

# The YCW moves into Soweto and other Black Townships: 1952 to 1965

Stuart C. Bate OMI

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5614-7982>

University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Religion Philosophy and Classics

Bates@ukzn.ac.za

## ABSTRACT

The Young Christian Workers (YCW) movement in South Africa officially began in Johannesburg in 1949. Within a few years the movement expanded into Soweto and then other surrounding emerging black townships of Johannesburg. The YCW was a movement of the working class: by workers for workers. The young workers were the leaders of the movement. As a movement led by lay people in the church, the YCW is a movement of “Catholic Action” and this dimension will be clarified in the text. The specific focus of this article is an examination of the early history of the YCW in Soweto. This was initiated through the work of a young worker, Eric Tyacke, who was appointed to this mission by the local bishop in Johannesburg, William Patrick Whelan OMI. Missionary priests in the townships, especially those from Belgium and Ireland, facilitated the establishment and development of the movement in their role as chaplains. However, the main means of the primary activity of mission to workers, was carried out by the young worker leaders of the YCW themselves in their places of work and their communities. For this reason a major part of the data collection was through oral history, where possible from those former YCW members still alive, as well as other written sources. This missionary activity will be analysed in terms of a model of method in contextual missiology previously developed by the author. The social context of this period is also examined, as this was the time of establishing racially defined

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suburbs in Johannesburg as well as restrictions on trade unions, in a time when the apartheid policy of the new nationalist government began to grip.

**Keywords:** Young Christian Workers (YCW); Catholic Action; apartheid; worker ministry; trade unions

## INTRODUCTION

The Young Christian Workers (YCW) is a movement which emerged out of “Catholic Action.” The term, which is still used, refers to Catholic activities undertaken in society by lay people in the church rather than ordained ministers. The purpose of Catholic Action was to improve social conditions in conformity to the teaching of the Gospel and Catholic teaching. Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is usually recognised as beginning with the seminal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (RN) of Leo XIII, which described the social changes affecting the world as a result of the industrial revolution. The purpose of the encyclical was to respond to the “misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class” (RN3). It is important to understand that the YCW is a movement of the working class and is involved in mission and ministry to the working class. It focuses on themes such as the rights and duties of workers and employers; the role of the church to speak out about injustices in society; and the role of the church to educate people to act justly. It has also been seen as the church’s response to the communist analysis of the Industrial Revolution first articulated by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* (1879).

The term “Catholic Action” described both a movement and a mentality. As a movement, Catholic Action had its beginnings in the latter part of the 19th century, when people proactively took measures to counteract the anti-clericalism running rampant, especially throughout Europe. As the church entered the 20th century, Catholic Action became more of an organized movement in which laypeople, collaborating with members of the hierarchy, worked to bring Christ and the social teachings of the Catholic Church into the greater society. Joseph Leo Cardijn, a Belgian priest and later cardinal, was the godfather of the movement. In 1919 Cardijn founded the Young Trade Unionists, which later became the Young Christian Workers—the quintessential model for Catholic Action. (Nieli 2015, 36)

Catholic Action, and movements like YCW that were part of it, can be understood as missionary. One of the YCW chaplains used to say that YCW leaders are writing the Acts of the Apostles for our time. Faith-based activities of these groups can thus be analysed in terms of missionary criteria (Bate 1998). These criteria include “The church as the site of *martyria*, *koinonia*, *diakonia*, *kerygma*, *leitourgia*” (Bate 1998, 169). This means faith activity informed by God’s word promoting the *kerygma*; faith activity lived in community promoting *koinonia* in the local groups; and sections as well as regional and national events in the life of a movement. It implies faith activities working for service within in society: *diakonia* and enriched by *leitourgia* through prayer and worship. It implies witnessing to Christ and the values of the reign of God by the offering of lives as young workers as indicated in the YCW prayer (YCW 1960, inside cover): a daily expression of the mission of *martyria* (Bate 1998, 169). It implies membership of the Church: “One Holy Catholic and Apostolic” (Bate 1998, 168).

It is not the intention here to pedantically analyse the text to label these approaches and activities, since they are layered into the narrative.<sup>1</sup> What is important here is to tell the story of young Christian people from the underside of history, the working class including the unemployed, who played an important yet heretofore hidden contribution to the struggle for liberation in South Africa. They became Christian activists, members of the working class and new residents of the apartheid-constructed “Bantu” townships of Soweto and other areas in the Johannesburg region. Their missionary activity focused on the struggle for liberation and a better world in the context of being young workers in the struggle against apartheid at work and in the community. The article responds to the question: What role did the YCW movement play amongst young residents in the emerging apartheid areas of Soweto and other black townships as they encountered the problems of their social context in the 1950s and 60s? The particular context is the impact of the construction of the townships to be known as Soweto and the impact of the emerging apartheid labour legislation on their lives.

In this way the text is also a response to the plea of Ineke van Kessel: “YCW deserves to be more widely known because of its importance as a conduit for notions of liberation theology

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1 This article is one of a series of an approved research project of UKZN entitled *The History of the YCW in South Africa*.

and third world socialism to the world of working youth as well as a training ground for a remarkable crop of talented and committed leaders” (Van Kessel n.d., 2; see also Van Kessel 2000, 161). The story is told principally through the witnesses of those involved, using the methodology of oral history construction through interviews. In addition other sources emerge from documentation on the YCW available in archives and other sources as indicated in the references. In this way some corroboration of oral sources can be indicated when necessary or available.

The YCW was already an international movement present in many countries before it was established in South Africa. It uses the cell-based group system of young people who examine their social conditions and reflect on them in terms of the teaching of the Gospel. These reflections led to action in society by individual members of the group who were called leaders, or by the action of the group as a whole. This is the established missionary method of “See, Judge, Act” carried out by groups of Christians and well known now for many years in South Africa. This is also the main missionary method of Catholic Action.

The value of this research is enhanced by the fact that the “See, Judge, Act” method of Christian social reflection and action originated in the YCW in the 1920s and not, as some have assumed, in Latin American liberation theology. The YCW movement and its method are thus the precursors of both liberation theology and indeed contextual theology; and this is what makes the historical study of the YCW so important. Since the methodology of contextual theology and liberation theology and their histories have been so well documented and are known in South African theology and missiology, the articulation of their origins in the YCW makes the history of this movement crucial in providing a lesser known yet principal root of the methodology of these theologies and missiologies. Reading this history of the YCW in South Africa clearly provides an opportunity for underpinning the foundation of a theology and missiology which we already know and use.

The article will thus focus on the people of the YCW movement, their social context as a result of the emergence of Soweto, in particular, and other townships at this time and their responses to that context. It will tell their stories, for many are still alive, have shared their stories and deserve to be recognised. Where possible it will also use archival and other written texts to expand the story and to compliment it with information on the activities of the YCW in Soweto and other black townships within the context of the transformation of Johannesburg as the

apartheid government took hold. The litmus test of their Christian responses will be measured in terms of the growth regarding their belief in and solidarity with the movement, which helped them to survive as actors in and not just as victims of the social system of apartheid South Africa. The experience and skills gained as young people made the YCW a training ground which prepared many of them for leadership in church, politics, the media, and the trades unions in adult life.

The oral history is crucial here and that is why time and care has been given to contact those YCW leaders and chaplains from this time still living today to tell their stories. The oral history remains the most crucial original contribution to the text. In addition, the daily written log of the late Eric Tyacke also provides a precious original written source of personal testimony and reportage on his mission as founder in southern Africa. The same applies to the witness of the late Jane Banded, a YCW organiser in the early days of the YCW in South Africa, who wrote a personal testimony of her time in the YCW and the social conditions of her time in Soweto (Banded Hlongwane 2000).

Eric Tyacke, a young layman, went to England in 1948 to train with the English YCW National Team. In 1949 he became the recognised founder of the Young Christian Workers (YCW) in South Africa (Bate 2017, forthcoming). Right from the beginning of his mission to establish the movement in South Africa he had a passion to get African groups going.<sup>2</sup> His method was to convince parish priests of the importance of the YCW and help them to get going. He focused initially on those missionary priests who had experienced the YCW in their own countries when young. In 1949 he wrote in his daily log:

Fr. C. Mariman, OMI, of Orlando African Township gave me a nice welcome and is keen to start with Africans,<sup>3</sup> using a recreation service as a start. He has lots of KAJ

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2 For more on the beginning of the YCW in South Africa, see Bate, “The Beginning of the Young Christian Workers’ Movement in South Africa.” *Journal of Religion in Africa*. 2017, forthcoming.

3 The term “African” is clearly multi-vocal throughout South African history. Here the term is used as it would be used at the time. Clearly Tyacke, a white man, uses the term to refer to indigenous black African people or what apartheid designated as “Bantu” ethnic groups. The term “black” is also contested and has been defined and redefined conditionally, dependent on anthropological and political views emerging after this period. In this period it refers to the same group as Africans above, viz. indigenous black African people or what apartheid designated as “Bantu” ethnic groups. In this article the term is used only in lower case to indicate a neutral position related to general usage at this time, which largely predates the black consciousness and black theology debates which emerged from the mid-1960s outside the time frame of this article. Capitalisation is however retained in citations. These matters only entered into YCW discourse in a peripheral way in the 1970s. The same applies to the terms “coloured” and “indian.”

literature.<sup>4</sup> I gave him the “How to Start” and the “Priest and YCW.”<sup>5</sup> He is keen on the “born leader” idea. He says it would be dangerous for Africans to meet at night because of frequent attacks. His parish priest is Fr. Vandebroek OMI; he is reading KAJ literature. Fr. Paulsen, OMI, of Moroka could also be interested.

Fr. Mariman took me round Orlando with its population of well over 50 000. The council houses are not too bad but very over-crowded and there are four shanty towns with over 5 000 people, rows of mud, tin, straw and sack huts, with mud and dirt all round. There are communal taps and a few open air communal lavatories. There is no lighting of any sort. I saw a huge maternity home for illegitimate babies in Orlando. I also saw something of Moroka and Jeppestown.<sup>6</sup> The total population of Orlando, Moroka and Jeppestown must be well over 150 000 people with about 15 000 Catholics. There was little or no sign of any recreation facilities (Tyacke Log 15.7.49).

Unfortunately we have no evidence of YCW Sections emerging from this early initiative. It was in 1952 or 1953 (sources differ) that Fr. Daniel Verstraete OMI began the first YCW Section in Soweto at Blessed Martin De Porres Church in Orlando West.<sup>7</sup> Verstraete had experience of the YCW and other Catholic Action movements growing up in Belgium. In a 2015 interview with him the interviewer notes:

(Fr.) Verstraete started at that time (1952–53). Tyack used to come by train every week on Wednesdays and Verstraete took him back by car in the evening. They also started pre-YCW in the schools.<sup>8</sup> The Christian Brothers<sup>9</sup> were active in the school in Orlando East. (Verstraete 2015, Interviewer’s note)

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4 OMI (Oblates of Mary Immaculate) is a Catholic religious institute of Missionary Priests and brothers. KAJ is the Flemish acronym for Young Christian Workers.

5 Literature used by the South African YCW at that time.

6 The reference to Jeppestown is strange. It is not in Soweto, being more than 20 kilometres from the other two places. Tyacke may have meant Kliptown in his log, which is close to the other places and was to be the site of the first YCW group in Johannesburg, see Bate (2017).

7 A *Section* is a unit of the YCW which comprises a leaders group, a committee and general members who participate in YCW events. It is used interchangeably in this text with the word “group” as both terms were used.

8 “Pre-YCW” refers to groups made up of schoolchildren using the YCW method but within the context of their school life (Tyacke 1952, 1).

9 These were the Flemish *Brothers of Charity* who opened a school for the deaf in Orlando during this period. They subsequently withdrew from the school, which continues today as *Sizwile School for the deaf* in Dobsonville, Soweto.

Verstraete points out that he “also got a group started at Moroka and one of the members of that group, Leonard Sikhakhane, became important in the trade unions; YCW was good training for Trade Union action” (Verstraete 2015).

Verstraete also notes: “There was no quick growth in those early years. Fr. Paulsen OMI in Moroka was supportive” (2015). He was followed by Fr. Eddie Kelly OMI who was the chaplain of the YCW Moroka Section at least until 1957. Indeed, Fr. Kelly was “given permission to attend the World pilgrimage of the YCW to Rome in August 1957” (Tyacke 1957). The first black YCW full-time organiser, Johannes Bakane, also came from the Moroka Section.

Nonetheless, Verstraete’s view that most priests were not interested in the YCW as mission and ministry was quite true. Sacramental ministry was the main work and this was also the emphasis of Bishop Boyle of Johannesburg who had “no eye for the Lay Apostolate” (Verstraete 2015). His recollection about the YCW some 60 years later was that “through dialogue, misunderstandings at work were ironed out” (Verstraete 2015). Actions carried out by group leaders included “Security during work; re-admission of dismissed workers and minimum wage” (Verstraete 2015). He also recalled that “one driver was paid out for under payment over 8 years; he left the job and used the money to install himself as photographer and became successful” (Verstraete 2015).

From this point the YCW began to grow more substantially in black townships around Johannesburg as new Sections were started in Soweto and other black townships. In a letter to Archbishop Hurley, dated February 1957, Tyacke writes: “The following is a list of existing and starting African Sections: Orlando West, Moroka (2); Randfontein (3); Alexandra, Orlando East, Vereeniging and Germiston ... Possible future groups include Krugersdorp, Pimville and Luipaardsvlei” (Tyacke 1957).

## THE POLITICAL CONTEXT AND THE EMERGENCE OF NEW APARTHEID-BASED TOWNSHIPS

The mechanism for controlling Africans coming into the labour force was already set up in 1923 with the enactment of the Natives (Urban Areas) Act, No. 21 of 1923 (Natives 1923). However, it was more systematically applied only in the apartheid era.

The Act empowered municipalities to establish segregated locations for Africans, to implement a rudimentary system of influx control, and to set up advisory boards, bodies which would contain African elected representatives and which would discuss local issues affecting Africans, but without any power to change policy. (Maylam 1990, 66)

During the 1950s, these policies gradually began to change the lives of black people in the Johannesburg area. Two of the main areas where this was felt were in classification of identity by ethnic group and in the construction of ethnically defined suburbs in Soweto. The trigger for this was the decision by the government to implement the forced removal of black people from previously mixed areas such as Sophiatown and Western Native Township into new ethnic areas in Soweto.<sup>10</sup>

Jane Banded joined the YCW in 1959 and served as National Secretary from 1964 to 1967. She explained her personal experience of the events of racial classification and forced removal in these words (Banded Hlongwane 2000):

I was born in 1935 in the then Western Native Township in Johannesburg. Western, as we used to call it, was adjacent to Sophiatown, one of the townships established in the late 1900s. Sophiatown was one of the unique townships in Johannesburg as its population was cosmopolitan and was surrounded by 99% of the mainly white suburbs. I started working in 1958 at the age of 22 years. My occupation then was a Typist/Clerk.

Before 1948 the black males were already carrying “passes” or identity documents. However, when the Nationalists took over, black females were forced to carry passes

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<sup>10</sup> In the white South African context at this time “native” refers exclusively to black Africans. Whites and other races born in South Africa would not be referred to as natives.



too. Therefore all Black persons were subject to Influx Control. The information in the pass was: Name, Ethnic Group, Place of Birth and Qualifications. The qualifications were divided into A, B, C and D. "A" denoted the right to live and work in an urban area. "B" denoted permission to live and work in an urban area. A number of people who could not produce proof that they were born in an urban area were forced to move to one of the Homelands. "C" and "D" denoted a temporary permission to seek work in an urban area. Under "Name" all Black people were forced to have a "Bantu" name. I had to add to my names "Nkgabe," which was my late granny's name. The children born out of marriage would automatically belong to the father's ethnic group. In my case they belonged to two ethnic groups. My husband was Zulu and I was Tswana. In the ID book there was also one Section where it was compulsory for the employer to attach his/her signature and a rubber stamp. The employer was required to do this monthly whilst the "Bantu" was still employed ... Previous cosmopolitan areas like Sophiatown were declared white areas. As Western was declared a Coloured area, the Black people were moved to Moroka in Soweto. The "South-Western Townships" (SOWETO) was declared a Black area in the late 50s. The Black people from Sophiatown were moved to Meadowlands and the Coloureds to Western. My mother, nephew and I moved to Moroka in 1961. By then all my sisters and brother were married and were settled in the different townships.

## Other Aspects of the Political Context during this Period

In addition to the residential upheaval in the Johannesburg area during these years, the life of the black majority was impacted by two pairs of major political events. They can be described in terms of a "couplet paradigm" which begins with action from the resisting group and its supporters resulting in a response from the government and its supporters. This led to a reconstruction of the socio-cultural context on each side of the couplet. The first couplet was in the mid-fifties and the second occurred between 1958 and 1962. These couplets would bracket a period of increasing confidence and determination on *both sides* of the social spectrum, setting up a clear framework for future conflict. Battle lines were being empowered.

The first couplet began in 1955 when the Congress of the People met in Kliptown to draw up the Freedom Charter.<sup>11</sup> This document became the principal expression of the aspiration and vision of those organisations opposed to the policies of the white minority government. By the end of the year the charter was banned by the government and many leaders of the participating groups were arrested and tried. In addition, a further response of the apartheid government was the passing of the Industrial Conciliation Act, of 1956, which proscribed the registration of new multiracial unions. Existing multiracial unions were required to have racially separate branches and all-white executive committees. The Act prohibited strikes in “essential industries” for both black and white workers, and banned political affiliations for unions. Clause 77 legalised the reservation of skilled jobs to white workers “to ensure that they will not be exploited by the lower standard of living of any other race.”

The second couplet began with the promotion of the “one pound a day” wage campaign; first in 1957 as a five year campaign by SACTU and re-affirmed by the same organisation in 1959 in affiliation with the commitment of the Congress alliance.<sup>12</sup> Linked to these, in 1960, the ANC launched the “Anti pass” and living wage campaigns. These various campaigns led to a number of mass actions, of which the events in Sharpeville on 21 March 1961 was the most significant because of the most violent reaction it precipitated when a large crowd of people marched on the police station and 69 people were killed.<sup>13</sup>

On the other side of this couplet, as a response to these events, the government promulgated the Unlawful Organisations Act in 1960 which declared illegal any organisation that deemed to “threaten public order or the safety of the public” (Unlawful 1960). The law empowered the banning of the ANC and PAC which happened the following day, and subsequently other organisations. As YCW grew in the 1950s and 1960s it was clearly impacted by this context.

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11 The Freedom Charter was the statement of core principles of the South African Congress Alliance, which consisted of the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People’s Congress. It is characterised by its opening demand; The People Shall Govern! [http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv\\_pdfo/AD1137/AD1137-Ea6-1-001-jpeg.pdf](http://www.historicalpapers.wits.ac.za/inventories/inv_pdfo/AD1137/AD1137-Ea6-1-001-jpeg.pdf)

12 SACTU, the South African Congress of Trade Unions, was founded in 1956 as a non-racial union. It was formed after the *Council of non-European Workers* collapsed in 1953 and a number of mixed race unions refused to join the whites and coloured-only *Trade Union Council of South Africa* (TUCSA) (Kiloh 2000, 22).

13 This date is commemorated annually in South Africa as Human Rights day.

## **THE METHODOLOGY OF THE YCW: TRAINING FOR CATHOLIC ACTION THROUGH THE WEEKLY SECTION MEETING**

The YCW method of “See, Judge, Act” is well known today and has been used by church organisations of all kinds to deal with issues in their community. However, in the 1950s and 60s it was new and unfamiliar. The goal of the YCW was to provide Christian leaders who would play a role in the workplace and in the community. The YCW used a number of approaches to formation and leadership training. The first was a basic training manual used by all YCW sections called *How to Start a YCW Section* (YCW 1951; YCW 1960). This became the handbook for all YCW Sections. It provided a template of 21 meetings covering many aspects of the lives of young workers and a basis for discussing ways to deal with issues emerging from their lives from a Christian perspective. Sections met on a regular basis, usually weekly, to reflect on issues of concern in their lives at work or in their local community. The booklet provided a weekly social enquiry which encouraged the leaders to bring cases of injustice coming from their work or neighbourhood.

In the “See” part members raise issues of concern from their own lives and present them for clarification to the group. Once the issue is clear the group moves on to the “Judge” part where they try to understand and reflect on the matter from the perspective of the teaching of the Gospel and a reflection on what Jesus might do in such a circumstance. Finally they help one another to discern what can be done to improve the situation and discuss possibilities for Christian action to remedy the situation. This is the “Act” part and an essential commitment on behalf of those involved to deal with the matter.

By going through meeting by meeting, group members develop knowledge about how to approach issues at work and in society as well as knowledge about the Scriptures and how to apply the word of God to issues in their lives. It is also helpful to repeat meetings and Tyacke used this as a tactic in the first YCW group in Kliptown. Sections would also change over time as some left and some new people joined. This basic programme served the YCW until the late 1960s when themed programmes started to appear. The missiological strategy was to train the leaders in using the YCW method by focusing on both sides of the dynamic between faith and life on a weekly basis. The weekly subscription promoted the value of self-sustainability of the movement through contributions from working members.

The weekly leaders' meeting followed the same basic format:

- YCW prayer.
- Weekly subscription of each working member.
- Minutes.
- Social enquiry, review of life: Facts of the week. Each shares whatever incident from their work or community.
- Gospel enquiry reading and reflection on a Gospel text and application to life.
- Actions for the week ahead.
- Closing prayer.

Jane Banded Hlongwane gives an example of a social enquiry on a fact coming from the neighbourhood:

For instance a complaint was lodged with the Health Department against white owned restaurants in the centre of the city that were serving Blacks. These restaurants did not provide tables, chairs and spoons to the customers. Therefore the customers were forced to stand and use their fingers when eating. This abuse of human dignity was discontinued when the Health Department took action as a result of the action of the group. (Banded Hlongwane 2000)

In commenting on how the booklet helped young people to become trained in the method, she remarks:

At first the YCW method used in the social and religious enquiry was foreign to all of us. Gradually, though, we began to see, hear and notice what was happening at work, home, church and around us. The "Judge" concept, which was the most challenging part, helped the young people to try and debate issues without prejudice. The young people began to accept that if changes needed to be done then we ourselves had to try and make it happen. The "Action" concept, although difficult at first, was instrumental in introducing the group to Trade Unionism. (Banded Hlongwane 2000)

## **THE METHODOLOGY OF THE YCW: REGIONAL TRAINING MEETINGS**

The second missionary method happened at the level of the YCW region to which all sections in the area belonged. Regions changed over time but at this time there was a Johannesburg region, a Durban region and a Cape Town region. Groups within a region such as Johannesburg would meet about four times a year to share activities and results of action, as well as to have some more formal sharing through deeper enquiry. There were often talks on social and political issues as well as leadership training and reflections on significant Scripture texts. Regional training meetings brought together YCWs from neighbouring groups to share experience and receive training in an area of common life and skills training such as group dynamics, note taking, and public speaking. Time was also given to planning regional campaigns on common issues. Polisa (2016) explained that regional meetings were held at St Thomas College in Soweto. He was also elected secretary of the Johannesburg region. “We discussed things like supporting each other; getting experience from each other and how groups dealt with certain problems ... We would organise talks and plan the annual trip to the National Study week” (Polisa 2016). He also pointed out that regional meetings were very helpful because “if a Section was struggling, we would visit the Section to support port it. Once we visited Sharpeville” (Polisa 2016). The chaplain to the Sharpeville YCW group was Fr. Rudolf O’ Flynn OFM. He was very helpful in regional meetings, according to Polisa. He was also very outspoken and openly critical of the apartheid government. After the Sharpeville massacre he held an annual memorial service in his parish until he was deported from South Africa in 1963.

## **THE METHODOLOGY OF THE YCW: THE ANNUAL “STUDY WEEK” AND NATIONAL COUNCIL**

The third missionary method used was the annual study week. It was the most important training event of the year and it always attracted a large crowd of YCWs from around the country. It normally lasted about five days and always took place in the December–January period. During the week a National Council of delegates from each region and the National Committee would meet to debate issues. Polisa (2016) reports that there were very vibrant young people from all races who met and studied together. “We learned from each region how

YCW was working in each region and what the problems were.” Bernard Hlongwane (2016) reflects on the spirit of the study week as follows: “There was a lot of singing, partying and powerful masses in prayer for various things. Songs were mainly in English. There was a great spirit of socialising together. New year’s eve in particular was a wonderful evening of unity.”

Jane Banded Hlongwanw recalls the following incident after a study week:

One weekend after the seminar had ended some of the girls had to board a train back to Johannesburg. At that time the train compartments were divided into three classes, first, second and third. The first class compartments were reserved for Whites only. On this occasion one of the young workers, who was the only white person, boarded the third class where the rest of us were. Later the conductor came and ordered our colleague to move to the first class. She refused as she wanted to be with rest of the group. When the conductor realized that she was adamant and had our support he gave it up as a bad job. (Banded Hlongwane 2000)

Polisa recalls that he went to study weeks in Mariannhill, Inkamana, Verulam (Oakford) and Cedara and twice in Lesotho. Indeed, in the 1960s study weeks were held more frequently in Swaziland and Lesotho for a while because of increasing interest from the apartheid security forces in multiracial youth meetings.<sup>14</sup>

## **THE METHODOLOGY OF THE YCW: FULLTIME ORGANISERS**

The growth and development of the YCW internationally has been facilitated by full-time organisers. Eric Tyacke, the founder, went to England for one year to work with the YCW national team of fulltime organisers and chaplains. As the movement grew in South Africa the need for full-time organisers grew with it. Tyacke was the first appointed in 1957. In the same year a former United States full-time organiser, who had also worked at the international YCW Office, volunteered to come to South Africa. At the 1959 National council, a resolution was

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<sup>14</sup> Information from Fr. Albert Danker OMI National Chaplain of YCW at the time.

adopted to appoint a full-time organiser from YCW leaders in the South African movement. Johannes Bakane from Moroka was chosen (Mitchinson 1982, 48).

The Southern Cross records this appointment of the first African fulltime YCW organiser: formerly a messenger in a Johannesburg city office, Johannes Bakane has shown his talent for leadership in the ways he has contrived for meeting fellow messengers at lunch breaks such as joining in their card games and there discussing with them topics such as choice of a marriage partner, the pros and cons of *lobola*.<sup>15</sup> By selling the YCW bulletin, *Challenge*, on crowded trains Johannes has interested fellow passengers in the movement and in the starting of groups of passengers who travel together regularly for their own and other passengers' protection from being molested by *tsotsis*.<sup>16</sup> Johannes died in 1978 on Labour's battlefield working for the *Black and Allied Workers Union*. Eric (Tyacke) writes: "Jean and I were banned at the time but we went to the funeral. *Rouse Up*, the international song of the YCW was sung by the host of former YCWs who were there."

Theresa Mthembu from Durban was also appointed full-time organiser the following year. Full-time workers had time to recruit members, start new sections and visit them at the beginning to help them develop experience in the methods of the movement. They also prepared training events for leaders in the regions and helped stabilise the regional structures where they worked. Full-time organisers also met nationally for review and future planning. They also planned the National Council and the National Study Week together with elected regional leaders.

## **RESPONSES OF YCW SOWETO GROUPS TO ISSUES IN THEIR CONTEXT**

Bernard Hlongwane, a YCW leader, speaking from his experience in the sixties, said:

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15 Lobola negotiation in traditional African cultures in South Africa is an age-old tradition where a man pays the family of his fiancé for her hand in marriage. It is governed by the customary law of the tribe. See <http://www.heraldlive.co.za/my-heraldlive/2014/03/20/lobola-ins-and-outs/>

16 A young black urban criminal (Oxford dictionaries.com).

The YCW gave us a movement to operate within but we were always very aware of the political issues around us. We attended political meetings privately for education without the knowledge of the group. We were discreet for fear of “*Izimpimpi*”<sup>17</sup> or “State sponsored whistle-blowers.” We did not always trust each other even in the YCW. (Bernard Hlongwane 2016)

Hlongwane joined the Orlando West Section of the movement “by chance” when he was “invited to a meeting by some members of the movement after one of the Sunday Masses” (Hlongwane 2016). He recalled that issues discussed in the YCW Sections included wider national matters such as the abolition of “Bantu Education,” the release of Mandela and all political prisoners, the removal of the “Group Areas Act” the granting of freedom of association and the removal of the “Immorality Act.” However, a lot were more local in character. Examples furnished by Hlongwane (2016) included:

- Add more coaches to ease the congestion in the trains.
- Stop advertisement of alcohol in the townships.
- Get rid of beer halls and drinking bars.
- Give title rights to township dwellers.
- Afford Blacks trade union rights.
- Convert hostels to family dwellings.
- Supply libraries.
- Supply recreational facilities.
- Restructure the “Canada Bridge” to prevent flooding in summer.<sup>18</sup>

Groups would strategise to lobby for these requests. For example, Hlongwane remembers that Percy Qoboza, who belonged to the Molapo YCW group, worked as a reporter at *The World* newspaper and in his reporting he often used to deal with some of the issues coming from YCW groups. Ambrose Polisa (2016) also recalled that that “Percy Qoboza was to move into journalism and in his early years he would publicise facts reported at YCW meetings which often proved helpful to the Section in getting actions done.”

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17 Informers, spies, and snitches.

18 This problem has not gone away as a 2014 newspaper article testifies: *Soweto's New Canada Road flooded* Gauteng, 9 February 2014, 12:20pm. <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/sowetos-new-canada-road-flooded-1644163>



YCW increased in popularity during the 1950s and early 1960s because it provided black members in particular with a method of responding to problems faced in their daily life. It also provided a place, within the context of the safer space of the church, for young people to speak about issues in their own lives, as well as the greater issues regarding the changes in South Africa.

The experience and training in YCW groups and the success achieved in actions in society ensured that many YCWs continued to be involved in their communities for the betterment of peoples in civic and social life in South Africa, bringing their YCW experience into a range of organisations. Many YCW leaders went on to greater involvement in trade unions after leaving the movement. Others went on to play a role in community organisations, local governance and the fourth estate. Most of their stories have not been documented but some became better known publically and we have records of their involvement. In the following section a few examples are given about some Soweto and other township YCWs who played an important role as Christian activists in society, both during and after their time in the YCW. Clearly their training in the YCW impacted on their careers as adults.

## **SOME KEY ACTORS IN THE YCW SOWETO STRUGGLE**

Many YCW leaders from earlier times have passed on and their contribution has been lost to history. However, a few key actors are still with us and their testimony is clearly of major significance. This section will present some of their stories. These are stories of lay Catholic Activism in which the categories of missionary method described earlier arise from the text.

### **Ambrose Polisa**

Polisa is the oldest living former YCW member at the time of writing (2017) and worthy of special attention. Born on 14 February 1931 in Leribe Lesotho, he moved to Johannesburg as a child. In 1955 he joined the Orlando West YCW Section after attending a meeting of black and white Catholics at St Thomas Training College, where Eric Tyacke and Fr. Verstraete were

speaking about the YCW movement.<sup>19</sup> Verstraete was parish priest and chaplain of the Orlando West YCW Section. For Polisa, participation in the YCW Section and the example of the section leaders gave him confidence to believe in himself and have the courage to organise workers and to take actions in his place of work (Polisa 2016). For example, he was able to persuade the manager to allow a member of SACTU to address the workers in the company in order for them to be unionised (Polisa 2016).<sup>20</sup> This was done and he was appointed the first shop steward at the company where he worked. He relates the following story about overtime at work.

The office staff worked overtime without pay. We discussed this in the YCW Section. I went back to the company and spoke to the manager asking why. The manager listened to me and said “there is no argument about it. You are entitled to it.” And he asked me to take names and present them to him. Then they got paid every end of month after submitting the names of those who worked overtime. (Polisa 2016)

He recalls that some of the other issues the group discussed included working conditions, unfair dismissals, and sexual harassment at work. The latter concerned a case of sexual harassment of workers by *indunas*.<sup>21</sup> The group recommended that the YCW leader, a young woman, should get together a group of women who had previously experienced this before, trying to formulate an action. The concern was that she should not be isolated but rather work with a group. She was able to do this and as far as he recalls the matter was settled through management structures, though he no longer remembers the details.

He also remembers that the YCW group had an influence in parish life and society, which was unusual for youth at that time. In particular he was taken by the “fascinating discussions on facts and actions in society and learning to use the ‘See, Judge, Act’ method as well as study of social and gospel enquiries” (Polisa 2016).

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19 St Thomas training College at Lourdes Mission at Village Main in Johannesburg began in 1940 as a teachers training college for young women. It was disestablished to comply with the Group Areas’ Act of the State and then demolished. For more see <http://kwtdominicans.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/missionary-endeavour-27-28-29.pdf> (accessed 3 March 2017).

20 SACTU, The *South African Congress of Trade Unions* was founded in 1955 as a response to the decision not to accept African Unions by the *Trade Union Council of South Africa* (TUCSA). For more on SACTU see Lambert (1985).

21 In the urban industrial culture of Johannesburg the term *induna*, borrowed from *isiZulu*, referred to a black male who was placed in charge of a section of the black work force. Such a person would normally report to a white manager. They had considerable authority over the lives of the black workforce.

Fr. Mcinerny OMI was the Chaplain after Fr. Verstraete. He was very friendly and used to visit young people in their homes. Polisa explains the importance and spiritual impact of the YCW chaplains in these words:

They helped us to have confidence in ourselves. This helped me to develop my spirituality and to see myself in the church as one who had a vocation and they helped me to find my vocation here in the group and that I also had a mission to fulfil in the church not only as a member of the church but as a leader in the community. We became missionary even before the Vatican II talked about that. (Polisa 2016)

Another action of the group that he remembered was to change the habit of men sitting on one side of the church and women on the other side. “We changed that to families should sit together and we did that even in the 1950s” (Polisa 2016).

## Eric Tyacke

Eric Tyacke, the founder and first organiser of the YCW, can be said to be the founder of many of the early Soweto groups starting from the first group in Kliptown (Bate 2017, forthcoming). He was involved in many unions, both in his YCW years and after. He was one of the prime movers within the establishment in 1971 of the Urban Training Project (UTP). “Its initial plan was not to be a trade union or worker-controlled organisation; it assumed this role only when money, provided by foreign sources to assist existing as well as new African worker organisations, was pumped into it” (Sithole and Ndlovu 2006, 198). In 1971, UTP started with a committee of five. “Tyacke and Hlongwane were from YCW and as expansion occurred other YCW people became involved as well as blacks with different backgrounds” (Lowry 1999, 47).

## Jane Bandes Hlongwane

Jane Bandes Hlongwane had a very distinguished career as a trade unionist. While still in the YCW, she was employed by the Trades Union Council of South Africa (TUCSA) in the African Affairs Section as a typist clerk. In 1967 she went to the Engineering and Allied Workers Union

in a similar position. In January 1969 she was appointed Secretary of the Union. In June 1974, she represented the Union at the World Congress of the International Metalworkers Federation in Stockholm. In September 1974 she was elected Chairperson of the International Metalworkers' Federation South African Co-ordinating Council (IMFSACC). In 1971, together with Eric Tyacke, she broke with TUCSA because of its decision to expel its black unions in 1969 (Lowry 1999, 41).

## Leonard "Skakes" Sikhakhane

The Urban Training Project "became one of the leading forces in the establishment of black trade unions during the 1970s" (Sithole and Ndlovu 2006, 198). Within weeks of its foundation "UTP took on ex YCW Leonard 'Skakes' Sikhakhane as an organiser. He was soon reaching workers in factories instead" (Lowry 1999, 53). Skakes was a former member of the Moroka YCW group in Soweto. At the time he joined UTP, he was involved in the Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union where he was acting secretary. Later he was the founder and first secretary of the Building Construction and Allied Workers' Union (BCAWU). "[It] was formed on 1 March 1975, and Leonard 'Skakes' Sikhakhane of BCAWU staked its claim as the first of the independent black trade unions to emerge during the 1970s and to organize specifically in the construction industry" (Building Construction and Allied Workers' Union, South African History Online 2013).

There are many others like these. One further example taken from a different time will suffice. Benjy Mngoma was an early leader in the Kwa Theme YCW Section on the East Rand in the 1960s. He was instrumental in the formation of the Paper Wood and Allied Workers' Union "which was formed in Springs on 31 May 1974 with Mngoma, as its first secretary. It organised workers in the paper and pulp, paper printing and packaging, wood, sawmills and furniture sectors. It had branches in the Transvaal, Natal and the Western Cape" (Sithole and Ndlovu 2006, 199).

## Percy Qoboza

Qoboza came from a devout Catholic family who lived in Sofiatown and, similar to the case of Jane Banded, his parents were forced to relocate to Soweto. He originally studied for the

priesthood in Lesotho and according to Mati (n.d.) had already attended some of the YCW study weeks. However, Qoboza “had to abandon his studies after only two years to get back home to take care of his father, who had suffered a stroke, and to look after his sisters” (Mati n.d.). In 1958 “he found a job as a clerk with the Johannesburg City Council working at the municipal offices in Soweto” (Mati n.d.), and at this time he joined the YCW group in Molapo (Polisa 2016). According to Van der Walt (1999), “in 1962 Qoboza met Anne, his wife-to-be, at a camp of the Young Christian Movement [sic]. His love for this young woman and his need to inform his community and encourage them to improve their situation changed the course of his life.” Van Der Walt (1999, 190) writes that Qoboza:

... started his career in journalism as a freelance contributor to *The World* while he was employed as a clerk by the Johannesburg City Council. He became a reporter for *The World*, a newspaper with a strong anti-apartheid stance, in 1963. Soon he became known for his investigative reporting and his awareness messages about the reasons for the precarious social conditions in the townships.

Qoboza was instrumental in the establishment of the Group of 10<sup>22</sup> and was eventually detained because “Jimmy Kruger believed that *The World* was inciting the people” (Mashabela 1987, 152).

## Leonard Mosala

Ambrose Polisa (2016) recalls that Leonard Mosala was also a very active YCW leader in Soweto. He was involved in trade unions and was chairman of the African Chemical Workers’ Union. In that role he later made a contribution to the book *Business in the Shadow of Apartheid* (Mosala 1985). He married Bernadette Buthelezi, another former YCW member and eventually moved into the teaching profession and became a school principal. Later he became an elected member of the Urban Bantu Council of Soweto. He was also involved in the establishment of the Group of 10, together with ex YCW Percy Qoboza and became the secretary of the group.

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22 The Soweto Group of ten or committee of ten "was at the forefront of community politics in the post-1976 era and steered resistance against apartheid into more productive channels." <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/nthato-harrison-motlana>

He is perhaps most well-known for his attempts to get the apartheid government to become aware of the wide unpopularity of forcing Afrikaans as a medium of study in schools, which led to a series of events leading to the Soweto riots of 1976 in which many schoolchildren were killed by apartheid forces. As a result of these interventions he and his wife were detained by the government (Mashabela 1987, 152). These events formed part of his submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Mosala 1996).

## Fikile Mlotshwa

Fikile Mlotshwa joined the YCW in 1961 at Moroka, where Fr. Gerry Coleman was the parish Priest. She also remembers that some issues discussed in YCW concerned the life of the church. For example, the parish priest “Fr. Gerry Coleman struggled to give sermons in Sesotho which made it difficult for people to follow him.” YCW spoke to him and said that “many understand English and so he could give them in English and someone could translate for him” (Mlotshwa 2017).

This method of preaching is quite common in many churches today, but for lay people to be translators was almost unheard of in the Catholic Church, apart from the case of trained full time catechists in the rural areas. She continues: “Another project was to try to decorate the church for big events like confirmation “so that we can present things with dignity. Today it is a little issue but then it was important for us” (Mlotshwa 2017).

Fikile Mlotshwa was later involved with Jane Bandes who recruited her into the Engineering and Allied Workers’ Union staff where she worked between 1970 and 1974. She recalls that Eric Tyacke, Jane Bandes and herself were all working together in the same building in town in offices next to one another. Before that she had worked in the office at an engineering factory in a supervisory role. Though she tried, she found it difficult to unionise workers because the workers were scared to lose their job (Mlotshwa 2016). Mlotshwa subsequently moved on to work for the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops Conference in the mid to late 1970s.

As she looks back, she concludes that the main strength of the YCW was working towards justice issues by raising issues of unity. Through YCW unions were formed like the Food and Allied Workers Union and the Engineering and allied Workers Union, which she was involved

in. The YCW brought issues of injustice into the life of the church. However, she admits that “we didn’t really transmit that to those who came after” (Mlotshwa 2016). Finally she points to the YCW for having vibrant life-giving liturgies in their meetings on a local, regional and national level, as well as in some parishes.

## CONCLUSION

Fr. Embo who started the first YCW group in Kliptown in 1949, wrote a reflection in the 1960s on what he had observed about the YCW growth in Soweto in the fifties and early sixties:

It was from then on that the YCW made great progress. The blacks, he wrote, have their own traditions and forms of education and moreover, through the long years of the work of missionaries, they have real Christian families. They can see, too, that the YCW has just what they need, i.e. a form of evening school, education, possibilities of leadership training and a solution to their problems of life and work. Real leaders came forward, who sought contact with the youth of other missions and thus, in the intervening years till now most of the branches of the YCW developed among black young workers, so that most of the leaders at YCW congresses were blacks, with just a few “coloured” and whites. (Mitchinson 1982, 26)

It is interesting to note the quarrels between the Marxists and the ANC Africanist exiles in which each promote their own ideological perspective and contribution to the history of trade unions in the liberation struggle (Legassick 2008). Neither have anything to say about the contribution of the church, as presented here. It has been washed out of history.

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