

‘LIKE A BIRD ON THE WIRE’
One experience of Australian YCS in the exciting, tumultuous 1970s

Interview with Pat Walsh, YCS national chaplain 1974-1978
September, 2021

First of all, why the title?

Leonard Cohen fans will immediately recognise the quote. I first heard his mesmerising song in the 70s when I was working with the Young Christian Students (YCS). I didn't think I was a bird on the wire then. That image only occurred to me when writing the reflection that follows and I spotted our local magpie perched on the power line across from our house. It was a windy Spring day in Melbourne, very unsettled. The power line shook in the wind, but the magpie, known to me as Calvin after my Collingwood supporter neighbour, maintained his grip. That was me in the 1970s, I thought. Buffeted by strong cultural westerlies and southerlies, I somehow managed to hang on for the ride of my life. To survive and to enjoy it.

It's over forty years since your YCS days, so how did this reflection come about?

Hilary Regan, the publisher of the ATF Press *Cardjin Studies* journal started it! He emailed me in mid-November 2020 to ask if I'd like to contribute to a history of the YCS in the 60s, 70s and 80s. Maybe he thought I needed something to keep the neurons spinning during COVID lockdown! His pitch was persuasive. 'It may be the only attempt to get a history of the YCS during those times by those who were directly involved', he wrote. He also made it clear that he believed the YCS had something unique to offer the modern church and that the upcoming assemblies of the Plenary Council should be reminded of its potential.

So how did you respond?

I said OK to doing 3000-4000 words on the 70s, on condition I could find records from that time to consult and check my recollections against. I wanted to write, not re-write, history, albeit from a personal and reflective point of view.

I went online looking for a YCS website and Facebook page but couldn't locate a central contact point. A couple of old YCS colleagues couldn't help either. With all the changes of personnel and offices, I began to worry that records from the 70s and previous times had been lost or trashed. Then a glimmer of light. My old friend and colleague Dave Freeman in Hobart, an influential contributor in the late 1970s, said he had some. He was also in touch with a PhD candidate from the Australian Catholic University who was researching how local churches and lay movements received Vatican II, and might have leads. Great project, but he didn't. He was focussing on Hobart.

Then, like the lad from Tangmalangaloo in John O'Brien's bush poem, I was suddenly struck by 'a squall of knowledge'. Maybe those old boxes in our attic were worth a look. And there they were. Driven by caring premonition all those years ago, I had gone to the trouble of boxing and preserving them for posterity but, overtaken with work for international human rights, had forgotten them.

The boxes contained some 300 files. Pure gold waiting to be mined. They include YCS publications from the 40s to the 80s, programs, national and international conference reports, notebooks, exchanges with dioceses and international YCS, address lists, correspondence with the Bishops conference and so on. Even a YCS minute book from 1947. In it, recorded in handwriting, are the proceedings of meetings that involved people like Bob Santamaria and notes on visits to the first schools in Melbourne to take on the YCS.

I was simultaneously embarrassed and relieved. Also, to be honest, I was a bit annoyed to find that a nice publication commemorating 50 years of the YCS made no mention of me or of staff like Roger Slee, Anne Keogh, Trevor Bate and Kevin McDonald who'd put their careers on hold to work for the YCS. Having the archives also meant I had no excuse now not to write for Hilary Regan's publication. I submitted a general overview. I very much hope that a professional PhD student or historian will write a proper history. And that the archives find a good home and are digitised and made accessible for research. What follows are little more than rough notes so that at least one experience of the exciting and tumultuous 1970s is there to consult, for what it's worth.

How did you first become involved with the YCS?

I was not in the YCS at school. I only became involved as a young adult priest and teacher in the late 1960s. I wonder now would I have taken on a chaplain's role had I been in YCS at school? Would an early experience of the YCS have formed me in what St Therese of Lisieux called *un bruyere d'amour*, a commitment that burned deep enough to inform the rest of my life in some way, or would it have been water off a duck's back? I'd like to think the former. I agree with an observation Christine Perkins from those days made to me recently. 'As a young person,' she said, 'YCS taught me to look beyond myself. It gave me a vision which has expanded over time and shaped my whole life.'

My first experience of Jocism was attending a Young Christian Worker (YCW) summer school for seminarians at Lowanna in Melbourne. It had a decisive impact on me. The impressive presenters (young lay leaders and the charismatic Fr K.J. Smith) and Joseph Cardijn's work gelled with my reading about the exciting priest-worker movement and other social apostolates for the marginalised in France. It also fitted well with new emphases coming from the Second Vatican Council on the lay apostolate, the unity of faith and life, and engagement with the world. Aged 24 and newly ordained, I came away committed to making the principles of Jocism integral to my future work, whatever that might be. I also came away with a YCW perspective, not one informed by the Melbourne YCS model of the day.

What impressed you about Cardijn?

It was a case of the medium being the message. I never met him so my impression was second hand and mediated by those YCW people I met at Lowanna. Like a religious order or civil society organisation that epitomises and projects the founder's charisma, these YCW had caught the Cardijn bug and given it to me.

In essence, what struck me was Cardijn's belief in ordinary young people, and his concept of priesthood. Both amounted to a direct challenge to the church model of the times which was too aligned to the establishment and too clerical. Growing up in Belgium, Cardijn's

parents were working class and so were his friends but, when he entered the seminary, the latter scorned him for joining the elite. This convinced him of two things. One, that the church and priests were badly amiss to ignore youth who worked in factories from which, as Pius XI famously said in 1931, 'dead matter goes out improved whereas men are corrupted and degraded'. And two, that working class youth themselves, loved, believed in, organised and trained, could be 'subjects' of their own development and evangelisation. For this he developed his famous see, judge, act method of formation. Vatican II saw that the method had wider application and endorsed it including for schools. It also influenced the development of Paulo Freire's famous pedagogy of the oppressed, as it did liberation theology in poverty stricken Latin America.

Cardijn's first love was working youth and the YCW; I don't know what he thought of the YCS. I doubt he disowned it like an illegitimate child but I wouldn't be surprised if he was ambivalent. Years later, visiting Hong Kong in 1967, he lamented that not one priest had been released to work with working youth there while thousands of priests all over the world were occupied with the education of middle class youth. I imagine he thought that, at the very least, Catholic schools should ensure that their 'products' went out into the world and the church with 'improved' social consciences and a strong sense of their unique vocation as lay people.

Though not new, Cardijn's recognition of the potential of youth as a force for change was spot on. It remains so. The impact motivated students can have is clear to any observer of contemporary affairs. Greta Thunberg, the students of Hong Kong, and the 90s generation in Indonesia who overthrew Suharto and created the conditions to free East Timor, all ask the church, as Cardijn did vis-à-vis working youth: where are you in all this?

So how did you put your Lowanna experience to work?

Ironically, my first job after ordination turned out to be teaching at Monivae College in Hamilton, Victoria. A provincial centre of some 10,000 people, Hamilton was not at first sight the most obvious place to put my enthusiasm into practice! But the college and the town soon presented openings.

Academically, I was able to introduce a third world language, Indonesian, to the curriculum and open young minds in a country of 'the centre' to a country on 'the periphery', to use later International YCS (IYCS) language. As a teacher of religion, I asked senior students to value their future role as lay Christians, and not feel lesser Catholics because they didn't 'have a vocation' to the priesthood.

My apprenticeship deepened when I engaged with life outside the college. I learned that 'day students' felt alienated in the majority boarding school and suffered small town blues. Though within Malcolm Fraser's electorate and boasting it was the wool capital of the world, Hamilton struggled with economic depression, youth unemployment, lack of opportunity, exodus to the city and associated loss of confidence and civic pride. The situation peaked tragically in 1971 when two local 18 year olds sadistically murdered a local 15 year old school girl, generating unwanted publicity and further anguish in the town.

In response, I introduced the YCS to both boarders and day students. Sharing membership in the same organisation may have helped level the playing field, but was probably more helpful to the day students. As a form of 'official' outreach on behalf of the college it made them feel the college cared a bit more. It was a space that was their own, in which they could share freely and seriously with trusted friends, including about faith, take responsibility for an organisation, socialise and have fun. The YCS also engaged with the town in other respects. It came to include girls and students from non-Catholic high schools. To considerable acclaim, it established and managed a drop-in coffee shop for local youth, got good support from the local council, parents, the State member of parliament (Bruce Chamberlain), the press, and several aspiring entrepreneurs. YCS also did its bit to support Action for World Development (AWD) and local groups involved in Third World development, produced a newsletter, and participated in the Ballarat diocesan YCS.

My scrappy diary at the time reminds me that Bob Santamaria and his National Civil Council (NCC) were active in the diocese and that I attended several of their briefings. This is not surprising given that Malcolm Fraser and Santamaria shared similar world views and were in contact. The NCC's concern was not schools so much as hotbed universities that naïve school leavers were heading to. Universities like Monash were depicted as ideological battlegrounds on which the future of Australian society was being decided, for better or for worse, as graduates came to occupy influential positions in commerce, education, media and politics. Invoking the famous dictum attributed (perhaps wrongly) to Edmund Burke that 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing', Paul D'Astoli warned that a minority of Trotskyist, Maoist and SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) revolutionaries were free to 'terrorise' Monash because most students just focussed on getting a degree and having a good time.

Other than in books, this was my first exposure to political analysis of this kind. As will become clear, this perspective was consistent with the orientation of the YCS of the 40s and 50s but went further by calling for a direct engagement with the 'enemy'. As will also become clear, YCS in the 70s identified a different enemy, viz global capitalism. as the principal challenge, but, ironically, also grounded its critique in social Catholicism.

For its part, the YCW resisted pressure to be used by the NCC. Like Cardijn when he refused to make the YCW a trade union, or got Papal support to protect the YCW from being absorbed into a general Catholic youth movement, Fr Lombard, the YCW chaplain, insisted that young workers had to grow in their own analysis and orientation. Though a key supporter of Santamaria, Archbishop Mannix reportedly told Lombard to proceed as he thought fit.

A number of YCS students from that time, all day students, have been lifelong friends. In addition to me, some like Mark Considine, Damian Hurley and Roger Slee went on to work fulltime for national YCS, Roger probably the only non-Catholic to do so (in 1973).

What was happening in Ballarat at the time?

The diocese had an active YCS program, including summer schools, and more broadly, championed the lay apostolate. Backed by Bishop James O'Collins, who had confirmed me, it hosted an Adult Lay Apostolate centre at 42 Sturt Street that provided a range of services,

including support for the YCS and YCW. In 1967, galvanised by the ‘spirit of initiative and responsibility... that has quickened and intensified remarkably in the wake of the Vatican Council’, the diocese held the first lay convention of its kind in Australia. The convention discussed how key Vatican II documents such as the *Decree on the Laity* could be implemented in ‘the real life situations of our people, in our diocese, in our times’ and tackled world poverty and peace. Contributions were made by respected lay leaders such as Gerald Caine, Jim Ross, Garry Eastman, Pat Goggin, Elizabeth Ross, and Frank Sheehan. It also served to prepare delegates to the forthcoming World Congress of Laity in Rome whose Australian delegation was led by Bill Byrne.

Looking back from 2021, what did you learn from your experience in Hamilton and Ballarat?

My work contributed in a small way, possibly more by osmosis than anything, to the development of student leaders across the diocese. Besides those already mentioned who went on to work for the YCS, others like Judy Kennedy, Bernadette Prunty, Genevieve Timmons, Rosie Callahan and Christine Perkins, went on to give exemplary service to society at home and abroad. Michael Perkins, a St Patrick’s College old boy like me, also worked nationally with me for two years. Mick tragically drowned in East Gippsland in 1976 while on a camping trip with our YCS colleagues Kevin McDonald and Lorna Payne, due to his epilepsy we think.

I can think of three key lessons from those seven years. First, I prioritised action over reflection, divorcing rather than marrying them to add value to both. I made problem-solving action the end point, undervaluing the potential of situations for further inductive formation via reflection and analysis, including faith inquiry and prayer. Trevor Bates (who worked for the YCS in Sandhurst and Ballarat at the time) and Kevin McDonald challenged me to do this, but in vain. Second, I neglected the student character of the YCS. As a teacher, I was in a unique position to encourage deeper reflection by the YCS on college life and education. Colleagues from other parts of the diocese such as Frs Bill O’Connell, Paul Mercovich and Noel Torpey were not so well placed. For them as curates, the YCS was more a parish activity and youth group. And lastly, the YCS did not continue for long after I moved on. I had excellent support from people like Sister Maureen Keating, John O’Loughlin and others but I had not effectively mentored a successor at Monivae.

How did you become YCS national chaplain?

The short answer is Mark Considine. Mark moved from Hamilton to work for national YCS 1971-1972. Anne Keogh, Carmel Brown (Melbourne YCS) and Trevor Bate (regional YCS) also worked in the national office, then upstairs at the front of Central Hall at 20 Brunswick St, Fitzroy. A former boot factory, the hall had been turned into a Catholic meeting venue by the Melbourne archdiocese. It later became the renowned TF Much Ballroom where bands like *Daddy Cool* and *Midnight Oil* played; it is now part of Australian Catholic University. Ted Cox, the hall’s caretaker and fixture almost as old and popular as the hall itself, was distinguished by his badge of office, a massive bunch of keys that hung off his pants like a gaoler’s. The archdiocesan Catholic Education Office was also housed in the building and the YCS had an informal arrangement with its director, Fr Tom Doyle, to act as their occasional chaplain. Tom and the YCS blokes enjoyed each other’s company and sometimes held their consultations at one of the pubs in Brunswick St, somewhat to the chagrin of female staff

left in the office. I imagine it was at one of those consultations that my candidacy was mooted.

I was invited to several YCS gatherings and sounded out. As the YCS was an official organisation of the church and I belonged to a religious order (of French provenance), the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), agreement had to be obtained from both the Bishops and the MSCs. This was given. As the appointment was a break with established MSC activities, the Order agreed to it only on a yearly basis. It also meant I lived apart from the Order, and received a modest salary equivalent to the unemployment benefit, for the first time in my life. It meant I got to live out my vow of poverty! Consistent with the innovative spirit of Vatican II, the MSCs eventually allowed the arrangement to continue for five years though on one or two occasions heavies like Archbishops Little and Faulkner had to be called on for support.

So how was the YCS travelling when you arrived as chaplain?

When I moved to Melbourne in 1974, I found a YCS in significant flux. I didn't initiate the change. It was already in full swing. But I embraced it and with my YCS colleagues worked to reshape the YCS according to this new vision.

This change was a transition over several years, not a sudden break. But a signature milestone in the process was the end of Fr Paul Kane's chaplaincy in 1970 following the YCS national conference in Sydney.

Paul Kane was a key figure in Australian YCS for some fifteen years. The YCS model he inherited was centralised, structured, adult managed, dependent on resources generated by the national office, referred to as 'headquarters', and effective. It also enjoyed the clear support of the bishops who weaponised the lay apostolate to combat secularism and communism. As a result, the 1940s, 50s and early 60s were decades of stability, growth and a strong sense of purpose.

Established in several top Catholic girls schools in Melbourne in the early 1940s under the National Secretariat for Catholic Action led by Frank Maher and B.A. (Bob) Santamaria, the mission of the YCS was to protect students from '20th century paganism' by strengthening their commitment to Catholic practices and culture. It was effectively part of the Catholic education system and run top-down by chaplains and religious orders. It gave young people a cause and a sense of being part of a great, historic movement. By 1963, for example, there were some 25,000 students in 450 groups across most dioceses in Australia.

This model crumbled under the impact of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and cultural upheaval in the West, both of which generated lots of turbulence. Anti-Vietnam war protest morphed into a rejection of the status quo in the West and experimentation with alternative lifestyles and ways of organising. In their own ways, the Council and the protest movement both championed 'people power'. Vatican II re-imagined the church as 'the people of God'. Its documents on the laity in *Lumen Gentium* (1964) and its *Decree on the Laity* (1965) were the first time in 2000 years that a Council had addressed the role of the laity. Both had Cardijn's fingerprints on them. He and Pat Keegan, founder of the English YCW, attended the Council as advisers. The documents represented a paradigm shift. The

laity were no longer to be defined in relationship to priests but, via baptism, Christ. They were now, nominally at least, equals in the church called to live out their faith in the world, no longer a stranded asset confined to paying, praying and obeying. In the language of the *Decree on the Laity*, all are called to be 'priest, prophet and king'. Schools were asked to foster the lay apostolate amongst students; the Jocist method of see, judge, act was endorsed. The post-Paul Kane YCS had Vatican II's blessing.

The times were also marked by a strong questioning of authority. In the church, everything from clericalism, papal pronouncements on birth control through to clerical attire and lifestyle, was challenged. The education system was not spared. In 1968, in the name of 'student power', undergraduates in Paris called for a radical rethinking of education and took over university faculties. Professor Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, and a highly regarded liberal theologian at the time, is said to have been so shocked by the upheaval in his German university that he turned conservative. The mood also affected the Jocist movement. French YCS supported the Paris student revolution. At my first meeting with Bill Armstrong, probably not long after he'd returned from working for the International YCW in Brussels, he challenged me to think how I would live my priesthood. Later we were to collaborate for many years in the defence of international human rights.

In Australia, *aggiornamento* in the YCS was led by impressive lay leaders like Suzanne Carmen, Brian Lawrence, Elizabeth Proust and Anthony Regan. In 1972, this was built on by Mark Considine and Anne Keogh, then continued in 1973 by Michael Perkins, Roger Slee, Kevin McDonald and Anne Keogh. They emphasised engaging with the big issues of the day such as apartheid and political imprisonment in Vietnam and Indonesia, and looked for ideas to people like Fr Bob Wilkinson and YCW leaders like Tim Walsh, Frs Frank Hornby and Michael Casey. When she visited Sydney for national YCS, Anne Keogh billeted with YCW in Redfern who were active on Aboriginal issues. Later, this sense of common cause with YCW contributed to collaboration and socialising with YCW staff such as Mark McPherson, Mick Campbell, Kath McPherson, John Bonnice and Terry Daniels.

International YCS also became more significant in Australia during this period, adding to the momentum for change. In 1971, Anthony Regan and Suzanne Carmen attended a YCS meeting in Singapore. Johannes Lee (IYCS extension worker based in Singapore) and Eric Sottas (a Swiss staff member at the international secretariat in France) visited Australia in 1972 and 1973 respectively. They formed strong bonds with national YCS and Mark Considine in particular. Student action to deepen faith, analysis and commitment was the centrepiece of their message to Australian YCS.

This search for a more authentically Cardijnian, lay-led and student focussed YCS was to characterise the YCS throughout the 1970s. It also generated a fraction too much friction, including in and for me!

Can you say a bit about the big moments of your first year as national chaplain.

Like a weather map, 1974 was a year of highs and lows.

The YCS national executive asked me to work first in Melbourne. As I was new to Melbourne and the job, this seemed like a good idea. However, YCS in Melbourne, or at least its

chaplains, politely resisted my advances! Frs Ernie Smith and Mick Morgan, both energetic assistant parish priests, preferred parish to school-based or focussed YCS. The national YCS approach, they said, was 'difficult to fully understand' and 'non-productive'. Citing what divorce lawyers call 'irreconcilable differences', I told the executive I had to back off. Rather patronisingly, I blamed the chaplains for the problem. I reported they treated students 'as the objects of their vertical apostolic activity'! The chaplains and I, however, stayed in touch and later they attended several national workshops for chaplains and assistants.

Refusing to be beaten, I switched my attention to schools in the less privileged inner and western suburbs where YCS didn't exist, but seemed more relevant. I also checked out housing commission flats and youth centres and considered living at the All Saints parish at the southern, depressed end of Fitzroy. Though well intentioned, none of this worked out. Establishing a new organisation required long-term immersion that by definition was not possible for a blow-in with national responsibilities.

Not being welcomed in Melbourne, the heartland of YCS where it first started and after all the excellent work of people like Carmel Brown, was a setback. In September, I was delivered a similar message in Sydney. Bishop Edward Kelly, an MSC like me and my former superior, told me that national YCS was not welcome in Sydney. He denied 'rumours' that national YCS had been banned but said it 'had done enough in Sydney for the time being' and that contact should be limited to Fr Ron McFarlane and myself. 'Melbourne people', he said, had made a bad impression, sown division and, according to a report from a NSW state conference, 'were humanitarian and had no place for Christ'. Some other bishops, he concluded, were likely to follow Sydney and run YCS independently in their dioceses.

The stand-off by Sydney did not last. Amongst other things, the archives tell that Sydney YCS contributed to the 1977 edition of *Student Bulletin*, was well represented at the 1978 national conference held at my old school in Hamilton, Victoria, and elected to the YCS national executive.

Tasmania, thankfully, gave me a much warmer reception than the big mainland dioceses. Later in 1974, I worked there for some three months. Tasmania had a strong Jocist tradition, fostered by the likes of Frs Graeme Howard, Terry Yard, and Julian Punch. My itinerary included YCS groups in Devonport, Longford, Ulverstone, Launceston, Georgetown, Hobart, Dunalley, and Cygnet. Unlike Melbourne and Sydney, these were more than youth groups. They reviewed real situations and engaged in school related action as best they could. They also benefitted from the presence and leadership of young laity like Paula Daly, Mary Harrington, Mercia Bresnehan, David Freeman and Rosie Huxtable. Key adult supporters like Fr Mick Byrne, and Sisters Liz Compton and Prue Francis, became valued friends. Liz Compton and Dave Freeman, a student at St Virgil's when I visited, went on to give important and creative service to national YCS.

The balance of 1974 yielded three significant and more positive experiences.

In April, with colleagues Kevin McDonald and Michael Perkins, I attended a three day workshop with Paulo Freire in Belgrave, Melbourne. At the time, the bearded, Brazilian, Catholic educator enjoyed guru status and his critical pedagogy owed much to Cardijn's

method of formation. Mark Considine had given me Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Mick Perkins (visiting Maitland YCS at the time) captured the star power Freire enjoyed amongst us when he wrote in pencil on the outside of an envelope bearing a letter to the national office: 'Make sure you let me know when Paulo Freire is coming to Melbourne!' He didn't want to miss out.

Education, Freire told us, is never neutral. It either serves those in power or it serves liberation. He advocated learning from experience, not only books or teachers, a lesson it took me many years to appreciate, raised as I had been to defer to external sources. His radicalism, he said, was 'the result of my Christian belief and formation, helped by Marx with whom I have no problems, but I am not a Christian, I am becoming a Christian.' The question is, he said: 'What is the task of Christians at this point of history? What sort of society do we want to create?'

Freire's critique was amplified in another hot title, Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1971). Illich, another Catholic thinker writing from a southern and Cardijnian perspective, also advocated critical pedagogy that drew on analysing and learning from experience. 'The most important thing you learn at school', he challenged, 'is that learning only happens by being taught'.

One couldn't have wished for a better preparation for the World Council of the YCS that followed in July-August in the Netherlands. I attended with Kevin McDonald, Mark Considine, Fr Geoff Aldous (Perth), and Fr Wally Dethlefs (Brisbane).

Though not to be missed, the Council was not for the faint-hearted. Over 29 intense days, participants from 41 countries analysed the world (with the help of Professor Nicos, an economist from the University of Paris) and reflected on what it meant for the YCS from the perspective of liberation theology (assisted by Fr Gustavo Gutierrez, author of the highly influential book *A Theology of Liberation*, and chaplain to the YCS in Peru). The Council was a triumph for the dynamic Latin Americans. Raquel Rodriguez (Uruguay) was elected secretary-general and joined by two other YCS from 'the periphery', Agnes Joseph (India) and Mwanitu Kagubilla (Tanzania). The YCS was re-oriented to engage in transforming a world order judged to be unjust and exploitative (i.e. dominated by 'the centre' or rich countries over 'the periphery', the poorer societies of Latin America, Asia and Africa) and at odds with the theology of the Incarnation and love of neighbour. The Council allowed that the development process of secondary students (absent, incidentally), had to be respected, but students generally were challenged to think big, to see themselves and education as a force for critical change, liberation and evangelisation, rather than simply a prudent career choice. We were also encouraged to collaborate with like-minded siblings such as YCW and the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS).

Some of us recovered by heading to Switzerland. As guests of the friendly YCS chaplain Jean-Pierre Catry, we picnicked on wine and cheese in the majestic Alps. Then, no doubt wanting to pay our respects to the Pontiff, we took the train to Italy hardly daring to look out the window down the precipitous drops. In Rome we crashed for a few days at the MSC head house at Via Asmara, photographed ourselves as Roman senators robed in sheets from our

beds, dined on pasta, and marvelled at Michelangelo's Pieta (sadly through glass, after its 1972 vandalism), before heading home to reality.

The World Council reminded us that we were close to Asia and, as an established YCS of the 'centre', could take up the IYCS cause by connecting to students in Asian countries. En route to the Netherlands in July, Kevin McDonald and I visited Indonesia only to find the lay apostolate there primarily preoccupied with communism. A year later, some of these laity were to advise General Suharto on the takeover of East Timor. At the Council, we also met with delegates from New Zealand, India, the Philippines, and Singapore to explore regional cooperation and mutual assistance. In 1976, this led to our participation in a regional conference of Asian YCS in Thailand. In 1977, Fr Mick Byrne from Tasmania visited the Pacific and attended a regional YCW gathering in Fiji on behalf of Australian YCS. The 1978 edition of our YCS directory included contacts we had in PNG, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, Indonesia, Singapore, India, The Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In 1999, I and a group of students explored the prospects for YCS in East Timor. Today, YCS has members in 17 countries in Asia, supported by a regional secretariat in Manila.

Lastly, sometime in 1974, I moved into a rented share house with Mark Considine and friends at 528 Brunswick St, Fitzroy. '528' has a special place in the YCS story. Situated across the street from YCW house, it became the unofficial HQ for YCS, a welcome house to others including interstate visitors, and then the national office of the YCS in 1976 when Lorna Payne and I were the national YCS team. I had canvassed the idea of non-institutional living in Hamilton and with MSC colleagues in Canberra, the idea being to live and bear witness in the community, not apart from it. At '528' we made valiant attempts to live as Jocists. In the spirit of the times, we tried living simply, dressing down, shopping in bulk, running chooks, sharing housekeeping and bills, reviewing our lives and faith and celebrating the Eucharist around our kitchen table. Let's just say, it was a creative project worth examining further at some stage for do's and don'ts. Fr Mick Bryne undertook a similar venture with YCW leaders in Hobart.

What were the main issues of the rest of your time?

The archives remind me that I attended a mind-boggling number of meetings over five years, particularly up and down the east coast. Many of these involved minute, even painstaking, examination of a plethora of local and individual experiences.

This approach was consistent with the method advocated by Cardijn, Freire and Illich. This was to work inductively, from experience, not to teach top-down in the traditional way. In hindsight, however, I think we risked losing sight of the wood for the trees... drowning not waving!

As national staff, maybe it would have been more helpful, and less demoralising, to have left the nitty gritty to locals and given more attention to method, principles, vision and their theological rationale. Framing study as a vocation and pathway to building the just society in Australia and the world envisaged by Vatican II might have helped students lift their heads above the tedious, daily round of classes, essays, and exams and made more sense of

school. It would also have required an enhanced level of theological literacy and spirituality on our part.

With the benefit of hindsight, I can see now that there were at least four burning issues at the time: the review of life; the student character of the YCS; its lay character and the related issue of chaplains and adult assistants; and the mission of secondary school YCS.

What was national YCS' concept of the Review of Life?

I will tackle this together with the second issue mentioned above. For us, the review and student character of the YCS were two sides of the one coin.

Life is a big word. It automatically evokes existence itself and its meaning and purpose, big questions like 'why are we here' and 'what is it all about'? Even for a teenager, perhaps particularly for a teenager, it also covers a broad spectrum of everyday involvements and concerns: home, family, relationships, music, social media, alcohol and drugs, school, faith, future, dress, health, hobbies, and the journey towards self-confidence and maturity, each a multi-dimensional composite.

So what did YCS mean by life? In the 1970s, we meant life at school, the equivalent of the workplace or factory to the YCW. YCS were encouraged to focus on school analytically, both as an experience and as an institution. To us, the 'see' part of Cardijn's method meant drilling down to deeper levels. We wanted the school itself, not just the curriculum, to be studied. Schools are key institutions in society, State-mandated and resourced to serve the interests of society and economy. They are a window into macro-society, its priorities, direction, and values and, to a certain extent, a microcosm of the world students are being equipped, or as some see it, engineered, to join. No matter how seemingly insignificant at first glance, incidents or experiences at school reviewed in-depth could show how school and society worked, their power structures, practices and relationships. 'Judged' against Christian ideals (step two of Cardijn's method), these uncovered facts might reveal counter-values to the Gospel and invoke calls to 'act' (step three). Repeated, this cycle of action and reflection would deepen understanding, faith and commitment. Fr Ben Pelegri, a Spaniard appointed international chaplain by the Vatican following the 1974 World Conference, sharpened this concept during his visits. He formed a close working bond with Fr Bob Wilkinson, reframed the review of life in terms of values and counter-values and encouraged YCS extension into the tertiary sector. This would take YCS to a new, unexplored level in Australia and provide a future pathway for committed secondary YCS alumni. With Bob Wilkinson, several ex-YCS pioneered this Tertiary (TYCS) initiative, including Francis Regan, Sharon Oates, Carmel Brown and Kevin McDonald. Later, TYCS collaborated as sibling organisations with the Tertiary Catholic Federation of Australia (TCFA) and their national staff, Linda Wirth, Peter Ryan and Colleen Foley.

In 1975, at the YCS national conference organised by Damian Hurley and myself at Monash University, I used the following example to illustrate how the review of life could be an instrument of conscientisation and faith building. Toilets at a school in Gilgandra had been defaced with offensive graffiti. Responses by the staff, YCS and SRC varied from disgust, to removal, to disciplinary action. At one level, this process was an example of an effective YCS review and action. Further reflection with the YCS, however, exposed a bigger issue, one that called for a different and deeper response. Aboriginal kids were responsible for the

obscenities. This in turn led to an enquiry into the source of their alienation, a new level of awareness, understanding of faith, and action. The example also illustrated that engagement with affected people, not just workshops (as Freire had reminded us in 1974), was critical to learning.

Was this focus on school too narrow, even Bolshie? As indicated, some dioceses believed it was. They felt that it ignored the wide range of teenage needs; favoured a YCS elite over the general membership, and encouraged militancy. Some were outraged at the suggestion that Catholic schools were oppressive. Others, on the other hand, believed the only way to conscientise youth in an 'option for the poor' was to forget schools and engage YCS with disadvantaged kids outside the school setting.

The approach also rebounded on national staff. We were accused, sometimes correctly, of having an agenda, of favouring students who'd engaged in 'authentic student action' and prioritising analysis of situations over the faith dimension. Working in places where a different YCS model was entrenched became awkward and challenging. On the other hand, Brisbane YCS questioned our credentials, arguing that our lack of local involvement and the very notion of itinerant, fulltime national staff was a contradiction in terms. All fulltime staff, they believed, should have a local engagement and function from that base. This partly explains why there were only two national staff in 1975. It also led to longer stays in several dioceses.

In self-defence we referenced the challenge about identity that Cardijn had given the YCW years before: 'A dramatic society, table tennis team, youth club of young workers for the sake of young workers, is not the YCW. Emphatically not. Get deep into this problem, it is absolutely fundamental.' The YCS, we responded, is what its name says it is. A movement of formation in awareness, Gospel values and responsibility for and about students as students.

Around the same time, YCW was asking itself similar questions. In response, several YCW chaplains and staff went to work in industry to re-connect with the work experience and refresh their understanding and authenticity. In 1978, Barry Dwyer, a Sydney lecturer in Catholic education, boosted our confidence in our approach. Addressing the YCS national conference, he reminded us that schooling owes a lot to the industrial revolution, and to military and factory practices. Drawing on relevant Vatican and other official church statements, he presented an inspiring alternative vision of what a Catholic school could become. We reproduced his talk in the national YCS *Student Bulletin* (issue 5, August 1978).

Granting that student life should be front and centre of the review, should review also make room for other life experiences and challenges? I believe so. Students are not disembodied minds or part-time humans. The whole person needs nurturing in a balanced way. This also means fostering a YCS that embraces play and socialising.

How did you promote the lay character of the YCS without losing adult assistants?

The obvious tension between the two was captured neatly by Cardijn when he said: 'Chaplains are everything and nothing'. I experienced an analogous example of that tension when I worked in East Timor for many years as an adviser to proud, newly independent but

nascent East Timorese organisations. In both settings, the idea was to do ‘everything’ possible to make yourself ‘nothing’, i.e. superfluous or at least a tomato stake not the plant.

Adults have played a critical role in Jocism from its inception and even more so in the YCS, ironically thanks to its student character. The age of its members and the nature of schooling mean there is constant turnover. In the YCS, one is always starting again both with members and young lay staff who effectively take a gap year or two to work for the YCS before resuming their education or commencing careers. Inevitably this makes the YCS particularly dependent on adults, whether chaplains, religious assistants, or, these days, laity. Experience shows that as constants and keepers of institutional memory, their presence or absence can have a decisive impact.

This fact of life is also acknowledged by IYCS. At the 1974 World Council, IYCS engaged Fr Gustavo Gutierrez as an expert and nominated Fr Ben Pelegri as international chaplain. Fathers Stan Fernando and Samuel Rayan played key roles at the Asian meeting in 1976, and Sister Jeanne Devos of India was engaged to promote YCS in the Asia-Pacific. The engagement of these clergy and religious also made clear that the IYCS continued to see itself as part of the church and informed by faith and the Christ of the gospels. Their roles, however, had been reframed in Vatican II terms, and their input recast from a Southern, not European, point of view.

Allowing that adults were an essential service in the YCS, the question was how should this service be exercised in an organisation whose purpose was the development of lay leadership. Run the show, be the expert, or king of the kids? Take a silent back seat and wait to be called on? Or, find a third way?

A good YCW group has a good chaplain, said Cardijn. The role is essentially to animate, advise and support, like a good sports coach, not to substitute. Our ideal assistant was the engaged adult who practised review in their own life, including with the YCS. A further quality was an adult who, as Pierre Babin put it in *Adolescents in Search of a New Church*, was prepared ‘to seek faith together’ with students or, to use Paulo Freire’s phrase, to be a ‘becoming Christian’.

This sort of thinking was a bridge too far for those with a pre-Vatican II clerical mindset. But YCS in the 1970s was blessed with the active support of some wonderful chaplains and assistants. The roll call includes priests like Bob Wilkinson, Gerry Gallagher, Mick Byrne, Tony Stace, Wal Dethlefs, Don O’Brien, Mick Lowcock; religious like Liz Compton, Bob Trembath, Cathy Smith, Helen Foster and Meredith Evans; and laity like Peter and Marya Stewart. Their involvement was deeply valued by the national YCS and myself. Equally appreciated was the interest and support of the two bishops who successively represented YCS in the episcopal conference: Leonard Faulkner and Peter Quinn (both members of a good Committee for the Lay Apostolate that also included bishops like David Cremmin in Sydney and Philip Kennedy in Adelaide).

The role requires fine judgment and timing. It also requires a good understanding of the Gospels and church teaching, not least on the lay vocation, and ability to express this simply. Pope Francis is a master of this art. He also urges priests and religious ‘to become immersed

in the real lives of people' and to encourage 'freedom'. During his visit to Slovakia in September 2021, he told his audience: 'A church that has no room for the adventure of freedom, even in the spiritual life, risks becoming rigid and self-enclosed.... Some people may be used to this. But many others—especially the younger generations—are not attracted by a faith that leaves them no interior freedom, by a church in which all are supposed to think alike and blindly obey.' The Pope added, 'Do not be afraid to train people for a mature and free relationship with God. This approach may give the impression that we are diminishing our control, power and authority, yet the church of Christ does not seek to dominate consciences and occupy spaces but rather to be a 'wellspring' of hope in people's lives.'

Slovakia, however, is not Australia where secularism, scandals and other factors have eroded the church and where priests and religious of the type who once served the YCS are thin on the ground. Catholic schools, however, are a conspicuous exception to this sense of diminution. Might not lay staff, for whom teaching is an expression of lay vocation, play the animating role to YCS that chaplains and religious assistants once did? Similarly, might teacher trainees be educated in Jocist principles and practice, especially in the education faculties of Catholic universities?

What did the YCS of the 70s decide about its core mission?

Basically, YCS had to decide whether secondary YCS in Australia was to be a force for institutional change in its own right or a seedbed.

The question became a dilemma following the 1974 World Conference. IYCS committed the whole movement unequivocally to serve within the vanguard of change, global justice and liberation theology. This was fine for tertiary students and politicised young militants from the south and their northern counterparts, but out of sync with the general reality of Australian secondary school YCS. As Fr Mick Byrne observed in a letter in 1976: 'YCS is mainly secondary, struggling for an identity and a purpose, continually faced with a high turnover and the problem of developing new kids all the time'. It wasn't till the IYCS World Conference in Spain in 1978, my final year, where Kevin McDonald was elected secretary-general, that IYCS gave this situation some consideration. Australia's delegation which included grounded assistants like Sr Meredith Evans and Fr Bob Wilkinson and national personnel Frank Johnson and Dave Freeman, who was elected to the Council steering committee, did their best to make this perspective understood.

While we didn't ignore basic groups (in fact, national and diocesan staff constantly visited them around Australia), the archives show that national staff prioritised YCS leaders, regional staff and adult assistants. Representatives from these cohorts were the ones invited to national workshops, executive meetings and conferences. Our principal media, *Student Bulletin*, *Letter to the Executive*, and *Subscription Service* (to serious reading) carried regular apologies for being heavy. Attempts were made to lighten *Student Bulletin* with humorous cartoons, but reports from international and national conferences, chaplains' meetings, dioceses and excerpts from the life of Cardijn defied a light touch.

The records also show that national staff focussed on promoting Jocist basics, including the review of life, though with a consistent emphasis on the student character of the YCS. In

other words, we felt our primary role was to support those engaged in the everyday, nitty-gritty formation of students, not to ferment institutional change though, of course, we celebrated any instances of 'authentic student action'!

Our front-line stalwarts included a stellar cast of young leaders, some of them employed full-time in their localities. In no particular order and allowing for subjectivity on my part, they included: Graham Chandler (Perth), Andy Sugg (Adelaide), Annie Monsour (Brisbane), Tim Curran (Melbourne), Kath Higgins (Townsville), Mary Harrington (George Town), Linda Baker (Perth), Mick Piotto (Adelaide), Kate McMahon (Sale), Debby Bell (Bathurst), Jenny Pritchard (Wollongong), Simone McGurk (Perth), Maryrose Hall (Ballarat), Andy Freeman (Hobart), Paula Daly (Hobart), Sharon Oates (Perth), Bern McEvoy (Adelaide), Liz Capps (Hobart), Ann Madigan (Adelaide), Carmel Fitzgerald (Brisbane), Rosie Huxtable (Hobart), Judy Dougherty (Lismore), Cathy Whewell (Adelaide), Mary Martin (Ballarat), Kim Voss (Hobart), Marianne Calleja (Perth), Peter Gartlan (Launceston), Tony O'Gorman (Brisbane), Shawn Boyle (Perth), Jenny Pritchard (Wollongong), Chris Keating (Perth), Marg Crowley (Bathurst), Mick Burstow (Brisbane), Kath Kelsey (Adelaide), Karen Chandler (Bathurst), and Therese McLean (Maitland).

Our focus on fundamentals was kicked on significantly by the next generation of national YCS. That is, by the end of the decade, Australian YCS had decided it was fundamentally a 'seedbed'. By then, national YCS had re-located from Fitzroy to the YCW office in Lonsdale St, Melbourne, an arrangement that facilitated useful interaction with National YCW and the Melbourne YCS and YCW for whom it was also a base.

David Freeman and Sister Elizabeth Compton, with input from Mick Piotto, were responsible for this initiative. Each had many years of hands-on YCS experience (in Tasmania and Adelaide respectively, both places with long Jocist traditions). David had attended the 1978 IYCS World Council in Valladolid, Spain, and Liz Compton was a former assistant, teacher and principal well versed in YCS, schools and teaching method. With the support of the national executive, they revived the handbook.

A staple of YCS in its first three decades, the handbook had been ditched after Vatican II in favour of a more self-generated, situational, less top-down approach. But, as Fr Mick Byrne had pointed out in 1976, secondary YCS, like it or not, is 'faced with a high turnover and the problem of developing new kids all the time'. The new resource book would address this recurring need. 'There was a widespread feeling that something was needed', wrote the authors in their foreword, 'and there were many requests... we wanted to write something that helped people gradually discover the YCS, but which also left the thinking and decisions in the hands of each group'.

Published in 1981, the outcome, drafted by Dave Freeman, test-driven by groups and finessed over three years, comprised three kits: *YCS Resource Kit* (resource book plus leaflets); *YCS Leaders Kit* (leaders/assistants book plus articles); *YCS Assistants Kit* (book, review of life booklet, articles). The kits were a creative blend of the old and the new. Group dynamics, structures, methods and the role of leaders and assistants were addressed. But so too were the emphases and insights of the 1970s: Vatican II, Cardijn's vision, the centrality

of Christ and the Gospels, review of life, action, reflection and engagement with the world, including the global village.

They had prepared a seedbed that, composted with the wisdom of decades, would hopefully yield a rich harvest. A bit like the grain of wheat on the YCS logo.

That's all pretty serious. What about the joy bit you mentioned at the start?

It was a thrill, if not a joy, to associate with icons like Paulo Freire and Gustavo Gutierrez, to travel and attend the IYCS conference in 1974, the 1976 regional meeting in Thailand (where we were caught up in Thailand's latest military coup), and to plug into Latin America, a most exciting place politically and theologically, now refreshingly represented in the Vatican itself. There was also a lot of fun in the communal experiment at 528 Brunswick St, Fitzroy.

Helping produce our various media was also satisfying. We professionalised *Student Bulletin*, started before me in 1973, making it into a substantial and readable regular news and information publication. Working with the Dominican *Bulletin of Christian Affairs* in Canberra, we also published an innovative series of five simplified church documents for lay and student readers. With discussion questions at the end, they included: *Justice in the World* (Synod Bishops, 1971); *The Church and the Modern World* (Vatican II); *The Progress of Peoples* (Pope John XXIII); *The Apostolate of the Laity* (Vatican II). This initiative was welcomed outside the YCS as well, and led to orders from overseas, including the US.

My best memory though is of my YCS colleague 'fulltimers'. I can't help thinking of them now without admiration, respect, an affectionate chuckle and pride in what they've individually achieved since YCS days, though sadly not Mick Perkins, who died in 1976 as mentioned. Though theoretically engaged by the Bishops conference, they certainly didn't live like bishops (or want to, of course). They made do on a very meagre income, lived simply, sharing accommodation, chores and bills, and spent any extra money on books, leaving little time or resources for shows and sport. Though they didn't see it this way, they effectively gave up one or two years to share their ideals, vision, and experience with students in the hope their work would contribute to the church and the world. But, as I've indicated, it wasn't all wine and roses.

These colleagues were Mick Perkins (1973-74). Kevin McDonald (1973-74), Damian Hurley (1974-75), Lorna Payne (1976-1977), Frank Johnson (1977-79), and David Freeman (1978-79). All blokes, I note, except one, interesting given the preponderance of young women at the local level in my list above. We spent a lot of time together; some of it in monastic silence, unproductive reflection, cleaning our pipes or seemingly endless analysis; all of it in camaraderie. They are a happy note to end on!

*Pat Walsh is a human rights advocate and author who lives in Melbourne. A shorter account of his experience, entitled **YCS in the 1970s: Young Laity in Search of Vocation**, is available on www.patwalsh.net*