T**HINGS** got a little too hot in San Francisco, so he's thumbing his way to Atlanta. New Orleans is just a stop along the way, and it begins to look like a bad trip. Broke and friendless in a strange town, his road-stained clothes and shoulder-length hair may attract the attention of the police at any moment. As he carries his knapsack through the crowded streets of the French Quarter, a girl steps up to him and smiles. Before he can return the smile, she has handed him a lily white pamphlet. The pamphlet describes a place called The Way, “a Christian Light Club at 1115 Decatur St. It's just the place if you want a free sandwich, a cup of coffee or a glass of punch, or if you would like to come in, relax your feet and get the worries of the day off your shoulders. Everyone is invited to The Way. It opens at 8 p.m. and stays open 'til . . .” The pamphlet goes on to describe the way to find Christian salvation, citing Biblical references.

**by Larry Bartleft**

Another bunch of Jesus freaks,” the man mutters. He has seen the type before; the Rev. Arthur Blessitt and his “God Squad” of straight kids and reformed hippies who preach salvation to the spaced-out potheads and speed freaks on Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. Like narcotics officers, they seem to be everywhere. But, it's been a long time between free meals, and there's almost no place in the Quarter where you can sit down without buying a drink—without getting arrested. So, why not? Like hundreds of others before him, he heads toward 1115 Decatur.

**The** Way is located on one of the darkest, dirtiest blocks in the French Quarter. On a street of bars, warehouses and deserted buildings, its doorways are marked by a tiny hand-painted tin sign. Inside, in a long dingy room, is a home-made checkers table, a rack of Bible tracts, a few seats and benches. Also, there's a snack bar with a mound of peanut butter sandwiches, a punch cooler and an inadequately small coffee pot.

A narrow passageway beyond the snack bar leads to a larger room. Its bare brick walls are decorated with day-glow designs and psychedelic posters shimmering under a ceiling of black-light fluorescent tubes. On one side of the room is a stage with a decoupaged piano, a set of trap drums, amplifiers and a series of microphones. Although this room looks like a discotheque, it serves as a church sanctuary.

On the floor of both the sanctuary and the snack room, old winos and young people on drugs frequently sleep off their latest trips into oblivion. Others sit around “rapping” about their troubles with society and drugs; about their endless search for truth and peace.

A number of “counselors” circulate among them, suggesting Christ is the answer to all problems, thumbing through worn Bibles to support their statements, passing out religious tracts and peanut butter sandwiches.

Photography

by Walter Brannon

Left, transients sit around (and on) checkers table in The Way's snack bar. Right, doors of The Way are open at 8 p.m.

One of the counselors is 35-year-old Leo Humphrey, ordained minister and founder of The Way. Humphrey, who looks more like Lloyd Bridges than a minister, began his career as an electrical engineer, giving classes on missiles at George Air Force Base in California.

“I used to go down on Sunset Strip on weekends,” says Humphrey, “and it burdened my heart to see the young people tripping out on drugs. Arthur Blessitt asked me to join him in his ministry in that area. I had to make a decision whether it was better in the Lord's sight to shoot people down with missiles or to tell them about the real life in Christ. The decision was an easy one; I worked with Arthur Blessitt on the Strip for about a year. I came to New Orleans to go to seminary, but I found I couldn’t stay away from talking with young people about their spiritual needs. So, I opened The Way to do something for transients, runaways and the youth of the city. We opened first at a place on Bourbon Street, but the city, under pressure from nightclub owners, forced us to close and find a place outside the main nightclub area.

“The club owners feel our place attracts hippies—undesirables as they call them. They say these kids are bad for the clubs' business. According to that point of view, Jesus Christ would be undesirable if he came to New Orleans. If the real undesirables were to disappear from the Quarter, a lot of night club owners and strippers would be among the first to go.” Humphrey, who used to minister to the Hell’s Angels motorcycle group and was almost lynched by Black Muslims during the Watts riots, says his chosen congregation consists of hippies, runaways, Black Panthers, members of the S.D.S., drug abusers and nonconformists in general.

“I do believe that this generation of young Americans is more spiritual than the last two or three generations,” he declares. “What we see is an entire generation of young people looking for the truth and amazingly receptive to any philosophy that comes along. They follow far-out people like Rap Brown and Jerry Rubin because these men, unlike most adults, believe in something enough to die for it.

THEIR search for something to believe in has taken the direction of rebellion, drugs and restless wandering—because the church hasn't been effective in conveying to them the message of Christ. Kids look at the typical church member, with all his materialism and hypocrisy, and say: 'If that guy is a representative of Christianity, then, baby, I don’t need it and I don’t want it.' But these kids are really humble in spirit; you can sit down with them and open up the Word and just be amazed at the freshness and depth they feel in the Christian message."

Because most of the people who come to The Way are transients spending only