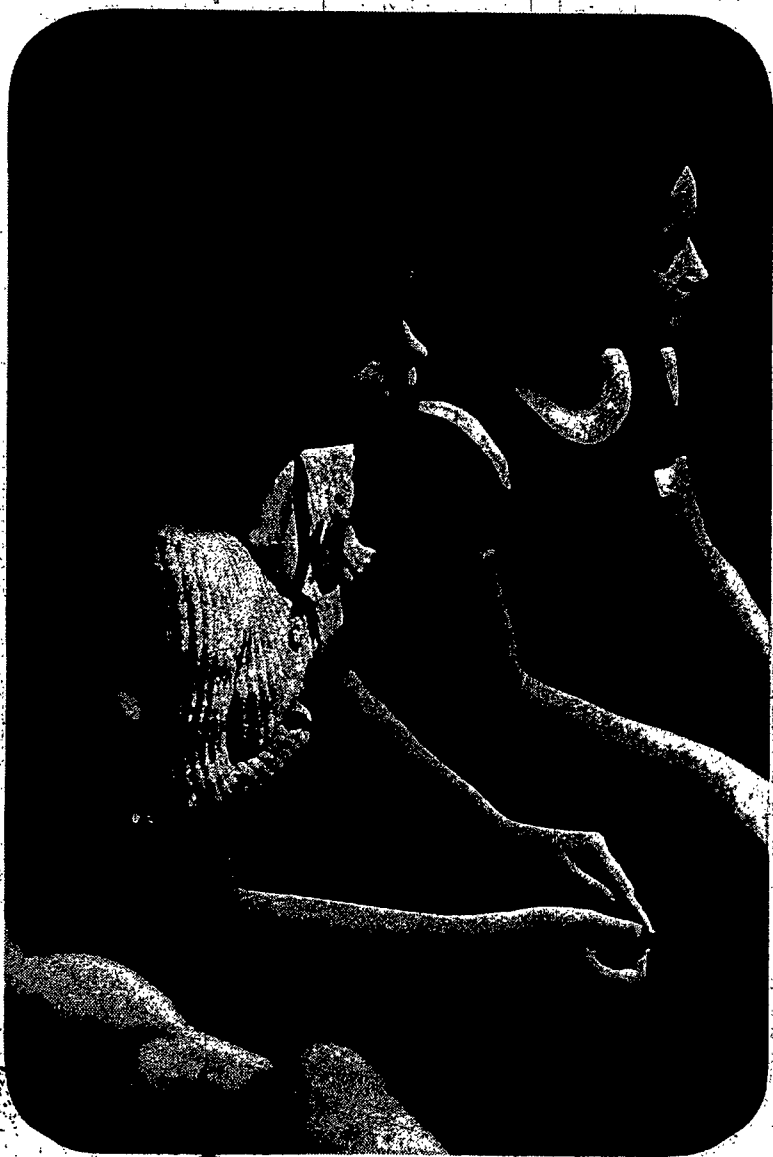




Fernando Lay talks to a basement meeting about concepts of God; below, girls in the audience listen intently.



Sister Mary Ann talks to Mercy High girls after school.

# Youth For Christ . . . Something for the Kids

PHOTOS BY LAURENCE E. KEEFE and SUSAN MCKINNEY

TEXT BY LAURENCE E. KEEFE

In living rooms and basements, an unusual form of ecumenical Christian evangelism is reaching Rochester high schoolers these days.

Rochester Youth For Christ-Campus Life is the local branch of an international organization working to spread the Gospel to teenagers. With a staff of 14, Campus Life forms clubs in junior and senior high schools, and coordinates large scale activities from its headquarters in an unused business building at 150 North Winton Road.

Sister Mary Ann Kosakoski, RSM, is assigned to the Youth For Christ staff as a worker with senior high students, especially in Catholic schools.

"My time is spent on one-to-one, counseling and listening," she says. "I spend most of my time listening, because most of these kids are just so eager to have someone who will listen to them."

The thing which makes Youth For Christ different from many evangelical efforts is that it doesn't work for conversion to a particular denomination. Its staff tries to arouse an experience of "commitment" to Christ. From there, Mike Flack explains, the organization hopes that the teenager will return to his own religion with a new sense of Christianity. Flack is head of Campus Life's high school efforts.

"We try to present the Biblical claims of Jesus Christ to school kids," says Flack, who finds that many youth "are turned off to whatever church they go to. We try to rekindle his faith, then he will reinvolve himself in his own church."

Youth For Christ, as Flack describes it, is "an evangelistic arm of the church in general."

The movement, which has been working in Rochester for 25 years, seems similar in its goals to the work of Rev. Billy Graham's worldwide "Crusades." A simplified approach to the Bible is used to make the YFC's preaching readily comprehensible and to heighten its impact.

To an outside observer, Youth For Christ has a fundamentalist Protestant appearance, although officially it claims the membership of Catholic, Protestant and Jewish youth. Sister Mary Ann admits that it is "mainly Protestant-supported, even though so many of the kids in it are Catholic." This appears to be changing, however, as the ecumenical and Pentecostal movements in the Catholic Church bring more acceptance of non-ritual religious practices.

Fernando Lay, originally from Lima, Peru, is the YFC's coordinator for work with minority groups, such as black and Spanish speaking. He finds the Catholic Church in the United States more open, less authoritarian and more sympathetic to evangelism than it is in Peru.

Most members of the staff are responsible for three or four clubs which meet weekly. Fernando's three groups meet in homes of sympathetic parents and are drawn from similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds, rather than from the same schools. Every other week the meetings alternate between recreation and religious instruction.

On the other hand, Sister Mary Ann has organized clubs of students at Mercy, St. Agnes and Bishop Kearney high schools.