymore. It’s too complicated. Hey look at him. This guy is black! Or is it yellow? No one told me he wasn’t the same colour as me. Actually, he smells too – he’s dirty. Why doesn’t he get his act together and shower like me? Why doesn’t he get a job and live like I do, look like I do and smell like I do?”

“He’s different. So are his million mates. Maybe we’re spoiling their culture, coming in here like this and carrying him. Maybe it’s cultural for them to be dirty, smelly, homeless and hungry. These people don’t even call God by his proper name. I think we should be forcing our world view of wealth, health and three meals a day and God on them.”

“Besides he’s getting heavy. I’m getting tired of this. I might just slip away. There are others here who are doing the job. They’re stronger than

me. They want to do this more than I do. They won't miss me. I've got better things to do than this. I might send these people a couple of bucks to help them keep up the good work though – if it's tax deductible."

"But then you're never really sure the money will get to the ones who need it are you! I don't want to be irresponsible with my money."

"I'll go away and think about it. Hey what's this? Good movie on tonight."

"I'll think about it later."

Reflections.

Activity: Separate into small groups of 7 or 8 people. Read the story aloud, and have the groups lift one member of the group up at the appropriate time and hold onto them until the last paragraph. (Be safety conscious with this, okay!)

Discussion questions.

What are the top ten excuses people give for not getting involved in supporting aid organizations?

What motivates those who do support aid groups?

Check out Matthew 25:31-46. What is Matthew saying about helping others?

How does helping others affect our relationship with God?

## God Couldn't Possibly Love Me.

"God couldn't possibly love me – I'm too bad!"

Are you a prostitute? A murderer? A thief? A traitor? A coward?  
Oh, I see, you're bad but not that bad. Well don't you know that God loves even prostitutes and thieves and murderers? Jesus proved that God loves "bad" people when He showed God's love and forgiveness to them while He was with them in person. Some of his best disciples used to be "bad" people. No one is so bad that God stops loving them. No one is so bad that they can't be forgiven. God loves everyone. God loves you!! It's as simple as that.

"God couldn't possibly love me – I'm no one special."

Who says you're no one special? Not God. You may think you aren't and other people might tell you that you aren't, but no one has convinced God that you aren't. To God, you are one of His children. That's enough to make you very, very special. Good parents love all their kids and God is a very good parent indeed – the Best!! Believe it; you are special to God.

"God couldn't possibly love me – I'm only one person among zillions of people. He's got too many other, nicer people to look after."

Who do you think God is? A mere human or something? Remember God doesn't have limits to his ability. He's not like us. We may only have room in our hearts for a few people but God doesn't have that sort of limitation. After all, God is God. He has the capacity to know every person who has ever lived, who is living, and who ever will live. God knows us all so intimately, each and every one of us, that He knows the number of hairs on our head. For God nothing is impossible – even loving every single person – including you!

And as for the bit about "He's got too many other nice people to look after" – who do you think God is? He's not like a TV quiz show host who is only interested in the winners. He is concerned with everyone. And from among all the zillions of people on earth that He loves, He also has His eyes on you personally. No kidding! He loves you personally and he loves you whether you are a winner, a loser, or a little of both.

"God couldn't possibly love me – I sure don't feel like he does."

Feelings are unreliable. Do you always feel a deep love for your closest friends or family? Of course not, but that doesn't mean you don't love them. Feelings only surface occasionally. Facts stay with us. "God loves you" is a FACT and you will probably only FEEL His love from time to time. The rest of the time you just have to believe He does. Trust Him. He says He loves you in the bible. He didn't get the thing written for nothing you know. The Bible is God's message to you and to everyone else too. Part of His message is that He loves you. See for yourself.

#### **Reflection.**

Check out these passages and have a go at putting them in to your own words.

John 3 v 16: "God was so wrapped in the people of the world, that he sent his only Son, Jesus, to us. The deal is that everyone who believes in Him can be forgiven and experience eternal life."

Psalms 103 v 8, 11, 12, 13: "The Lord is merciful and loving, slow to become angry and full of constant love. That means he's really patient and tolerant. How much does he love us? As high as the sky is above the earth, that's how great his love is for those who choose to go with him. How much is God prepared to forgive us though? Heaps! As far as the east is from the west, that's how far he removes our sins from us. God is like the ultimate, perfect, mum or dad, treating us as their much loved children."

John 16 v 27b: "...for the Father himself loves you. He loves you simply because you love me and have believed that I came from God. You don't have to earn God's love. Just believe in Jesus."

1 Peter 5 v 7: "Don't stress about life. Put all your worries in God's hands because he cares about you."

1 John 4 v 8b – 10: "Whoever does not love can't know God because God is love. Love is God's main personality trait. God showed his love for us by sending Jesus into the world, so that we might have life through him. This is what love is; it's not that we have loved God so well that we've earned some brownie points. No way. It's all about the fact that God loved us even though we are real bad, and he sent his Son to forgive us for all our sins."

Romans 8 v 38 – 39: "Look, I'm positive that nothing can separate us from God's love; not death nor anything that happens in life, neither angels nor devils, nothing in the here and now and nothing that might come up in the future either, nothing that might come from heaven and certainly nothing that might come from hell, in fact there is in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is our through Jesus our Lord."

Revelations 1 v 5: "...Jesus is the ultimate. He is Lord. He loves us and by his death he has freed us from our sins...."

## Love One Another!

Jesus is pretty demanding isn't he! Just read John 15 v 9-17 if you don't believe me. That's where Jesus tells us to love one another. That's right – love one another. That's a big ask.

Can you love others? Do you care about others? I'm sure we all do to some degree at least.

A guy asked Jesus once, "What's the most important commandment?" Good question for a Jew of Jesus' day. The Jews had 631 commandments to learn, obey...and worry about. Imagine that! 631. How many of us can't even count up that far yet?

You're mucking around at home and mum says, "Hey, cut it out you guys. How many times do I have to tell you commandment no.246?" "Yeah, right mum. Rule no. 246...now which one was that exactly? Don't eat animals with cloven hooves...or was it the one...don't eat the mildew out of your belly button...or...maybe, don't kill your little brother."

Or you're down at the markets with your friends. Some heavy-duty religious Pharisee dude bowls up to you all red faced hot and puffy. He starts ranting and raving about no. 597, and wow are you going to cop it. You and your friends are frantically counting them off in your mind. 1. No other gods but me. 2. No idols. 3. Don't blaspheme  
It's a long way to rule 597.

Before you've worked it out, the Pharisee has dobbed on you all over the place. You've been grounded for 2 weeks, spent every afternoon at school in detention; and down at the Synagogue they've sent you back to the kindergarten class of the Sabbath School till you learn your rules again.

Then it finally comes to you.

Oh yeah. Rule 597. Don't pick your nose and put the booga on the priests.

Remembering all those rules is hard enough. How about trying to obey them! Quick game everyone. A rule survival game. See who's the last person standing.

Everyone stand up. Now, sit down if you have ever, ever told a lie.

Hey, I've got 630 rules to go and you're all out already – especially those who are still standing.

Good thing our buddy Jesus has got our sins covered hey!  
The only way we are getting into heaven is through being friends with Jesus. Certainly not by trying to obey 631 rules.

Now, getting back to that guy who asked Jesus, "What's the most important commandment?"  
Jesus answered him, "Two things God requires: Love, (say them out loud readers if you know them), God and love others. Do these and you'll be obeying all the rules God is interested in."

Cool! Love God and love others. 631 versus 2. I'm with you Jesus.

Well, yeah, it is cool. Love. That's what Jesus wants us to do. Love God and love others. Sound easy, do you reckon?

Let's vote. Choices are – easy – not so easy.

Hands up for easy. Hands up for not so easy. Hands up for, 'What was the question, I wasn't paying attention?'

In that John 15 v 9-17 Bible passages, Jesus is talking to his friends about love. Let's try a memory challenge here. Read these points and try to remember as many as you can.

1. Jesus tells his friends he loves them.
2. If you obey Jesus' commands, then you will remain in his love.

3. Obeying his commands will bring you joy. Obeying Jesus commands is the most excellent, wonderful and fulfilling way to enjoy life.
4. What is his command? "My commandment is this: love one another just as I love you."
5. The greatest love a person can have for their friends is to give up their life for them.
6. You are my friends, if you do what I command you.
7. I've chosen you to go out there and do some serious good in the world. I want you to make a positive and permanent difference.
8. God will help you, just ask him.
9. The 9<sup>th</sup> point Jesus makes is that 9 points are too many. So he summarises them all. "This then is what I command you; love one another."

Okay, close the book now and see how many you remembered.

So we've got the message. Love one another.  
How? The same way Jesus loves us. How's that? Enough to die saving us.  
Enough to live his life saving us too.

Now I've got to be a bit careful here. Jesus wants us to love one another as he loves us. But I don't want you to get fixated on the idea of being willing to die for others.

I don't want you hanging around busy roads watching for pedestrians who are about to get hit by trucks – so that you can heroically dive out and push them to safety – and then get squished yourself.

And I don't want to see you all hanging around the beach hoping for shark attacks...so that you can swim out and feed your leg to the sharks instead of someone else getting eaten – unless of course it's me you're saving.

I don't want you day dreaming about some big, heroic, extreme, two minute burst of love that's over in a flash.'

The real challenge for us is in putting love in to practice on a day by day basis through out our whole lives. It's in the routine things of life that our caring is really tested.

You want a real tough challenge; try watching TV and loving others as you do it. Check this out.

Your favourite show, or a great movie is about to come on. You throw yourself into the best lounge chair in the room.

Babow. How come you get that seat?

Love one another as I have loved you. How did Jesus love us? By giving up his life for us. How should we love other? By giving up our life for them. We sacrifice what we want for the sake of others. We put their needs before our own.

Okay, okay, here dad, you have the best seat in the house. I'll just sit in this scuz bucket one with the pokey spring that jabs you right in the b...back.

Your sister says casually, "Hey there's a good show on channel9."  
Your show is on channel 10. Love one another as...  
Forget it! I'm watching channel 10. Babow.

Your show starts. There's a lot of noise out in the kitchen. Mum's doing the dishes. Mum also made tea. Mum also went to work today to help pay for tea. Mum could probably do with a rest. This is mum's favourite show too.

So what are you going to do?

"Mum, can you keep that racket down? I can't hear the tele."  
Love one another...

The phone rings. You tell your sister to get it.

It's for you. Your best friend. You groan. You're about to say you're not in, when an ad comes on. You race to the phone. This better be quick. There will probably only be about 4 ads. You pick up the phone to talk to your best friend and you say, "What?"

Oh, um, they just kind of rang for a bit of a chat.  
"Call me back at 10:30 ok?" you say as you hang up.

Your friend just wanted to talk because their parents are splitting up and your friend needed you for support. But you wanted to watch tele.

Love one another as I love you. The greatest love a person can have for their friends is to give up their life for them.

You run back to the TV. Oh good. The ads are still on.

A World Vision ad comes on. For just \$1 a day, you can save the life of a starving child. The 40-hour famine is coming up. Kids can be famine busters by missing a meal and raising money. How about getting involved?

You hate these ads. Dad asks if you are going to go in it again this year.

No way. I did it last year. It was horrible. I hate going hungry. You think going hungry for a few hours is a pain, you want to try it as a lifestyle!

Your sister says she's going to do it. Will you sponsor her?  
Yeah, all right. How much? \$2.! Per hour? Get real. For the whole lot. She calls you a scab. Well it just went to \$1 now sis.

Love one another as I have loved you. The greatest love a person can have for their friends is to give up their life for them.

Wait on, wait on. Those starving people aren't my friends. No, but Jesus cares about them. Jesus is your friend. He's kind of counting on you to help them on his behalf.

By the end of that TV show, you could well be a seething mass of guilt-ridden resentment. You got what you wanted though.

Or did you?

That's the thing with selfishness. It looks like, feels like, smells like and tastes like...spew.

It's an awful thing. Show me a really yucky face. That's what selfishness is like.

Love is a roast dinner with your favourite dessert by comparison.

Love brings joy.

Love is good!! It feels good to help someone.

There is a special satisfaction in caring for a friend who needs a shoulder to cry on. There's a rush of good vibes you experience when you do something kind hearted or generous. Like helping a friend at kindy find their lost toy.

It feels good to give to people in need. Now put on a happy, excited, feeling-good face. Go on, I dare you! That's how it can feel to love others.

Loving might be a commandment. And it might be hard sometimes. It certainly requires self-sacrifice. But it's not a bad thing. It's a great thing. It makes your life richer, fuller, happier, with a greater sense of purpose and fulfilment. And all the time your intention was to do good for someone else, but hey, surprise surprise, it did you good too!

This is my commandment, that you love one another...that my joy may be in you and that your joy will be complete.

That's enough talk. Let's go do it. We are all loving others to some degree already. Let's get out there and love louder, care harder, be kind faster. In the name and power of Jesus, let's get out there right now and give some love to someone. Let's do it.

**Reflection.**

Wow, that was a really long story. Summarise it into one sentence, but as a bit of a challenge, you can't use the words, "love", "care", "caring", "good" or "kindness".

Who is one of the most loving people you know, and how do they earn that vote of confidence from you?

Is that person perfect? (Probably not, but that doesn't stop them from giving what love they are capable of does it?)

**Love Action Challenge.**

Try doing something loving on each of these levels. Do a level a day and see how far you can go. Pray for inspiration and help first.

Level 1 – Easy. Your good friends.

Level 2 – Fair. Your family members.

Level 3 – Getting tougher. An acquaintance.

Level 4 – Challenge Zone. Someone you don't like very much.

## If Jesus Were A Teenager Today.

If Jesus were a teenager today he'd like bands like Midnight Oil, Rage Against The Machine, Fuel and Live. He'd invite Marilyn Manson to get out of his tree and come to lunch.

He'd invite Courtney Love to hang up her image, give her money to the poor and to come and follow him – and sincerely hope that she would.

He'd wear t-shirts with greenie slogans and Amnesty International buttons. He'd have a tattoo that says, "Love can conquer anything."

He'd go on shows like, Who Wants To Be A Millionaire and give the winnings to worthy charities. He'd go on Survivor and tell everyone to sabotage the game by refusing to sacrifice anybody. Jesus would cry at the movies, a lot, but not when most people were crying. Also when watching the news. Especially when watching the news.

He'd tell parables where aids sufferers, street people or the disabled were heroes and the cool, popular kids were the bad guys. People who are fat, ugly and have lots of acne would be the first people he'd talk to at school each day. He'd love nerds and stars equally.

If Jesus were a teenager today, he'd heal the road-shredded skaties, and the bungie jumpers with dislocated backs. He'd deliver the addicts from the demons of drugs, drink, gambolling and shopaholicism.

If ever he came across dealers at a party he would publicly humiliate them and give them hell. He'd shame them out to the max.

He'd knock over the dirty magazines rack at the newsagents, then go the bolt. On his way out he'd spit on the scratchies section.

He'd carry a bag full of bikini tops to the beach. He'd surf with or without a board.

He'd question the rock industry. He'd scoff at the fashion industry. He'd tear shreds of the media. He'd tell the church to wake up – to live out the good news or go out of business. He'd tell the computer industry to leave people alone – to let people get out from behind the screen and live a real life for a while.

And sooner or later he'd have to start dodging bullets when appearing in public places. And though the world might hate him, we would love him with all our hearts, minds and souls – wouldn't we?

Reflection.

Write your own version of the story using the following skeleton outline. Remember though, it has to be true to the nature of Jesus. Resist the urge to recreate Jesus in your own image, to be what you'd like him to be like.

If Jesus were a teenager today he'd like the bands..... He'd invite out for lunch...He'd wear..... He'd own..... He'd go on T. V. shows like..... He'd heal.....He'd carry....He'd get really angry about....He'd speak out against.... He'd tell the church to....He'd tell politicians to... he'd tell atheists to...and sooner or later...

What about a story on If Jesus Were A Woman Today; or a minister or...

## R.I.P. Angel.

Angelica had a pretty bad reputation around the place. "Angelica". She thought it sounded like some heavy metal fallen angel.

Angelica clutched her school books to her chest and pushed past the sea of uniforms crushing along the corridors. She noticed the other girls' sideways glances, wanting to examine her but not wanting any contact with her. She heard the occasional whispers between friends as she moved towards them. She knew when a boy was leering at her, looking her up and down, and up and down again.

The music playing in Angelica's head was turned up loud. Her reputation was like a walkman sewn into her heart, like some weird kind of pacemaker. With every step she took, the same heavy tape played over and over in her mind. "I am dirty. I am bad. Used and abused. I am so unworthy."

She thought she heard someone say "Slut" as they passed. Was it real or was it the tape in her head writing another verse? She couldn't tell but the tears welled up in her eyes.

But they had no time to fall. A guy right in front of her stumbled and crashed into her. Arms, legs and books flying everywhere, they both went down, Angelica landing on her backside and the guy lying face down into page 157 of Angelica's maths book.

"Are you alright?" they both asked at the same time. "Yeah, sure" they replied together. Then they both went silent, together, not wanting to say the same thing yet another time. The joint silence was even more ridiculous and they both burst out laughing.

The guy gathered up Angelica's books and helped her to her feet. "I'm really sorry, Angel, I didn't see that step there."

"That's because there isn't one!" Angelica pointed out, which made the boys' cheeks turn even redder with embarrassment.

"Oh", he said sheepishly looking at his feet.

He raised his head and the two of them stood standing there, looking into each others' eyes for an awkward moment, wondering what to say next.

"Let's do lunch, Angel.", he said, taking her wrist as he spun around, dragging her through the crowd of fellow students.

It was too late for, "No thanks," so instead she called to him, "Okay. And hey, it's Angelica by the way."

"Not the way I figure it", he called back over his shoulder, pulling her forward faster.

Angelica felt like she had been swept up in some kind of a whirlwind. Everything was happening so fast that even the tape in her head had stopped playing.

At the bench he spread his lunch out for them both to share.

"You're new around here?" Angelica asked, hoping to start to work this person out.

"Well, not really. You just haven't noticed me. But I've noticed you a lot. You're a really cool person, Angel".

The words were like a come on, but the tone was something different. Head to one side, eyes focusing on him so hard she was almost squinting, Angelica swept her hair back and tried to figure out exactly what it was that was going on here. But she couldn't work it out. He was not like the other boys who'd been interested in her.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Jaycee." He answered with the most wonderful smile she had ever seen. She knew he was teasing her somehow, but it was in a good warm hearted fun. She couldn't help smiling back even though she didn't get the joke. Laughter and kindness twinkled in his eyes.

Then suddenly he was serious. "I've got something for you", Jaycee said, rummaging through his bag.

He pulled out a Bible and Angelica felt like she had been slapped. She sat bolt upright, the hairs on the back of her neck turning electric, "Oh no, wait a minute, I'm not into this...."

"Chill, Angel. Stay frosty. This will be cool- don't worry." Jaycee quickly found the part he wanted. Rrrrip. He tore the page out and handed it to her like it was a fragile treasure, like it was the last ounce of a precious medicine and she was a person about to be healed. She would have laughed at his seriousness except for the kindness that she felt in him. "Read this, Angel. Read this 10 times today. Read it 10 times again tomorrow. Keep reading it until you understand it. Keep reading it until it becomes your story."

Jaycee paused, waiting for her to look at him. Their eyes met and she knew they were already friends. "Angelica, I believe in you. You have so much love in your heart, so much goodness in your soul. Let it out. From now on you'll only ever hear me call you Angel, because that's who you really are."

Angelica, or was it Angel, was dumbfounded, speechless. The whole world had gone quiet.

Too quiet. The school was still. No one was around. It was that kind of silence that meant everyone was somewhere else. Jaycee was distracted,

his mind had moved on, his thoughts were wherever everyone else had gone to.

"Probably just a fight down at the oval, Jaycee." Angelica said to settle him down.

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking", he replied, looking in the direction of the oval like it was some irresistible magnet. He shook his head and refocused on Angel, "Will you read it Angel, please?"

She promised she would and with that he was gone. Angelica watched him as he ran towards the oval. She watched him until he turned a corner and was out of sight. She was left alone with Jaycee's words ringing in her ears, his sandwiches beside her and a page from his Bible in her hand.

She took a sandwich and began to read. It was from Luke 7. It was the story of a woman, a sinful woman, a woman with a bad reputation around town. Angelica's eyes widened. Why did Jaycee choose this story for her to read? How much did he know? She could feel the shame coming out as a blush on her cheeks.

Jesus was at a religious dude's house having a big deep and meaningful chat. This woman just walks straight in and throws herself at Jesus' feet. She's crying and the tears fall on his feet, so she wipes them off with her own hair. The religious guy is pretty disgusted at all this. He knows this woman. He knows what she does, this woman who is wiping Jesus' feet with her hair, who is now actually kissing Jesus' feet! He's losing respect for Jesus real quick. Jesus sees through him and knows what he's thinking. He tells him off. He sticks up for the woman. He talks about forgiveness. Then he tells her that her sins are forgiven. She is saved.

Saved from her reputation, from her sins, from the guilt that has been chewing her guts out, from her own private hell. She can start over with her life. Jesus sends her on her way with a new and wonderful sense of peace in her heart.

It's a beautiful story and Angel has read it many times since then. Angel has a new song playing in her heart now. It's a powerful rock song. It's a celebration, party song. It makes her want to jump up and dance for joy. It's a song the whispers, the sideways glances and the leering looks can't turn off. It's indestructible and it can't be taken off her by anyone. It says, "I am a brand new me. I am free. I am loved and I am worthy."

Angel carries Jaycee's page with her everywhere. She keeps 10 copies of it with her, and from time to time, she gives one out to a friend who she thinks might need it too. Angel and Jaycee are the best of buds now, total soul mates.

#### **Reflection.**

If you had to choose a song or a saying as a personal life motto, what would it be and why?

Read the story of the sinful woman in Luke 7v 36 – 50, in the Bible.

How do you feel about yourself? Do you have a tape playing inside your head, a recurring thought for example, and if so, what is it saying? Are you happy with the tape or do you want to be rid of it?

What sort of reputation do you think you have – what do you think others think of you and how do you feel about that?

Is there any one in your life who treats you in a special way that you really enjoy, you know, like they really believe in you or they think you're really great or something? Are there people in your life whose self esteem you are boosting? How?

## R.I.P. Headshave. (version 1 - \* and version 2 - #)

There must have been 80 people huddled together down at the oval, packed in tight, squeezing and wriggling, trying to edge in closer to the middle for a better view of the fight.

It was no even match I tell you. There was no way this was fair. The little kid was scared. He was bravely holding back the tears. He had his fists up ready, more to protect his head than to hit out. He knew he was in for a thrashing. He was the third one from his group of Asian-Australian friends to be picked by this same guy. The other two were badly hurt. They all thought of moving to another school but who's to say things would be any better?

So, here he was, determined to survive this beating with as few injuries as possible, and at the same time not to be too humiliated in defeat. The crowd liked his courage and were shouting out fight tips to help. But they knew he didn't stand a chance.

The bully was three years older than, and twice the size of his latest victim. He wore those big, heavy boots the school had supposedly banned. His head had a number one shave. He was scary. Nobody ever deliberately crossed him or his gang. Nobody. Ever.

Until today.

Jaycee peeled aside the layers of people and carved a path right into the middle of the crowd. There were now three people in the ring. The crowd went quiet. The little guy couldn't help himself. Fear got the better of him. He snuck around behind Jaycee for protection, putting his defender between him and the bully. Two good guys in the crowd reached forward and grabbed the kid, slipping him behind them. From there he was passed all the way back till he was outside the crowd altogether. There was almost a collective sigh of relief that the little guy

was out of there. What was happening here was ugly and it was these incidents that had changed the tone of the school. A lot of people wanted it stopped but what could they do?

Jaycee was one of those people. He wasn't sure what to do about it either. But he knew something had to be done. And now here he was right in the middle of it.

Jaycee was shorter than the Headshave, but he was a lot stronger.

His old man was a builder and the family weren't that well off. So Jaycee worked weekends and some afternoons with his father at the building sites as a labourer. Jaycee's version of working out wasn't pumping iron down at the gym, but doing honest and serious hard work helping his dad. It paid off. Jaycee was one of those guys who, if you gave him a friendly thump in the arm kidding around, you could feel how solidly packed he was. He was like a rock.

"What exactly is your problem?" Jaycee blurted out.

"None. But you just bought one". Headshave raised his fists.

"Forget it. I don't fight", Jaycee said putting his hands in his pockets. (Not a strategy the crowd were pleased with. The mass groan was audible.)

Headshave's reply was swift, short and simple. "If you don't fight, you bleed." And he swung a big hook punch at Jaycee's head. Jaycee leant back and the punch whizzed past his nose. The straight punch that followed it up caught Jaycee just above his eye. The eyebrow split and gushed blood.

Jaycee stepped back a couple of steps. He wiped the blood from his eye so he could see. He slowly took his hands out of his pockets. The crowd had gone silent. Silent in anticipation, silent in revulsion, and silent in

shame, knowing deep down that their mob mentality had contributed to the violence in their school.

"Are you finished now?" Jaycee asked him.

"No, no. About three more will do it I think," said Headshave, winding up for another punch.

\*"I don't think so," said Jaycee. His hands were faster than lightning.  
\*Headshave didn't even have time to flinch. Jaycee had hold of his shirt  
\*and was holding him on his tip toes. Jaycee's other fist was right at  
\*Headshave's face, held there in position, just a few centimetres from his  
\*nose.

\*Headshave could feel the tremendous power in Jaycee's grip, in his  
\*forearm, in his whole body, the power level rising like a storm. Jaycee  
\*lifted him up even higher on the very tips of his boots, the other fist still  
\*held in his face. Jaycee's eyes burnt into him. A finger from the fist in  
\*his face sprang out and was pushing in to his forehead. "This is the end  
\*of it. The end of it, do you hear?" Jaycee commanded.

\*Then, that threatening fist shot down to Headshave's shirt pocket.  
\*Jaycee held it for a second, giving Headshave time to catch up with what  
\*was about to happen. Rrrrip. Jaycee ripped the pocket right off  
\*Headshave's school uniform. The crowd gasped. They thought Jaycee  
\*was going to reach right in and rip Headshave's heart from his chest.  
\*(People watch too many horror movies these days.)

\*Instead he poked that iron rod finger into Headshave's chest, right above  
\*his heart and whispered, "This has gone bad. Fix it."

\*He lowered the guy down till he was standing flat on his feet again.  
\*Jaycee eyeballed him all the way through to the deeper recesses of his  
\*thick head. He released his grip, very slowly, but he didn't let his eyes go.  
\*Jaycee's eyes were on fire. He was white hot with intensity. He was

\*staring down all the evil and hatred in Headshave's soul, setting it on fire,  
\*melting it down. Some people in the crowd reckoned Headshave kind of  
\*slumped at that point, but I'm not sure about that.

\*Jaycee whispered again, "This has gone bad. Fix it. Do you understand?"

\*Headshave understood. Everybody did.

Headshave felt like he had been dismantled, piece by piece and spread out on display for everyone to examine, for everyone to take note of how many rotten things there were about him. It was like one of those terrible dreams where you've gone to school naked and everyone can see you for who you really are under all the coverings.

But of all the people there, it was only Jaycee who could read the pieces. He saw Headshave's anger, his frustration. He saw how much Headshave wished he could do well at school and not always feel like a fool. He read his home life and how Headshave's dad had run out on them, and how his new stepfather treated him badly. He read how Headshave felt about himself and how he thought he had absolutely nothing in his life that he could feel proud of. There was nothing in his life that he could feel good about. Jaycee read that Headshave was hurting. Hurting more than anyone else in their school and his bullying was a way to even up the balance. Others did well at sport or at school work or with friendships. Others were loved. Others had good families. He couldn't reach up to their happiness so he lowered some of them down to his pain. It made him feel like he was the same as them somehow. Headshave was damaged goods, and Jaycee saw it all.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jaycee's cut above his eye took five stitches. The scar was there forever. Peter told him it made him look tough. "Scars are a babe magnet." Peter told him. Jaycee laughed.

"It's true. Every since the day you got that scar, Angelica has been hanging around you all the time". Jaycee laughed even louder, but Peter saw that he was blushing.

"Angel and I are just good friends", Jaycee said, looking at the wood he was sawing. "And speaking of babe magnets, don't you know head shave's are out?"

"No way. The girl's love 'em. Pass me the hammer, please Mr Jaycee senior sir."

Jaycee's dad threw Peter the hammer, which he caught and proceeded to drive the nail in. It took him only two clean hits to drive it in. He had only been working weekends with them for three months now and already he was showing good skill. He got on well with all the guys too, especially Jaycee's dad. He was going to make an excellent carpenter one day.

Peter could see that about himself too. It sure felt good.

Maybe he would grow his headshave out.

### R.I.P. Headshave (version 2)

by Guest Author, **Jonathan Sargeant**.

Jonathon takes the story up at the point where Jaycee is in the ring with Headshave. Instead of the lines with \* try these with the #

"Forget it. I don't fight", Jaycee said putting his hands in his pockets. (Not a strategy the crowd were pleased with. The mass groan was audible.)

Headshave's reply was swift, short and simple. "If you don't fight, you bleed." And he swung a big hook punch at Jaycee's head. Jaycee leant

back and the punch whizzed past his nose. The straight punch that followed it up caught Jaycee just above his eye. The eyebrow split and gushed blood.

Jaycee stepped back a couple of steps. He wiped the blood from his eye so he could see. He slowly took his hands out of his pockets. The crowd had gone silent. Silent in anticipation, silent in revulsion, and silent in shame, knowing deep down that their mob mentality had contributed to the violence in their school.

"Are you finished now?" Jaycee asked.

"No, no. About three more will do it I think." Said Headshave, winding up for another punch.

"I don't think so", said Jaycee. As Headshave threw the punch, Jaycee stepped aside. Thrown off balance, Headshave's body followed the wayward fist. He stumbled. The crowd gasped as they saw Headshave's face, steaming red with anger and maybe even some embarrassment. His fist flew again like a missile and this time, Jaycee wasn't so fast. The blow caught him on the cheek. The next hit his nose.

"Hit him back! Give him some too!" yelled the crowd, eager to feel less uncomfortable about this one-sided fight. But Jaycee used his powerful arms only to steady himself for each new blow. Some looked away as Headshave hit Jaycee's lip. It split and blood splattered on the ground and on some of those watching.

One drop hit Keith. He looked down on it, disgusted, but in an instant another picture filled his mind. He saw Jaycee taking the blame meant for him when he broke the Science block window two months ago. I can't let him get slaughtered like this, he thought.

Another drop fell on Lisa. She went to wipe it on the back of the person beside her when a thought hit. Jaycee was the only one who listened

#when I got drunk at that party and Phil sleazed all over me. Now I'm  
#letting this happened! What can I do?

#Kyle felt a tiny speck of blood hit his glasses. Annoyed, he reached into  
#his pocket for a tissue, to get rid of the gross smudge. He hand felt  
#instead a two dollar coin. It was the same coin Jaycee had given him  
#this morning when he discovered he didn't have enough for the bus  
#home.

#Elsewhere in the crowd those hit by the blood were remembering things  
#Jaycee had done for them. Keith yelled out, "This isn't right!" and  
#entered the "ring" beside Jaycee. Somebody else went to his other side.  
#Lisa stepped in front of Headshave. Kyle, feeling small compared to the  
#other, commanded, "That's enough!" in the loudest voice anyone had  
#ever heard.

#Headshave's fists dropped in amazement. All around the circle people  
#were stepping forward. He couldn't believe it!

#Lisa felt Jaycee's hand on her shoulder. "Let me see him", he said. She  
#stepped aside, leaving the two face to face. Slowly Jaycee pointed at  
#Headshave's chest. Even with all the welts and cuts, Jaycee stood tall.  
#But the thing everyone noticed were his eyes. Jaycee's eyes were on fire.  
#He was white hot with intensity. He was staring down all the evil and  
#hatred in Headshave's soul setting it on fire, melting it down. Some  
#people in the crowd reckoned Headshave kind of slumped at that point,  
#but I'm not sure about that.

Jaycee whispered again, "This has gone bad. Fix it. Do you understand?"

Headshave understood. Everybody did.

The story continues as with the version one from here.

Reflection.

What experiences of bullying or racism have you had?

Did you feel you had any power over the situation? If you could have done anything at all, what would you have liked to be able to do?

Which of the two versions do you prefer and why?

Which do you think makes Jaycee more like Jesus and why?

Jesus had some fairly radical views on violence. He told people to love their enemies, to pour kindness on them and not hatred. He said if someone hits you on the side of the face, to turn the other cheek towards them and let them hit that one too if they want!! What's that about? Then when Jesus was being arrested by the mob in the garden of Gethsemane, Peter pulled out a sword and hacked off one guys ear. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword. Then he healed the guys ear!

From there Jesus went willingly to the cross. Imagine the sort of courage that would have taken. He could have taken off days before they came to get him you know.

On the other hand Jesus was no wuss either. He over turned the money changers tables in the temple and drove them out with a whip. He cursed a fig tree and killed it because it had no fruit on it. He told the Pharisees off publicly for being hypocrites. He kept doing things that drove his enemies wild. There were actually four assassination attempts on Jesus life. It was only the last one that he surrendered to.

Jesus said that peacemakers would be blessed, but he also set a fine example for standing up for the right and for fighting against things that are wrong.

What do you reckon about that?

## R.I.P. Crush.

"Crush" was the eyeliner queen of the world. Sometimes she layed it on so thick she looked like an Egyptian goddess. It was her thing.

Having countless guys fall in love with her was also her thing. Which of course was how she got her nickname. That, along with a line from an R.E.M. song. It's not that she tried for any of this popularity stuff to happen. It just did.

But she played it pretty cool and just acted like she didn't notice the special favours that came her way, the extra friendly attentions. After all, she figured, weren't all girls treated like this? The frequent invitations to go out, she either very graciously declined or gratefully accepted. Underneath her eyeliner and her devastatingly gorgeous looks, "Crush" was basically a sweet person. Everybody either liked her, had a crush on her, admired her or were dead jealous of her.

So when Crush put the word out that her parents were going away and she was having a party, everyone was pretty keen to attend. The word spread fast and as it got passed around, it went from a B.Y.O. junk food party to a B.Y.O. whatever party – you know – whatever – as in anything goes. Soon the invitation beast was out of her control. It seemed like the whole world was going to be there. The mindless masses had taken over the planning of the party, and they had decided it was going to be wild. A lot of energy was being generated as people talked up a storm about the party.

Crush didn't like a lot of the things that were being said. She got more and more nervous as the party got closer. Her two older sisters would be there to help with riot control, but would that be enough?

Some of the churches youth group gangs at school were thinking of banning the party. Other youth group gangs were planning to go just as wild as anyone else at that party. Angel, Peter, Lisa, Keith, Kyle and Jaycee were deciding about the party, just like everybody else.

Peter was definitely going to be there. Definitely. Angel wasn't keen. "Been there. Done that," she reckoned, "Suffered enough. Moved on."

"What about it, Jaycee?" Angel asked. "Are you going to go?"

"Yeah, Angel. I'm going," said Jaycee.

Peter looked at him slyly, smiling a bit of a wicked smirk. "Sure, I'll bet you are," he threw at Jaycee.

Lisa was surprised. She was a bit disappointed too. "But haven't you heard what that party's going to be like? You shouldn't be getting into that!"

"Relax, Lisa," Jaycee replied, "Yes, I've heard. I also heard that Crush was so upset that she was in tears about it. She's really worried. I reckon we'd better go. All of us. Maybe we could do some good there."

"Yeah, and maybe we'll get our heads kicked in," said Kyle, "What are we going to do? Go around telling people not to use, not to get drunk, not to...."

"I don't know. Let's just go and see what happens." Jaycee replied.

The big night arrived. Angel asked Jaycee to bring her. She wasn't facing this party alone. The rest of their friends were waiting out the front. Kyle and Lisa looked worried, but Keith and Peter were excited. They all headed in together.

The music was loud. There were heaps of people and more kept arriving all the time. Crush greeted them at the door and brought them in. She was

worried but obviously trying to hide it. Her big sisters were doing the screening process. The oldest one, Anne, told them, "Look have a good time, but don't do anything stupid. All right?" Jodie, the other sister added, "And don't break anything. And if you're going to throw up, do it outside or else!"

Crush groaned and led the group through to the centre of the party. It was crowded and noisy. It smelt of smoke, (both kinds), and of beer.

Keith and Peter headed for the eskies and came back with a couple of beers in each hand offering them to their friends. Angel ignored them and headed for the soft drinks. Kyle took one, not to drink, but to fit in. Jaycee said, "No thanks. Maybe when I'm 18." They all laughed.

Jaycee edged alongside Peter and Keith. "How many of these are you guys planning on having?" He asked seriously and quietly enough for their ears only.

"Hey, who's counting," was Keith's reply. Rrip. He tore off the ring pull tab and started to guzzle.

"Two," said Peter, "One now and one at the end."

Jaycee said to Peter, "I've got a feeling you're going to be needed for life guard duties tonight. Keep it together. All right?"

Peter, who used to be the roughest guy in the school, knew the party scene only too well. He knew what Jaycee meant. He put the beer down and nodded, "Okay." He gave Keith and elbow in the ribs.

"Hmm, might just have a coke instead," said Keith as he went to swap drinks. Peter called after him, "Hey, one for me while you're there."

"Yeah me too," Kyle added, putting his beer with Peter's.

The group spread out from there mixing with other friends, checking out all the action.

And there was plenty of it. Some people were drinking pretty heavily already. Some were already drunk when they had arrived. A dark room under the house was becoming the base station for sets of couples who wanted to get with each other. Mark, an ex student of the school who was a known drug supplier, had several people crowding around him, hustling for bargain prices. The Tae Kwon Do heroes were showing off their favourite kicks on the wheelie bin. The bin copped a spinning back kick and split down one side. The group cheered.

Jaycee went looking for Crush. He found her upstairs arguing with Jodie and Anne. They were all doing that subdued, keep your voice down kind of yelling, throwing their arms up in the air in exasperation, all nearly in tears.

Jaycee walked straight up to them, smiling, acting as if he hadn't even noticed them fighting. "Hi, Crush. Hi, Jodie, Anne. Hey have you guys got any cards or stuff we can much around with. There's nothing to do but drink and some of us aren't into that."

Crush and her sisters looked at each other. "Now there's an idea," Anne said, as a light bulb snapped on in her head.

Jodie, Crush and Jaycee raided the games cupboard and pulled out cards, Twister, a volley ball net, some packets of water bombs and some other stuff.

The three of them went around setting up games for people to get into. It was like the tide changed for some people. Soon there were lots of smiles, laughter, and good natured fun as people threw themselves into volleyball, Twister, Snap or whatever.

But not everyone wanted the tide to change. Matt, the dealer, had found some of the younger kids at the party. He had produced some ecstasy tablets – for sale at a special discount rate for first timers. Lisa had been watching Matt all night. Kind of tailing him, wondering what to do. Her rage built up and up inside of her until it gushed out. She elbowed her way into the group.

“So what have we got here, Matt?” Lisa asked.

Matt wasn’t phased. “Either you’re buying or you’re moving on, Lisa. If you don’t want any, then get lost.

Lisa was furious. “Hey, Matt, have you heard about that police thing – Operation Noah or something? You know, the one where you do b in the drug users and dealers. Has anyone ever do bbed you in or will I get to be the first? And what are these kids names, I’ll need to know them wont I?”

The young kids disappeared. They headed straight for the park and didn’t look back. Matt left to find another party. Lisa collapsed into a chair as the rage subsided. She had surprised even herself and now she started to worry whether or not she’d done the right thing. Matt would get her for this.

Angel was leaning against the door of the couple’s dark room. She said “Hi” to a couple as they squeezed past her into the room. “So, Steve, what’s your new girlfriend’s name?” Angel asked. The couple stopped. They were silent. They looked at each other and Steve would have asked her name except Angel didn’t give him time.

“You don’t know? You don’t even know her name?”

The girl let go of his hand.

"Does she know what she's doing, Steve? Looks to me like you've got her pretty drunk."

The girl blinked and stepped back to focus on him.

Angel was relentless, "You did that to me once, Steve. I've hated you ever since then." The girl blushed and walked away. Steve was angry and called Angel every name under the sun.

It was only half an hour later that Angel ran up to Peter and Keith.  
"Guys, I need you quick. Come and help."

Angel took them to the front room. Steve was working on another victim. Cathy was really drunk. Steve had her by one hand, pulling her to her feet, coaxing her outside.

"But I don't want to go for a walk," she slurred.

"You're a pig, Steve," Angel said. He was about to blow a fuse at Angel but Peter and Keith stepped in front of her.

"So, Steve, how's it going?" Peter asked.

"I was just helping her out, guys," Steve said. "She looks sick, so I was just going to get her some fresh air."

"Good idea. Hey, you're a great guy after all, Steve." Said Peter, stepping in between Steve and Cathy. "Here, we'll help you."

Peter, Angel and Keith took the girl and led her out onto the lawn. They got her there just in time. She threw up all over herself.

"Class act, Cath," Peter said. The guys stayed with her while Angel went to get a washer and towel.

It was a busy night for Jaycee and his friends. They re-grouped towards the end of the night.

Angel was happy. "That was the best party I've ever been to."

"Yeah, that felt real good," Peter agreed. "It's the end of the night and I'm not sick, I haven't done anything to be ashamed of, I haven't been in any fights and I even did some good."

Lisa, who didn't look happy at all said, "Well, I think I'm in big trouble with Matt. He's going to get me back for sure. Maybe I shouldn't have threatened him."

"No way, Lisa. You've done a good thing. A great thing. I am incredibly impressed," said Jaycee. "I'm impressed with all of you. I am so proud of you, gang. I could just hug you all."

"Start here," said Angel as she opened her arms and stepped towards Jaycee. Peter jumped in front of her for a laugh and grabbed Jaycee in a big bear hug. "No way, Angel. Me first," he said and started crushing Jaycee's ribs.

"No, me first." "No! No, me," others said, grabbing Jaycee and Peter and whoever else had gotten into the group hug thing.

When the laughing had almost stopped, Crush and her sisters stood beside the group. "We want to thank you guys. Thank you so much."

There was a beautiful moment of silence, of deep gratitude, of smiles shared around between everyone.

"Room for three more," Jaycee shouted. The group grabbed Crush and her sisters and pulled them into the middle of the hug machine. There was lots of laughter and hugging, tickling and pushing around.

As it all settled down, Angel stepped free, rubbed her hands and said, "Right, now where's your vacuum cleaner, Crush? Time to get into it."

### Reflection.

What's your idea of an excellent party? What's it take for a party to be out of control and no longer safe by your standards?

In a scene like the party in the story, which of the characters are like people you know. Which character are you most like? Which one would you like to be most like?

Jesus said that to follow him was like being born again. That involves both a death and a rebirth. R.I.P. Rest in peace. The old has gone. The new has come. The old ways have been rejected and the new and better way is struggling for its place as habit in our lives. The way of Jesus.

If you're on Jesus team, you've got to work on that being a full time position. A way of life - consistently followed, every day, everywhere. THAT'S NOT EASY!! Just as well Jesus was very big on forgiveness and mercy. It's not being perfect that will get us in to heaven - because we will never be perfect. It's just being Jesus friend that counts. But if you are truly his friend, he's going to count on you in all kinds of situations. He needs you on his team and he's going to count on you.

So how about it? Jesus team. Are you in or what?

## Rip. Rock Axe.

He was the sort of guy no one chose intentionally to sit next to in class, but well, hey, if there were no other seats except the one beside him, it wasn't a big problem either. There were a few ways to tackle it. You could ignore him. You could treat it like a joke and pay out on him. You could just say "Hi." And reckon you've been friendly enough and leave it at that. Or if you were a bit of a star and loved an audience, and there was some time to kill before the lesson, you could try to have a conversation with him just for laughs.

The trick then was to make sure you asked him the right kind of questions, because he could handle the "Yes", "No", "Maybe" one word answer type questions pretty well. You needed to get him to try for a sentence to turn him in to a foaming, lathering, blubbering idiot. He'd stutter away, turning red, getting more embarrassed and more nervous by the second, which made his stutter worse and he would progressively fall apart from there.

Some people thought it was a great joke. But he was starting to get good at knowing when he was being set up now, so you'd have to be pretty sneaky to pull it off. You know, start out like you were being genuinely friendly to get him to start to open up. Mostly he wouldn't risk communicating at all anymore. People who didn't know him would sometimes say "Hi", and think he was damned rude because he wouldn't even respond to that anymore. They'd think he was really stuck up unless someone who knew him was around to explain it to them. "No, that's Jimimimiminy. He's just an idiot. He couldn't put two words together to say "No thanks.", if you asked him if he'd like a kick in the butt. Just ignore him."

And that's what most people did.

So Jim spent his lunch hour hiding in the library, reading rock music magazines in a cubicle at the back.

Jaycee didn't usually take this route home, but something about the day said, "Let's try something new." Jaycee felt that vague, inexplicable rise of excitement when he somehow knew something good was about to happen. He had some kind of radar for this stuff.

He took a turn down a new street and almost immediately the guitar licks came through over the street noise. As he moved down the street further, they became clearer and louder until it was obvious which house they were coming from. The electric guitar was soaring up and down and all around the scales. Sliding melodies through the ice box effects, then lunging in to wailing lead breaks, easing back in to catchy riffs with instant hooks. The music made you want to move so bad you had to hold yourself back from groovin' in the street. Then you turned in to a head banger, on the inside at least, as the guitarist kicked it in to a dirty grunge metal with a beat that vibrated all over your skin. It was fantastic! Absolutely fantastic.

Axe didn't know Jaycee real well. He thought he was a bit strange but then Axe figured everyone was from Pleasantville compared to him. Axe was the hottest guitarist in the school and his band came second in the Battle of the Bands finals last year. They'd been practising full on ever since, caught up in the dream of winning this year and getting a recording contract. The whole Rock'n' Roll dream consumed them with a passion.

The only reason he had agreed to take a walk with Jaycee that afternoon was because Angel had said she would be there too. Angel was a babe!

So the three of them tried to settle in to feeling comfortable with each other as they walked down this same street. It wasn't quite happening. It didn't matter. Axe heard it before the others. "Someone just plugged in." Axe said casually.

"What?" Angel asked, not understanding what Axe meant.

The guitar answered for Axe. A wall of sound projected itself out of a nearby house, swept across the road and almost knocked them over. It rocked, it cried and sang, it soared and it dived. Then it stopped.

Axe stared at the house where the music was coming from. "Wow!" he said.

Then the guitar launched in to one of the latest big hits from the alternative rock station. It was a brilliant rendition of the song and Axe started jumping up and down on the spot, head banger fashion. Then a voice came in and the guitarist started singing the words, and doing a real fine job of it.

"Is that the radio" Angel asked.

"Nah uh, this is live – this guys voice is better than the real thing. It's harsher, meaner – it cuts more, you know?" Angel and Jaycee didn't know.

"Who is this guy? We have got to add him to the band!"

Jaycee laughed with delight that all was going to plan beautifully. "Yes, you do!" he said. He grabbed Axe's sleeve and dragged him to the front door of the house, pressed the buzzer on the doorbell, and kept pressing it. The guitarist must have heard it because he stopped playing and you heard the "Thunk" as he unplugged from the amp.

"What'll I say?" Axe asked, all flustered and shy for the first time in his life.

"You'll figure something out" Jaycee said. His hand let go of Axe's sleeve and moved to Angel's arm. "We're going now. See ya!" Jaycee led Angel off the porch. And they were gone before Angel even got to see who opened the door.

Axe and Jimbo's band won the Battle of the Bands that year. People were so surprised when they saw Jimimiminy come out on stage with the band.

He blew them all away. Him and Axe shared the vocals and alternated the lead breaks. They were awesome. They were outstanding.

Singing wasn't a problem for Jim because the words were already worked out for him. They call him Jimbo now. Everyone does – except the guys in the band who came second in the comp. They still call him Jimimiminy. But everyone knows what that's all about. They're a bunch of losers.

You'd hardly recognise Jimbo now. He's got this cool haircut. He looks people in the eye with a relaxed confidence. He initiates conversations with people. He hardly ever stutters anymore. He's a totally new man. He reckons Axe walking passed his house that day was a miracle.

And it kind of was.

Axe is different now too. He's not so proud anymore; not so quick to write other people off. He's a better guitarist now too. It's no secret who's been teaching him some new tricks.

#### **Reflection.**

Imagine you were Jim. Describe your life before and after being discovered. Jesus was big on giving people new life. Read about Zaccheus, the crazy possessed guy out at the cemetery, the maneater woman who'd gone through so many men she'd lost track of them all. In what ways did Jesus give them all new life?

Has your self-esteem ever been given a big boost? If so, how?

List ten simple ways to help some one believe in themselves more. Get a friend and practise them. Now get out there and use them.

If that's going to be very different for you to do, if you are more used to damaging peoples egos than stroking them, think about who you might need to apologise to first.

Have a chat to God about all this.

## Puppet Masters.

It's eleven o'clock and the party's pumping up to maximum noise and action. You've just cruised over to a circle of people, elbowed your way in and you're looking for clues as to why the air here is so electric...

Something is being passed around the circle. It's two people up front from where you are. The group cheers after each person takes whatever it is. The person beside you has got it now and you're next. You've got exactly six seconds to decide what you're going to do with your turn. The group cheers – the girl beside you took it – she passes it to you.

All eyes are on you now. One second left to decide. You're stalling. They notice. The expressions on their faces start to change. They're waiting. In another two seconds they'll start yelling advice or insults to you over the music – what are you going to do?

### *A Little Test.*

Go on decide what you'd do and lock in your answer before I tell you what happens next.

(Well – what did you decide to do? Take it? Walk away? Throw the stuff on the ground and jump all over it? Fake taking it? Decide just to pass it on?)

Right. Now let me give you some possible and real endings to the story.

### *Possible Ending Number One.*

You take your share. You're passing it to the next person when the guy across from you falls to the ground. This is the guy who started it all.

The first one to try it. He's on the ground and his body is shaking uncontrollably. He's having a very bad time. The person beside him, number two in the queue is looking ill.

### *Possible Ending Number Two.*

You're holding the stuff when there's a huge thump on the front door. Everyone freezes. It's either parents or police. Another huge thump, the door swings open and they're coming in, coming straight for your group – you're holding the stuff. They're coming straight for you.

### *Possible Ending Number Three.*

You've made your move. No problems. No police or parents. No one got hurt. Everyone had a wild time. During the next week you get invited to a select, private party where you'll be expected to get in deeper.

*True Stories.*

Maybe all this sounds a bit too dramatic. I apologise if it does – but all the same it's real. My friend Gavin had a number three ending. He took the stuff when it was his turn. Four years later he was a dealer. A year after that he was a hopeless addict. Gavin fell victim because he'd felt rejected by straight people his age. He needed love and acceptance – we all do – so if people in trouble would be his friends, they would have to do. It was better than nothing.

Annette recently had a number two ending and was busted by her parents. She's grounded for half a year. She may be moved to a new school, away from her friends. Now she's asking herself why she did it.

Simple. She was sick of being rubbished at school for being the goody two shoes of her group. When her turn came up at the party, she took it. It was her big chance to get her friends off her back for always doing what's right. And that's not all she did that night to impress her friends.

Jan had a number one ending and she soon got the shakes too. It lasted a couple of hours and then wore off just before she got picked up by her parents to go home. They never knew.

Jan took it because she had a reputation to live up to. She was a rebel and her friends admired her for it. She was the leader of the pack and that's just how she liked it.

What Jan, Annette and Gavin didn't realise at the time was that they hadn't really decided anything for themselves. Their friends had this message written all over their faces. "Do what we want you to do and then we'll accept you". The fine print underneath says, "If you don't then you're out – you're reject material". They got the message. They surrendered to the Puppet Masters.

*Decide for Yourself.*

For Jamie things would have been a lot different. Jamie decides for himself. Yes, he wants friends. He likes to be liked – but not at any price. He doesn't need his friend's approval so badly that he becomes a human transformer that changes to be like them whenever they're around him.

I told Jamie I was going to write an article on peer group pressure. He told me it's a non-issue. It doesn't exist.

Well, maybe the fact that he is six foot two, built like a tank, wears an earring and is one of the coolest guys around makes him immune.

Which begs the question, "What do I do if I'm five foot nothing, have had the same boring haircut for five years and can't wear an ear-ring because I get infections?"

Well, for Jamie, it's more than just a matter of physical presence.

People can see an inner strength in him. Jamie does what he wants to do and wears his Christianity proudly. If people don't like it, that's their problem not his. He takes the stand he believes in. And the reason he is able to do that, is that he understands whose life it is he's living.

### *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*

Jamie's living his own life. He's deciding for himself. Jamie is the master of his own destiny. Being liked matters to him, but after all, how many of the people who try to steer us in to places we don't want to go, are actually doing it with our best interests at heart?

### *Belonging*

Belonging is a good feeling. It can overcome a lot of the pain that comes our way. But it needs to be real belonging.

If it's just based on something external, like how you wear your hair or what clothes you have, which bands you like, what sports you're in to, or whether you drink, smoke or do other drugs, that's a pretty weak link.

### *Out Of Control.*

What ends up happening if you accept belonging on this basis is that you are no longer pulling your own strings. You end up allowing other people to dictate how you will live – from how you wear your hair through to who you have sex with. They have become your puppet masters and you have relinquished control of your life in to their hands. That's crazy! This is your life! You're responsible for it!

### *Facing Up.*

Why would we let others control us? To be liked. Yes, well, remember that, you only have to live with your friends for as long as that friendship lasts, but you have to live with yourself forever. You'll be facing yourself in the mirror long after those people have faded out of your scene.

Make up your own mind. If people are not prepared to let you pull you own strings, you don't need them.

The good news is, once you have a reputation for living your own life, and allowing others to live theirs, you'll find friends who like you for who you are and not for how you dress or whatever. It's a good feeling to belong because of who you really are.

### *Living With God.*

Speaking of facing up, it's also worth remembering that one day you'll have to face up to God and give an account of what you made of this wonderful life he gave you. The less shame we carry in to that interview the better. When it comes to God, your relationship is forever and ever.

God is here for you. You already belong in his books. You're already his much loved child. God's hoping you'll live your life well and with love for Him and for others. If you need extra courage to do that, call on God to give you what it takes.

God has given you all sorts of resources to help you make the right choices in life. They include your heart and your mind, your own inner sensing of what's right and wrong, true friends who'll give you wise and honest counsel, your parents, the Church, the Bible, the Holy Spirit and the example of Jesus. The Puppet Masters of this world might try to enslave you, but if you know Jesus, you'll know the truth and that truth will set you free.

With that freedom comes a responsibility to exercise your choices wisely for your benefit and for the benefit of those around you. Maybe you can even become a freedom fighter who helps others to tap in to God's love so that they too can break free from the forces of the Puppet Masters in their lives.

Think about that. Decide to live in God's freedom, where self-respect is more important than the tentative approval of people struggling with their own out of control lives. Pray for God's Holy Spirit to give you the courage to do so and you'll be on your way to immunity. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but it's the winner's way to go.

### **Reflection.**

Got any Puppet Masters in your life? If so are you dancing to their tune or are you in control of your life? (Be honest with yourself now, no one is going to want to admit they are buckling to peer pressure.)

On a scale of 1 – 10, how susceptible to peer pressure are you?

Who is the most out of control person you know? Try to identify what or who it is that is controlling that person if it's not their true selves.

## The Rock.

Once when God was a little upset with humans, He decided to speak to a rock instead.

It was a good, solid rock. It wasn't very big but it was very strong.

"Rock", said God, "I am giving you, for a time, three abilities. The ability to think. The ability to do whatever you want to do. And the ability to become whatever you want to become".

The rock, with his new ability to think realised, for the first time, that he was sitting in front of a seat, on the lawn of a park not far from a pond.

Several passers-by spoke to the rock during its stay in the park. The first was a butterfly that landed on it by mistake.

"Oh this is a rock! How silly of me," said the butterfly to itself. "I must be going blind in my old age. I thought it was a flower".

"Hey rock," said the butterfly as a joke to its self, " Why don't you become a flower and save an old butterfly from having to move on?" The butterfly chuckled, then sighed as he pushed off in search of a flower.

The strong but silent rock watched the butterfly go. "I am a rock. God made me to be a rock, not a flower. I will be a rock".

Not long after a bird swooped down from the sky and stopped abruptly beside the rock.

"Oh I thought it was a snail but it is only a rock. Hey rock," said the bird, "how about turning into a snail for me?"

The rock thought to itself. "I am a rock. God meant me to be a rock, not a snail. I will be a rock."

The bird shrugged its shoulders. "Oh well rock, at least you won't be eaten. But if you were a snail..." and the bird flew off as quickly as it had when it arrived.

Next a human came and sat on the seat in front of the rock. The human looked troubled. Aimlessly, he picked up the rock and tossed it from one hand to another.

"What an ordinary rock." the human said to himself, "If you were a hunk of gold you would solve all my problems and make me a happy man. Or if you were a diamond you could make me rich. Why do you have to be just a rock?"

The strong but silent rock thought to itself. "I am a rock. God made me a rock and a rock I will be."

Sadly the human threw the rock into the pond. The rock felt nice and cool on the bottom of the pond. He thought about his stay in the park. He wondered if he had done the right thing by staying a rock when he could have changed to please the butterfly, or the bird, or the human. He wondered what he had achieved by staying a rock.

God spoke to the rock.

"Rock, you are good and solid. You did not please the butterfly that wanted you to be a flower. You did not please the bird who would have eaten you had you been a snail. You did not please the human who would have sold you for money had you been a diamond or a piece of gold. But my good and solid rock, you have pleased me – your creator – by being what I meant you to be, a rock. What can I do to reward you for your obedience?"

The rock humbly asked, "My creator, just let me stay a rock because I am a rock and that is what you made me to be." And then in a quieter, more timid voice the rock whispered, "And, could I also stay here for a while? I like this place."

God smiled. God and the rock were happy together.

#### **Reflection.**

What can we learn from this story?

The rock seemed to know how to please God. What do you think God would be pleased for you to do?

Do you believe you are valuable to God just as you are?

What characteristics, gifts, abilities, attitudes and hopes has God given you that you could use to please him?

Have you ever been under pressure to do something you knew wasn't right? If, so do you feel you handled it okay, or do you kind of wish you had done something better?



## The Gift Of The Big Picture.

I had just opened my Bible to the book of James when the daydream started.

In my daydream (or was it a nightmare?) I was given a gift from God. The gift of the big picture.

It was an ability to see things in perspective with what's happening in the rest of the world – beyond just my friends and my youth group.

I went off to youth group that night with my new gift. It was a group planning night and small huddles of people were sitting around the hall.

The first group that I joined was planning a service project. They decided we should hold a fund raising event. They said we should think big. The sky's the limit when it comes to how much money we could raise. We could even earn enough to buy a minibus for our youth group. Yes! Yes! That's what we need! A minibus for our youth group.

Suddenly my head was filled with a sea of people. There were five hundred homeless young people shouting at me: "We live in your city's alleys and parks and bus shelters. We need a home more than you need a minibus."

There were a thousand unemployed, deserted single parents, too proud to speak, whose eyes asked "What are we going to be able to give our kids this Christmas while you're riding around in your new minibus?"

Then there were millions of Africans and Indians and Pakistanis and South Americans and Aborigines and others looking at me and saying, "Minibuses? Homes? Presents at Christmas? What about decent food?"

I told the group what I was seeing. They looked shocked, then guilty, then embarrassed. They all looked down at the floor.

Someone piped up and thanked me for sharing my insights. They wondered if I might like to join one of the other groups. I went away. They looked happier. They went back to discussing minibuses.

At the next group they were discussing evangelism. "Why don't we hold a coffee shop?" someone suggested. "Great idea. What will we do there?" I asked. "Well, we'll play some Christian music and try to be friendly..."

I had a flash on one thousand students from the local schools and colleges quietly saying "We've grown up with you Christians. We are your friends, but you never really talked to us about your faith. Have you got some Good News to tell us or not? Why don't you just come out with it?"

"...and we will also sell coffee of course!"

Another picture came to mind. A picture of coffee pickers who work long hours for pay that barely feeds their families. They work for a company that sells coffee throughout the world and has more money than you or I can imagine. Its executives drive Porches in the cities while its workers trudge home on tired feet to their shanty village.

I told the group what I saw. They looked at me blankly. They didn't understand. They told me I was too spiritual for their group. They suggested I join the study group.

As I left, I heard them asking which Christian music would best get across the Christian message at their coffee shop.

The study group was discussing sexuality as a possible topic. "Great idea," I said, "I can see thousands of people who use their sexuality in subtle ways to get power over others and to manipulate them. I can also see statistics now. Statistics of the number of young people in our suburb who have been victims of rape or incest. Some of them are in our church, but they don't dare speak out. I see Judy now with the baby she had last year. She would like to come back to youth group. She would like to speak to us about sex before marriage and about responsibility. I see..."

I am interrupted by someone. "Well, maybe spiritual gifts would be a safer topic for us."

"Yes," I say, "that's a great topic. Pray especially for the gift of prophecy so that we can speak out like Amos against the injustices of our society, the greed and

heartlessness of some countries' institutions and work places, the hypocrisies within our own church and youth group, the stupidity of a nuclear war threatened world where billions are spent on weapons and virtually nothing be comparison on helping the poor."

"Let's get the gift of healing going too. People in our group, our suburb, our world, need healing – physical, emotional, spiritual healing – all of them."  
I'm on a roll now and go through every spiritual gift, telling of the pictures that come to mind.

Someone leans over to another in the group. "What's his problem? Has he been watching too many World Vision specials or something?"

"No, worse. Much worse. They say he's got the gift of the big picture."

I'm still going on the gifts. "..., and let's all pray for the gift of the big picture as well!"

The group groans under the weight of the idea. The daydream ends.

My nightmare begins. I think about what I am really lie. I want a minibus for the youth group. I've never bothered to visit Judy to see how she's coping with her baby. I drink that brand of coffee. I don't talk openly about my faith. I don't seek after the tougher spiritual gifts.

There is a big, wide, hurting, wonderful world out there. I, and my group too, need to remember it is there. Christianity must be lived, not just in our youth group or church, but out in this desperate world as well. Plenty of Christians throughout the world have the gift of the big picture. Out of their love for God and Humanity, they are doing what they can. Will I become one of them? Will my group join me? Will you and your group join us? Can you begin to see the potential if we all see that our faith is for not just here but for out there as well?

Enough of daydreams. Back to the book of James now. Oh, oh!  
"My brothers and sisters, what good is it for someone to say he has faith if his actions do not prove it? Can that sort of faith save him? Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to them, 'God bless you! Keep warm and eat well. See you around, bye.' – if you don't give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith; if it's on its own without partnering up with some actions, then it's as dead as a doornail."

James chapter 2, verses 14 to 17 T.K.V.

### Reflection.

Use the story as the script for a drama.

Let the story lead you in to prayers of confession and prayers for others.

## Hypocrites.

I get so sick and tired of hearing some atheists and agnostics wielding their bigotry sticks and hitting Christians with the charge that Christians are hypocrites.

Of course Christians are hypocrites! That's obvious. Working that out is no instant access into the Genius Club.

Christians claim to be followers of Christ. Christ was sinless. 100% pure. God as a person. Are Christians sinless? 100% pure? No way. So, of course we fail to live up to the standards we proclaim. We fail to be like Jesus, who was all love, mercy, wisdom, strength and forgiveness. Therefore we are hypocrites.

But how can antagonists of the faith find any joy in knowing that people who believe in the rightness of righteousness can only partially exemplify it? You've got to be hard to laugh at people with high ideals.

"Hypocrites" is a boomerang word no matter who's throwing it. So I won't exactly throw it myself but... How come atheists and agnostics celebrate Christmas? How come I don't see them marching off to work or to school at Easter as an act of solidarity with their non-faith?

And why do they question the God they say they don't believe in, when there's a tragedy in their lives? And why is "God" or "Christ" the first word on their lips when they want to cuss or curse with power? And then there's church baptisms, weddings and funerals and death-bed prayers. Why this buckling of the non-believing knees at life's magical moments?

Well, maybe I might as well have used the word myself. But like I said before, "Hypocrites" is a boomerang word, no matter who throws it. So, yes, Christians are hypocrites. But aren't we all? Aren't we all?

## The Icon.

It was a dream. I know it was a dream. It had to be. But it was so real! I'm not very religious, but this morning, I said The Lord's Prayer for the first time in ages. "Our Father, who is in heaven...forgive us our sins as we forgive those that sin against us..amen." Maybe that's what did it. I don't know.

Anyway, here's what happened. I was at the computer. I'd brought up the file on my "friend". That's where I keep a record of all the selfish, rotten, rude, manipulative, dishonest and generally bad things my so called friend has ever done. It was a big file. I'd been working on it for almost two years now.

When I've got the two years worth, I'm going to email it to everyone we both know. It's time everyone knew how low this person really is.

I finished listing their latest crimes for the week. Then I went back to the very beginning to check over all the entries, listed by dates, making sure I'd saved them all. There was a lot to read. I especially enjoyed reading the ones that I had put an asterisk beside. Those were the ones that really made my blood boil! This person is such a nasty piece of work!

Anyway, I'd got to around Easter time entries from last year, this foreign icon appeared in the bottom right hand corner of the screen. I lent in for a closer look. I couldn't believe it! It was a little picture of Jesus. The expression on his face was one of disappointment. Disappointment and anger.

I had no idea what was going on. As I focused back on my typing, something blipped on the screen. One of the asterisked entries had changed right before my eyes. I read the new text. It was totally different to anything I had put there. It was about teasing a poor little six year old kid, reducing them to tears. As I kept reading, I was just thinking that this wasn't something my friend had done at all, when it occurred to me, that it was something I had done. It was me when I was twelve.

Another asterisk flashed. That entry changed too. It was about when I had stolen money from my mum's purse when I was ten. Then the screen went wild. The file was speeding through page after page, and on each page the asterisked entries were all being changed. My name appearing in all of them. All of the entries now recording hurtful and bad things I'd done.

It stopped when it got to this week's records. There on that page were a combination of my friend's sins and my own with the asterisks beside them.

I tried to delete one of the stories about me, but when I did that, nothing disappeared – instead a fresh entry about me jumped up. I did it four times and four new stories came up, each one getting more personal, more embarrassing and more serious than the one before.

I don't know who could have this inside dirt on me, because I'm sure no one knew some of this stuff except me.

And maybe Jesus too I guess.

The Jesus icon in the corner of the screen, grew a speech balloon. It said, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." I slumped back in to my chair. I tried to delete it, but each time I did that, it increased in size on the screen. That same look of disappointment and anger on Jesus face, getting bigger each time.

It took me a while to figure out what to do next, but eventually I got it. I slowly moved the mouse to one of the entries about my friend and tried to delete it. It worked, and each line about my friend I deleted, a line at the asterisks, about my sins, was erased too. For each sin of theirs I deleted, one of my own got cancelled out.

I went at it with a vengeance then deleting huge blocks of typing at a time, then pages at a time. I was deleting as fast as I could, until, at last, there was nothing left. Nothing left of their sins, and nothing left of my own sins.

The speech balloon from the Jesus icon grew and grew until it took up the whole screen. "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Then it caught fire in one corner and burned all the way across the screen, just leaving this kind of smoking ash when it was all burned.

Then I woke up. And here I am now, staring at the screen with all the entries about my friend still there and perfectly in tact. No entries about me. No Jesus icon.

Weird. Very weird. I rubbed my eyes and pushed my chair back. I pressed the keys to save the latest entries on my friend. I was just about to close down the file, when a little icon appeared in the corner.

James 4 v 11 – 12.

Matthew 6 v 12 – 15 & 7 v 1 – 5.

Matthew 18 v 21 – 35.

## God's Okay But Church Is Boring.

Life is like a big bag with all sorts of contents. Some are weird, some wonderful, and some just plain dull. If you tip your bag of life out, and labelled all those things which are boring, (at least some of the time), you might end up with a list something like this.

*Things that are boring sometimes.* School, work, T.V., study, my old c.d.s, my old wardrobe, my parents – the fossils, certain friends, life, and even me, myself and I.

Most things can get boring. Even we do. But you can't give up on everything that's boring. If you gave up on school at the age of ten because it was boring, your work prospects would be severely limited. Being a 56 year old pizza poster wobble board waver beside the highway is an option – but I'm not sure it would be all that rewarding as a life time career. The idea of ditching school might seem like fun at first, but later you might figure it was a bad mistake.

In the same way deciding against going to church because it's boring could severely limit your faith prospects. If you are serious about believing in God and being loyal to him, you need to think seriously about being at church for the rest of your life. Christians need church.

You see, the church is like a mother ship cruising through deep space, heading for the most beautiful and cosmic destination. The space travellers in the ship are proud of being space travellers. Some of them even wear "Space Travellers for God" T-shirts.

The people run the mother ship while God programs the central computer banks. The ship protects them from the dangers of space travel and caters for their essential needs.

Every now and then though, a space traveller gets bored –painfully bored – and they jump in to a space suit and eject themselves.

They leave the ship and go out alone. No strings attached. They have their own built in supply of oxygen. They are still space travellers. They still wear their "Space Travellers

for God." T-shirts. They are space travellers till the day they die. Which is about the next day.

Do you have to go to church to be a Christian? No!  
Do you have to go to church to stay one? Possibly, yes.

Our relationship with God is like life itself – it needs the right conditions to survive. Church can provide the right conditions for faith to survive.

My friend Sam would probably disagree with me here. While many Christians thrive on church services, Sam finds church boring. He would rather get his spiritual food from other sources. I can relate to that. Sam's not alone in this. But what worries me about that is whether we will have the self discipline to keep reading the Bible under our own steam, or praying or seeking out spiritual inspiration. I don't know one single Christian who doesn't admit to being slacker than they'd like to be when it comes to matters of the soul.

If we go to church, at least we've got one hour, out of the 168 in our week, where we can be helped to pray, to praise and to have the Bible explained to us. Going to church can make up for the lack of spiritual nourishment we've given ourselves during the rest of the week.

At church we can tell God how much we love him. We can bring God our offerings, our gratitude, our concerns, our selves as we really are. At church we can be reminded of God's greatness – and we do need reminders. We humans worry, fret, fume and fight – often over such trivial things. Some quality time with God at church can help us take a reality check and settle down. It can turn life from black and white back to full living colour again.

Through the sermon, God has the chance to speak to us audibly – through a three dimensional, flesh and blood speaker system. During the prayers we can confess our sins and have the slate wiped clean again. We can join with others in praying for the world and our loved ones and those with special needs. Church has a lot going for it.

But it can still be dead boring! I know. So, what, is abandoning ship the only option? No way! Remember our space travellers for God? They could have tried to liven up the mother ship before giving up. There could have been lots of things they could have tried to do. Same with church. Is there some way you can make it more interesting?

Do something proactive and give your church a hand. Help them to help you. What about you try these ideas?

1. Go to church with the attitude, "I'm here to visit my best friend – God." And get in to it as much as you can.
2. Expect God has got a special message for you every time you go – and be expectantly on the look out for it. It could be in the hymns, the prayers, the sermon, or even in the smiles of the people around you. Ask yourself constantly, "What is God trying to say to me now?"
3. Be actively involved in the worship. Sing the hymns to God personally. Mean what you are singing. Pray the prayers that are being said. Keep your mind busily at work, involved in what's happening. Make sure you are giving yourself, your thoughts, your emotions, to God. Before you ask yourself, "What did I get out of church today?", ask yourself the more important question, "What did God get out of me today? Did I do God's heart good by the sincerity of the love I expressed to him in worship today?"
4. This one will take guts. How about telling the minister if church is getting really boring for you. If you do it kindly and sincerely and especially if you have some positive suggestions to make, they might actually really appreciate the tips. Why not ask them if they could do a sermon on a faith issue that really interests you? Do it in a letter if it's too scary to do it in person.
5. Get some lively, young people with good ideas on to your church's worship planning committee. And if there isn't such a thing, offer to help start one up.
6. Ask the minister if they would like you to a survey of others in the church, asking them what they like best about worship, what they'd like to see more of, less of, changed, kept etc. Let the minister have a copy and explain that your intention is to be helpful, not hurtful.
7. Do up a report of what's relevant for young people at the moment. Update it every few months. List film clips, pop songs, magazines, movies, t. v. shows, stories or illustrations that have particular relevance to the faith and to young people and could be used in worship.

8. Be fair. Remember that the church exists for people of all ages. Be sympathetic to others needs in worship too.
9. Offer to be involved. Get your mates together and offer to take part in leading prayers, taking Bible readings, presenting the readings through dramas, form a worship band to beef up the music, offer to recruit people for testimonies or sharing times. Remember that you belong in the church as much as any body else. You have the right to hope for interesting and relevant worship experiences. You also share in the responsibility to help it happen.
10. And if the minister isn't interested in the young peoples help or suggestions—well, I'll bet there's a church just around the corner that would be.

#### **Reflection.**

Do you go to church? Why / why not?

Along with church, how else can a person develop their relationship with God?

Are you doing any of these?

What's the best church experience you've had? The worst?

Jesus was a church boy. Check out Matthew 2 v 41 – 52; 4 v 42 – 44; Luke 4 v 16 – 30; 6 v 6 – 11 etc. He sure stirred things up in church!

Young people getting bored to death in church is nothing new you know. Read Acts 20 v 7 – 12. You could do a drama based on this play in worship just before you invite people to form a worship planning support group with you.

## The Swing.

Grandad sits on the old swing under the shade of the old, old jacaranda tree. No pipe. No cane. No book.

The wind plays with a whisp of his grey hair and throws it around his wrinkled head.

I don't want to interrupt him now with his afternoon tea and biscuits. I sit and watch in love.

He mumbles and mutters, not to himself, but to his good friend, God. They talk and laugh together most afternoons under the jacaranda.

The glazed look comes over his eyes now, and the smile and an ever so gently to and fro-ing on the swing.

He is remembering.

I know because he's told me before. And in all his rememberings I have never seen him look sad. Never upset. Never ashamed, or remorseful, or despairing.

How can a person live so long and never cause a regret that will come creeping back to haunt and to hurt – to twist the knife as the do the slow mind dance called "old age sits and remembers?"

I sat on this same swing just last night. I wrestled with a much shorter past, a much nearer lifetime. I regret already. I worry. I feel shame. Already I am sorry and yet my life journey has practically just begun. How do I arrive at seventy, look back and feel good about my life?

I swang furiously to and fro on our swing. Angry at myself and at others. Feeling foolish about my own mistakes and disgust at the mistakes of others.

But not Grandad. He swings ever so gently, a soft glaze of remembering in his eyes, the smile that comes and goes and the mutterings and chucklings between him and his good mate, God. Perhaps Grandad never sinned, never failed, never made a fool of himself, never hurt anyone.

No. I know that's not true.

What then? Is it that he learned to gather his mistakes, stack them in a line and use them as stepping stones to a better life? It sounds nice, but no.

The answer's there in Grandad's chucklings and mutterings. As he and God sit and chat together in the afternoons under the jacaranda, there is forgiveness and there is love. There is a friendship so cleansing that it reaches through the years and accepts and purifies them all.

I will take Grandad his afternoon tea. But not all of it. I'll keep a couple of biscuits. Today God and I will share afternoon tea together too.

### **Reflection.**

While the story is fresh in your mind, have a good chat with God. Go for a walk together if you can. Talk to God about the story – summarise it for him and tell God what you thought it was saying to you. Talk to God about your relationship. Talk to him about your life. Enjoy God's company. Be silent sometimes too. Give God the chance to talk back to you, with in your heart, mind or soul.

