

# New Crusaders

## Voluntary Service Overseas

'Come to Nigeria to die' was not the specific call that the missionaries of the last century answered when they flocked to Africa. But the Christian ethic of their times and the demand that they go and teach all nations spurred them on to face hunger and death in the service of an ideal. Today the ethic has changed and the cry is for the technocrat to help the underdeveloped and newly free countries find stability, security and material welfare. As then the rich countries of the world provided the teachers and priests, so today only the rich countries can spare the skilled men that are needed. The Churches are being supplemented by the Peace Corps and the VSO Committee. It is the work of the latter, more precisely called the Committee on Service Overseas by Volunteers, that this article is to examine.

The Committee is a co-ordinating body, overseeing four different organizations (their addresses will be found at the end) who are all working towards roughly the same ends and using roughly the same methods, and the discussion concentrates on the ends and methods of VSO itself, as the largest of the four.

It is rare for a volunteer to go out for more than two years, or for less than one. Both cases are known, but they are exceptional and the standard period of service is about twelve months. The variety of the work is impressive: the five heads listed in the official handout comprise teaching, agricultural production, medicine, engineering and administration. In fact, what is wanted are those people who might be described as the architects of society. The countries to which the volunteers go are the new countries, countries in every imaginable stage of advancement and voracious for anyone with the requisite skills. The work that the volunteer may find himself doing ranges from instructing Sea Dayaks in the basic facts about money, to teaching law at University College, Dar-es-Salaam. For both jobs, the pay is identical: the only difference is that the former is a twelve month stretch, while the latter is for seventeen. However, in Dar-es-Salaam, the volunteer has S.C.R. privileges; a volunteer building a community virtually from scratch, a week's journey up-river in British Guiana, may be living on the barest essentials.

1958 was the first year of VSO and Alec Dickson, whose idea it was, sent out sixteen school-leavers to three Colonies and one Commonwealth country. The Committee hope to send out this September, under the aegis of the largest of the organizations under them, a thousand graduates and some hundreds of school-leavers to half the countries of the world. Comment is unnecessary. Obviously the Committee have tapped the fantastically rich seam of idealism that runs through people today: a practical effective idealism that makes them

give up a year of their lives to work in unfamiliar and sometimes unpleasant conditions for very little pay. At the moment, the graduate gets his passage there and back, plus three pounds a week pocket money over and above his board and lodging while he is there, and, it is hoped, a terminal grant when he comes back of up to £150. This is a considerable advance on the first school-leavers who occasionally found themselves a few pounds out of pocket at the end of their task, but it compares badly with the offers of industry. The urge to introduce Chekov's plays to Ghanaian children, or, much nastier, to go out and organize a boys' club in the Philippines over the open opposition of the Bamboo boys (the local brand of teddy-boys, so called because of their vicious habit of beating people up with bamboo sticks), has a greater allure than the blandishments of ICI and Shell. Though not as high as the Peace Corps, the qualifications demanded are high. The spiel on one of the UN Volunteer Service posts that I have before me specifies a First or good Second, and the Committee that picks the school-leavers look for tough, upright and honest characters who are unlikely to leave their principles behind on the quay when they go.

What inspires these people to go out in this way? I mentioned idealism earlier on, and heard as I did so the universal scream of the cynic and the professional detractor that all they want is to see the world. This is obviously inapplicable to the graduate. Dr Huddlestone's comment on television that he was astonished how many people were thinking of their pension as soon as they left school, points more accurately the feelings of many today. They are torn between their emotions and their ideals, which urge them to go out, and their heads and often their parents, who urge them to get settled down. Parents tend to play on their fears of being left behind in the rat-race and do their best to emphasize the routine work and the hardships (which definitely exist, and the volunteer who does not appreciate this is probably unsuitable and anyway will not get picked) and never mention the peace of mind that you get from doing a thing, not because it is profitable, or because it puts you one up on your acquaintances but simply because you believe that it is right. It is the struggle to make this decision that demands the greatest effort. Many articles have noted the increase in the number of undergraduates who are seriously interested in religion. During this term in Cambridge, four members of the Theology Faculty have given a series of lectures that never once had less than a thousand listeners; the Union needs Peter Sellers or Mr Macmillan before it will get more than a couple of hundred. Now for a young person an idea that is strongly held must be turned into action. The action may merely be impulsive argument through the long hours of the night or it may also mean going and actually doing something: deliberately, hardheadedly taking an ideal-service of others, reducing colour bar tensions, giving one's help to those who need it, searching for humility, whatever it may be, however it may be phrased – and turning it into some kind of hard fact. It takes courage and honesty to do this and the end product is always far different from the original ideal, but the volunteer has at least done something for an idea and there is nothing more exhilarating than that.

So much for the graduate. He may be able to express his ideas in the concrete manner that I have outlined. He may understand many of the implications involved in going out to Sarawak to teach genetics to people with a different pigmentation and nearly as many prejudices as himself. But it is harder to apply this to the school-leaver, who may have become bored mixing cement, waiting to go up to University and just wants a change. But in the process, he makes a decision for himself, faces the consequences of that decision by himself, and overcomes the difficulties through himself.

The accusation that rang out loudest in the early years of VSO was to the effect that 'to help an under-developed country by sending them an under-developed do-gooder was a particularly dangerous version of the blind leading the blind'; and it is true that graduates today get a somewhat different briefing to the one the school-leavers got in 1958. Said the organizers then, 'We are sending you out to be a games master in British Guiana', and the volunteer found himself teaching A level Latin in a Methodist school (they're short of playing fields in British Guiana). But nobody's time was wasted; for this volunteer's achievement was not that he gave one or two children the chance of learning a dead language from the other side of the world, but that he was able to demonstrate, just by being himself, that a young white man is not the same as a middle aged white administrator or tourist from the European Club. There is a distinction worth noting here, and it is an important one: the school-leaver is not set in his ways or attitudes (this is borne out by the assertion of one volunteer to whom I talked that well over half those school-leavers who go are determined when they come back to go out again after University and to do similar kinds of work) and this makes him willing and able to learn as much from the people he works with as he teaches them. This perhaps is the key to the whole movement. Only by the realization that each has something to give and each has something to learn do you create the emotional climate that is necessary to change prejudice and ensure co-operation.

Some final points must be made. The task of the volunteer is two-fold: he must bring to the community he is building, or in which he is working, whether it is Man o' War Bay in the Southern Cameroons or in the country areas of Northern Rhodesia, the benefit of his skill and the benefit of his character. His tolerance, patience, understanding, strength of will, values, beliefs and ideas will have an effect out of all proportion to the time he is there and the money he is paid. The impression he leaves will colour the attitudes of the people around him for life. He is a modern missionary, all the more powerful for the fact that he enters upon the scene when the heady wind of freedom is blowing through the land, fanning the sparks of emotion to fever pitch. If there is a flaw in his character, this furnace will reveal it. This is the great challenge that, for a few years now, has faced the schools and universities of this country. The need in the under-developed countries for these types of skill is only a temporary one and in a few years will be gone. Now is the last chance that the richer nations of the world will have to give to the poorer ones benefits without strings, and to themselves a

generation who have practised their ideas and beliefs at a time and in a place where it matters.

JOHN TACKABERRY

**Note.** The addresses of the organizations, which are open to women as well as men, are as follows:—

International Voluntary Service: 72 Oakley Square, N.W.1.

National Union of Students of England, Wales and Northern Ireland:  
3 Endsleigh Street, W.C.1, and

The Scottish Union of Students: 30 Lothian Street, Edinburgh.

United Nations Association: International Service Department, 25  
Charles Street, W.1.

Voluntary Service Overseas: 18 Northumberland Avenue, W.C.2.

## Heard and Seen

### JAZZ AT THE CROSSROADS

When it is considered that jazz is but half a century old, that it was only the spontaneous means of self-expression of a repressed minority, it is then that one wonders at its international acceptance. Surely, it must cater for some deep-seated hunger, for otherwise how could it have achieved such an acceptance?

Jazz, today, can be divided into three rough categories – traditional, mainstream, and modern. The traditionalists maintain that the old times were the best, and to persuade us that this is true they not only use the line-up of instruments fashionable earlier this century (banjo, cornet, even tuba), but also dress in the style of a bygone era, eras which have nothing at all to do with the genesis of jazz. One band dresses up in Confederate uniform, another as Mississippi gamblers, and one of the best known bandleaders, Acker Bilk, dons bowler and striped waistcoat. In the effort to project the potential listener back into the period, posters and advertisements are executed in a pseudo-archaic typographical style that often antedates all jazz by as much as a century.

The mainstreamers eddy midway between the traditionalists and the modernists, borrowing from both. No one has yet successfully defined mainstream. It uses a harmonic vocabulary more advanced than the traditional variety, more down to earth than the modernists. Mainstream is ideally suited to the middle-brow jazz listener. There is not so much of the plink-plonk of trad, nor the muffled profundities of the modernists. Essentially this group is the most modest of the three, fairly unpretentious, but apt to amble along at a luke-warm