

A Review of the Original Young Life Leader Training Manual

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March 30, 2010

Intro and Background

I stumbled across a goldmine of Young Life history and philosophy. Let me tell you the story... While I was working on my M.Div I searched the country to find the best elective credit I could find. I found it at Wheaton. They have a Masters in Leadership and Evangelism program that is top notch. They study and teach the things I am most interested in at the highest level. I have since then graduated from seminary but I continue to travel back to Wheaton to take classes that I think will help my theology and ministry in Young Life.

A few months ago I was auditing a class and one of the assignments was to do an “archive” project utilizing the vast evangelism archives they have at the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton. The archivist presented us several suitable topics but on a whim I had them look up “Young Life”. In my humble opinion, Young Life is not known for its books, resources, literature etc. (which is a shame), so I didn’t expect them to have anything. To my surprise, the archivist knew from memory that they did have archives about Young Life by its founder Jim Rayburn.

As it turns out the Billy Graham Archives has a collection from Herbert John Taylor (1893-1978). Taylor was a business executive, civic leader, and sponsor of numerous Christian organizations. From what I learned through their collection, he served on the boards of several such institutions as: Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (U.S.A.), Youth for Christ, Young Life, Fuller Seminary, Child Evangelism Fellowship, Christian Service Brigade, Pioneer Girls, and the Greater Chicago Billy Graham Crusades. Their collection states that, “Taylor was involved in Young Life from the beginning, and was Chairman of its Board of Trustees for a number of years. Through his Christian Workers Foundation, Taylor purchased Star Ranch, one of the organization's four camps, for Young Life. The Young Life records are arranged alphabetically according to subject matter. There are annual reports, correspondence, brochures, board meeting minutes, financial records, and staff manuals.”

In these collections I read original letters from Rayburn to Taylor from the “Miracle Book Club” days before the inception of Young Life as an organization. The collection included an original flier from the early Young Life Tent Meetings and an original Topical Memory System type packet that was designed for the original Campaigners groups. I am fortunate to have copies of all of these things for my records now.

But the one thing that I really wanted to share with everyone is the original Young Life Leader's Manual. It was sent to Mr. Taylor on Jan 22, 1942 for any comments and suggestions he may have for it. It is divided into five sections:

1. The Introduction
2. The Campaign Leader
3. The Campaign Organization
4. The Young Life Club
5. Promotion

I want to walk through this amazing material step-by-step through each section. I think it will help us see the amazing vision that Rayburn had for the ministry. In many ways this manual could be copied off and handed off to leaders today for training. I think there are also some hidden nuggets of wisdom that all will benefit from reading.

1. The Introduction

The introduction begins by asking a great question, "Why Young Life Campaign?" Basically why do we need something like Young Life today? It also asks, "What need is there for another organization?" The same questions are asked today. Sometimes this is asked by teenagers, "What is Young Life?" Sometimes this is asked by parents. Sometimes the question is asked by opponents in and out of the church, "Is there a need for another organization?"

The Leader Manual gives three answers. First, it recalls the large percentage of high school students who do not attend church. In all honesty, it is unclear from this paragraph in the manual if they meant to say 25% or 75% do not go to church. Either way, it states that in 1942, 20 million high school students do not go to church. The manual quotes Rom 10:14, "how shall they believe in him of whom they have never heard?" The first reason why Young Life exists is that there is work to be done that isn't being done by anyone else. This is still true nearly 70 years later.

Second, the manual shows that there are new methods that are available. It is interesting that it mentions methods including radio, newspapers, and mass meetings. I'm not sure if Young Life ever spent much effort on a radio ministry to teenagers. Who knows, maybe today that would take the form of a social media ministry?

This raises a great question that many people I know kick around from time to time. Are the methods Young Life continues to use the best ones for today? I'm not bringing up the scriptural principles, those are timeless. I'm also not bringing up the theology, that is a separate topic. I'm talking about the methods. The time, location and style of club was a ground breaking method. Are there superior methods that we are just waiting to discover or tweak for greater impact? Rayburn and his associates were asking this question in the 1940's, we would be wise to ask it today. As several prominent Young Life staff have told me, "the best Young Life is yet to be done". The manual goes on to say, "These methods have proven effective. But when they no longer continue to do so, we shall leave them and try new ones."

The Young Life Leaders Manual wraps up its introduction by stating the two purposes of Young Life. First, Young Life exists to reach the unsaved with the gospel. Second, Young Life exists to teach Christians to grow in their faith. Simply put, "Reach and Teach".

One theme that stands out in this first section of the leaders manual is that Young Life had stumbled on new methods with a simple and clear goal of reaching the unchurched. The last statement of this section says, "Use these suggestions all you want; if they are ineffective search for better ones under God's direction." Given all the success of the first year and a half of Young Life (i.e. 40 clubs), the manual seems to have a sense of humility in their methods. They are not claiming to have found the new unique patented method for reaching teenagers. On the other hand it seems that their strength is being Spirit-led and open minded about different approaches.

Questions for discussion:

- 1) The first reason the manual gives that Young Life is needed is the sheer number of kids who do not know Jesus. How is it easy to lose focus of this in the weekly grind of doing club?
- 2) How is club working as a method for getting the gospel out to teenagers? What are the strengths and weaknesses of club?
- 3) With the founder's emphasis on being open-minded about new methods, what are new methods that you know have been tried? Brainstorm some new methods.

2. The Campaign Leader

The manual starts this section on leadership with a bold phrase, "The leader is IT!" Young Life puts an incredible emphasis on the leader and on leadership. There is not only one kind of leadership, as the manual suggests, "Do not put yourself in someone else's mold. Use the personality God gave you to its best advantages." This is a good reminder as we often see leaders up-front who are funny or exceptional communicators. There is not one "mold" for the Young Life leader. The mold is the complete body of Christ and each person is just one part.

The campaign leader is said to have three responsibilities. First and foremost the leader is responsible to God. "Our fellowship with Him must be unbroken, our growth in His knowledge unhindered, for we can never lead anyone where we have not gone." One thing I very much appreciate of the culture of Young Life I have experienced is that one's relationship with Jesus has always been elevated above "doing ministry." One great phrase the manual uses is, "Do not be caught trafficking 'unfelt truth'. Speak only of that which has laid hold of your own life." Anyone who has given even a few club talks knows exactly what means and the difference it makes. The same can be said for personal conversations with students.

The second responsibility of the leader is to the students. The leader must know students' interests and know their language. The manual says to, "Get next to them!" and "make the message interesting." In the midst of being close to students we are never to compromise our role as an ambassador of Jesus. In my opinion, we in Young Life continue to be with students, but I think that our creativity may be lacking in "making the message interesting". We must not compromise the message. It must be Biblical, and it must be with integrity and not gimmicky. In the time we spend with students, we must ask ourselves if

we are paying attention to how they learn, what messages are connecting with them and if we are using these methods or ones that we are simply used to using.

The third responsibility of the leader is to the other leaders in Young Life. The manual uses two words that stand out, loyalty and cooperation. I believe the context of this manual is about local leadership, but it obviously applies elsewhere as well. Each team of leaders in a club or area must have a certain loyalty, or in other words, trust, reliability, and devotion not only to the Lord but to each other. A spirit of cooperation and teamwork is a hallmark of a strong leadership team. The manual also teaches that, "if [the leader] cannot loyally support its leaders, doctrines, let [the leader] seek some other place in God's services." In the context of a local Young Life area or club, there must be a united front. There may not be a more important place for unity than on the front line of evangelism to the disinterested and the unchurched. We know that our love for each other is what will be noticed (John 13:34-35).

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) If the "leader is IT!" in Young Life, how are we developing each other as leaders?
- 2) Are we forcing ourselves into someone else's mold in Young Life?
- 3) How can we avoid "trafficking unfelt truth" in our ministry?
- 4) What are we learning right now about making the message interesting?
- 5) Does my Young Life team have a spirit of cooperation and loyalty? How can we grow in this?

3. The Campaign Organization

The Young Life "Campaign" was organized under a national board of directors, much as it is today. Under this board sits a local committee. Then there are field staff. At the time of this manual there were only five Young Life staff! The manual mentions that they were paid a salary each month, if the money came in that month! The staff was expected to keep a file of all club members. Weekly reports of attendance were to be sent in to the office for their records.

The activities of the local Young Life area were to be centered around the Young Life club. The manual calls the club the "backbone". But the manual teaches that the activities are not to be set in stone, but to flex with the changing needs. Interestingly enough it suggests that "more needs to be done", which may include, "radio programs, street meetings, gospel teams, printed matter, and so on." It may be that Jim Rayburn wanted to start a radio program to the unchurched as part of the ministry! We would be wise to keep our minds and hearts open to different opportunities in our day.

The organization was also based on its doctrinal statement. One interesting part in this section is that the campaign motto was, "He that hath the Son hath life" (1 John 5:12). What a great motto! Its explicit focus on Jesus, life and having Him in your life is what Young Life is all about. This part of the manual also states its financial approach. It mentions that Young Life has three sources of support: "contributions of Young Life club members, club offerings, and the voluntary gifts of interested Christian friends." I couldn't imagine a offering at club, or money from club kids, but I guess that is how it started!

The last part of this section goes into detail about Young Life's relationship with the local church. It quotes a motto, "cooperation, without confusion, competition, or compromise". It's a good one we could still use today. The motto goes on to state, "Young Life Campaign shall encourage all young people who have a personal faith in Christ to join a church of their own choice." The manual also states that "local clubs... much not be linked organically to any particular church" in order to be effective to reach all denominations and the unchurched. The leader is to "be careful to avoid controversy on subjects that arose opposition."

Questions for Discussion:

- 1) How do we benefit from a national board and local committee?
- 2) Early Young Life kept close record of each student and attendance. How might this help or hurt our effort now?
- 3) Is the Young Life club still the "backbone" of the ministry?
- 4) The manual suggests activities such as radio, street meetings and more. Brainstorm some activities that we have never tried in Young Life. Could any work?
- 5) What do you think of the original motto, "He that hath the Son hath life"?
- 6) How does Young Life relate to your local churches?

4. The Young Life Club and Promotion

The last two sections are about club and promotion of club. From the very start, the manual says that there is no set procedure for the club meeting. The manual consistently reminds the reader that Young Life is done best when it is molded to the local context.

As the manual starts to explain club, it is obvious that the context is 1940 in Texas, the Bible belt. It says to start club off with something unusual. Great idea! Then it goes on to say a great way to start club is with a prayer "for the Lord's leadership and blessing upon the meeting... it will quiet the crowd down if they are rowdy, and often be a real eye opening testimony to new kids." I'm not sure this would have the same effect in my club. Nonetheless, a prayer with your leadership team is something we always do every week.

Club should always have "an attractive, poppy song service". It is funny that it says, "If someone else leads, be careful not to let it 'bog down'. Interrupt if necessary, with 'Say, here's a new chorus I'd like to teach you.'" Club should not "bog down", but I think it would be pretty harsh and/or funny if someone interrupted the leader in the middle of a song and took over! I see a skit in this somewhere.

Another element of club in the manual is the announcement time. During this time you welcome new people and have a "time of testimony". This time would be a spontaneous testimony or story from one of the student. I don't see a lot this today but maybe we could do this more!

Until this point, there were quite a few differences between the 1940s Young Life club and the modern club. But when the manual starts to talk about the message those differences start to disappear. The message is to be "down-to-earth", "talk, don't preach", and "be conversational". It suggests that 25

minutes is long enough. Agreed, and it should probably shorter today. It teaches us to say what we have to say, “get it said and quit.” We should know how to make our point and then stop!

One of the best parts of the manual is how it talks about the gospel proclamation. It teaches, “Never avoid giving the gospel. It is not a boring subject; don’t make it so.” I have seen people criticize our relentless teaching on Jesus and the gospel. “When are you going to get to Paul, creation, king David, etc?” they ask me. Usually those people don’t understand our audience, or we have the wrong audience in our clubs. If the gospel is boring, the problem is with us, not the gospel. The gospel is the most captivating, life-giving message in history, past, present and future of all time. Each of us need to respond to the manual’s challenge, “if you have to drum up enthusiasm about the gospel, you have no business in the ministry.” Well said.

After the message is done, the manual gives some instruction about how the kids can respond. If an “alter call” type situation is appropriate it say, “Don’t ask for raised hands when eyes are closed... Urge a bold testimony by those who have taken Christ as their Savior.” I love those words. We certainly are gentle, understanding, not pushy about so many things, but one thing that we do not want to be wishy-washy about is out stand for Jesus Christ.

As the manual starts to sum up the message in club, it concludes that in the message, “Don’t assume that they know more than they do.” The general club aims are to “REACH and TEACH”, “always trying to reach the unsaved”.

At this point the manual takes time to teach about Christian growth. It doesn’t call it campaigners in this manual, but I believe this is what they were talking about. “Encourage the growth of Christian young people... stress these three: Bible study, prayer, personal witness.” Furthermore it tells us to be an example of a true Christian in our standards of living. Once again it mentions the idea of club kids giving money. It uses the term “dime cards” which today sounds like something totally different! I think some kids in my club have more “dime cards” then money to give to club.

The manual then talks more about club “officers”, which were student leaders in the club who helped run club and invite their friends. Several approaches in Young Life today seem to be emphasizing student leadership more and more. The manual says of the officers, “Here you will often see your greatest growth in spiritual stature”.

These junior leaders were encouraged to bring their friends and the club was to be promoted by a variety of means including, “printed invitations, handbills, posters, announcements on class room blackboards, radio publicity, newspaper articles, school paper announcements”.

At this point the manual abruptly ends. Interestingly enough there is no explicit mention of contact work by the leaders, though it may be implied several times throughout the manual. Young Life in those days seemed to be mostly organized by a staff person and high school student “officers”. The role of the adult volunteer had not been evolved as much as the message, the club, the organization, etc.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Several times the manual talks about club techniques which are outdated for our culture. How have you seen the Young Life club change in the last 5, 10, and 20 years if you have seen it that long?
- 2) Announcement time include an opportunity for a student testimony. Is this something we should reconsider?
- 3) We all experience ups and downs, but do you feel like you have to “drum up enthusiasm about the gospel”?
- 4) How can we encourage a bold stand for new Christians?
- 5) How can we utilize student leaders better in our clubs?