

FAITH BY PHONE

by CARL BAKAL



The age-old power of prayer is being brought to millions daily by the simple modern expedient of dialing a number

November is Religion in American Life Month, during which the nation is reminded of the importance of prayer. The following article underscores RIAL's theme that strength for a person as well as a nation comes from living faith.

ON THE NIGHT TABLE were a bottle of potassium cyanide and a telephone. The distraught man stared at them, instruments of life and death in this moment of utter desolation. His hand went out, hesitated over the poison, then moved toward the receiver.

In a moment he was listening to the recorded message of inspiration from Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell, pastor of New York's Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church. No life is hopeless to God, Dr. Bonnell was saying. Eyes closed, the man listened to the message, over and over, before calling Dr. Bonnell directly.

"Do you really believe what you say on that recording, Dr. Bonnell?" he asked. The clergyman assured him that he did and, sensing the man's crisis, invited him to his study for a personal talk. When the man left their meeting, he handed Dr. Bonnell the bottle of potassium cyanide with which he had planned to end his life. He had taken on new hope, found new strength.

"Faith by phone" has saved more than one person from suicide and has given moments of spiritual solace to millions of others caught in the hectic pace of daily living. In an estimated 150 areas, no man is farther from the comfort of prayer than the nearest telephone, and the number of persons using this service increases daily.

In Los Angeles, 10,000 calls a day are received by the YMCA service. Chicago's "Y" handles 5,000 daily and has counted more than a million in its three years of operation. In smaller cities, the Memorial Baptist Church of Columbia, Mo., (pop. 32,000) gets 400 calls daily for its "Inspiration, Please," and the Cactus Drive Church of Levelland, Texas, receives about 100.

"In this atomic age, men feel the need for prayer more than ever," explains the Rev. August F. Brunn, whose St. Andrew's Lutheran Church offers telephone inspiration to Pittsburgh. "Our business as a church is to bring the word of God to men whenever they need it. The telephone is one of our ways of doing it."

The help offered by these recorded messages is as varied as the people in need. An Ohio factory worker, victim of a boss with a furious temper, dials the local prayer service when there are arguments and hands the receiver to his chief. The soothing words calm everybody.

Housewives find the messages steady jangled nerves, businessmen phone when facing a difficult decision, as do doctors about to enter the operating room. Hospital patients, shut-ins, the aged, and others

who cannot visit their ministers dial a prayer several times a day.

A Marion, Ohio, minister reports that a five-year-old boy calls the local prayer service every day, listens to the message, then dials again for the benefit of his aged, blind grandmother.

Many persons report that they call every day on arising. A Broadalbin, N. Y., woman refers to it as her "right start for the day." In Madison, Wis., an elderly lady, afraid at night, finds the message gives her the calm to go to sleep. Some families have incorporated the recorded messages into their evening devotions.

COMMUNITY churches, or groups of churches, usually sponsor the dial-a-prayer services, which cost anywhere from \$15 to \$1,000 a month. The YMCA, chambers of commerce, Kiwanis and other service groups also give the programs financial backing.

The recorded devotions run anywhere from 10 seconds to two minutes and are usually nondenominational. In most communities, the messages are changed daily, and in Scarsdale, N. Y., reportedly the first dial-a-prayer town in the nation, they are changed twice a day.

Simple prayers are most popular, but readings may include Psalms, Bible verse, and other sections of Scripture, or perhaps just a plain "pep talk." Some telephone prayers have specific aims, though. In Chicago, alcoholics fighting the urge to lose themselves in a bottle can dial a number to spend "A Minute a Day with the Major." This is a message directed at drinkers by Maj. Roland Quinn of the Salvation Army's Harbor Light Center on Skid Row. More than 100,000 calls have come to Major Quinn's number in three years, and many have phoned him personally for specific advice or to arrange an interview.

Of the general prayers, possibly the most popular was recorded by F. William Stahl, branch associate general secretary of the Baltimore YMCA, who has selected and read more than 1,000 messages. This is how it goes:

"Lord, give me the strength to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed. Give me the courage to change the things that can be changed and give me the wisdom to distinguish one from the other."

Simple words. But for the anxious person pausing in his day to dial a moment's peace, they lift the spirit and remind him of life's true importance.

COVER:

On our cover: Fred Astaire and the newest addition to his charmed circle of dancing partners, Barrie Chase. For more about this ageless dancer, see "Hitch Your Wagon to Astaire" on page 20.

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