

STUDY GROUPS

Smoothing out the Wrinkles

by Gene Joyce

ALL URANTIA Study Groups are virtually autonomous, and therefore they vary considerably in their method of study - each has its own distinctive flavor. We have met continuously since 1968 on every Monday night except those which fall on Christmas Eve, Christmas, and July 4th. Virtually all meetings and most parties have been held at the same place and time for obvious reasons. Our procedure is to read through the entire book sequentially, and as hostess I always preside, except for occasionally when we have topical studies. We are presently in our fourth complete reading.

As a group we especially enjoy and welcome new readers, and the length of readership can vary from thirty-two years to "I just heard of the book this afternoon." I mention all these details to make it clear that most everything that can happen at a meeting probably has, and we have developed certain techniques to handle unusual circumstances as well as common problems. When new readers are present we often substitute a paper of more general interest that say Paper 106, Universe Levels of Reality. Usually we choose one of the Rodan papers, The Faith of Jesus or Papers 99 through 103. If the new reader has expressed a special interest, such as Adam and Eve, or happens to have had special training we might read a paper relating to his expertise. The first thing we bear in mind with new readers is to make them welcome and feel at home. Everyone makes a point of talking to them when we have finished reading and quite often they request a farewell hug when they leave. We try to be a warm and loving group, as I suspect the hugs they get at URANTIA meetings are the only ones some of them receive that week.

Before starting the reading we have a short period of silent meditation to get centered. We have also found it beneficial to keep a guest book. It has proved a good way to get addresses and phone numbers, and occasionally we need to check on a name. I have also kept a list of everyone who has attended any URANTIA function with the date. There are presently over 800 names on our list.

Sooner or later your group may attract an occasional person who is mentally unbalanced or who refuses to budge from an erroneous concept. In the early days we had a lady who communicated with the Life Carriers. Usually she could be distracted with a gentle reminder to return to the passage we were reading. Then there was the ~~tennis~~^{man} pro who claimed to have dubious contacts with persons from other planets. He told us he actually visited their domains. Both of these people only attended for a few months. Another interesting example was related to me by a member from another state. Two young men arrived who asserted they were Univitatia. Such cases are each unique and must be handled

individually. Tact and tolerance can be practiced while discouraging discussion of their various hallucinations- especially while reading a paper. We have a long-term reader who insists no mortal ever suffers extinction of personality. This person also believes Lucifer will accept Michael's proffered mercy and be rehabilitated. To avoid controversy we have learned to avoid the subject, especially when new readers are present. An unresolved conflict rarely occurs, and if it should, someone adds, "Well, it is more important what you are doing with what you believe than what you believe." In ordinary cases when someone expresses a view which is not substantiated in the book we merely ask for their reference which usually solves the problem immediately.

As always with us lowly mortals there are ongoing ego problems. It is a constant challenge to balance the talkers against the more introverted. There is a woman who admits, "I know I always talk too much." And then she does it again. Fortunately this type usually doesn't resent being reminded and gently steered back to the subject. More difficult is the person who considers himself or herself an authority, and may even be addicted to repetition. Most long-term readers could benefit from periodic sincere self-criticism. We have tried approaching the offender one-on-one or with a short general reminder before reading begins about not dominating the discussion. This results in a temporary improvement. Our worst offender, who has graduated to the Mansion Worlds, did inspire the entire group to all the tact, patience and tolerance we could muster. Some persons have lost the ability to change and some have never learned to do it gracefully. At least we are learning the all-important lesson that the only person we can change is ourselves. Every so often we have a confirmed fundamentalist show up. To avoid confrontation we emphasize Jesus' message that God is our loving Father, and therefore we look upon all men as our brothers.

After discussing all the foregoing problems that may crop up in a Study Group, it is appropriate to mention the many joys which come from sponsoring a Study Group. For over thirty years my life has been increasingly permeated with the teachings of the book. At first it enabled me to overcome the fear of death, eliminate anxiety and begin to truly love those around me. It has brought hundreds of men and women into my circle whom I would never have met. At a recent meeting we shared what The URANTIA Book has done for us. Everyone kept mentioning the word "family" in reference to those with whom we have shared some of the most meaningful relationships of our lives. From being just a Study Group we became a Society and began to have projects and Conferences. We became a Team that could govern itself by consensus and thus share our book with increasing numbers of our fellow mortals. We learned to stress commitment and purpose before inducting members to our Society, and recently have inaugurated some changes in our constitution - notably a requirement to have finished at least one complete reading of the book.

As we began to love and trust each other we grew in capacity to love and trust our heavenly Father from whom all these blessings flow. And best of all we have become increasingly aware of *that we* dwelling in a friendly universe and no longer look upon ourselves as orphans of the cosmos.