

YMCA 175

Oral Histories and Stories

Story teller Ron Ingamells

Subject Personal Reflection

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Ron: The Reverend Ron Ingamells now life vice president of Norfolk YMCA, which I'm very pleased to be.

Interviewer (Int): When did you become life vice president?

Ron: When I left Norwich in 1979

Int: You left in 1979?

Ron: Yeah.

Int: And when did you begin?

Ron: Well full time was 1969 for about 13 years but I've got memory now that I realise my first encounter in YMCA was in Skegness where I was brought up because of the holiday Centre there. And although I knew the management, the people there, I wasn't very involved. But in 1956 there was a crisis in Hungary, there was refugees coming from Hungary and many of them came to the YMCA in Skegness to start with. And I always thought it was the generosity of the YMCA, the hospitality, which has always been a theme of the YMCA, and I remember that my mother was helping with the refugees and I was helping as well. And that was my very first encounter. Later we would return to the Skegness YMCA for the Association of Secretaries Annual Conferences. But now of course it's no more YMCA there.

Int: Could you tell us more about Skegness YMCA?

Ron: Well it was an interesting place and not up to standard as you would expect now but then as it gave cheap holidays to people from the Midlands, young people and families, then it was very adequate. Nice playing area and the Association of Secretaries always had an annual cricket match - north against the south which we always enjoyed because I lived cricket and sport in general.

Int: So the Association of Secretaries, that was when you went back to Skegness?

Ron: That was when I was working for the YMCA I came here to Norwich in 1964 as the diocesan youth officer and that inevitably brought me in contact with all the youth organisations in the county and so I probably got more involved with the YMCA in Norwich than any other youth organisation.

Int: What was YMCA Norwich doing at that time?

Ron: Well they had accommodation and a sports hall and many YMCAs had sports halls in those days before the commercial fitness centers came on and that was a pretty busy place. They also had in the summer time, holiday camps for children and young people and I know my own children went there and it was at Swanton in the rural area of Norfolk. It was really appreciated by many people during the summer holiday season and so it went on for many years after that. It went on to another one on the coast and became part of the Norwich scene.

Int: And your involvement as the diocesan youth officer was with the YMCA?

Ron: Yes, I joined the youth committee and chaired the youth committee for some time. And we were involved with the planning and youth programs and summer programs and

gerbil ones as well, sports activities; and so I got quite involved. For some reason and I can't remember exactly why I also began to get involved with the National Council as it was then, in their annual assemblies and organising with a colleague from Suffolk the YMCA assembly main act of worship which was always a big event on the Sunday morning and I think I can say I changed it little bit because I wanted to bring new ideas and thoughts and so that brought me more into contact with the national scene and eventually I was invited to apply for the position of Christian education officer because the national council at that time were really thinking a lot of the YMCAs are very good social centers, they do a tremendous work but they have perhaps forgotten their Christian heritage and forgotten their Christian work so they became my main job. I've been involved in a lot of training of youth workers and part youth workers in Norfolk and so that was a lot of experience I was able to bring in to the YMCA.

Int: So you mentioned the act of worship and what it used to be and these new ideas you brought in, would you tell us a little bit about that assembly and that experience and what happened there?

Ron: Well. I became so much part of the YMCA that I've almost forgotten what we did so it became less formal and more energetic perhaps and involving lots of young people in the acts of worship. Which is very important

Int: And your role as Christian education officer, was that across England?

Ron: At first in the four countries and then later they separated and I still had contacts. I remember one exciting visit that had an impact on me was in Northern Ireland because it was in the days of the troubles and I went to meet up with the Secretaries in Northern Ireland and visit the YMCAs and was really an eye opener about the division between catholic and protestant. We also at that time went to Corrymela which is a Centre which brought together young people from both sides, it did a marvelous work and there were some interesting encounters in those places and young people met each other as young people for the first time there because the schools were segregated and they really made a difference to each other because they saw and became friends with each other. In the rest of Ireland, I was quite astonished by the memories of history that hang on in that part of the world. Scotland as well, I had many visits to Scotland and Wales, but most of the work was really thinking though how the Christian emphasis in the YMCA could happen without being overwhelming and totally evangelical because I always felt that doing the work itself, doing the work for the young people, for the poor, for the disadvantaged and working for young people generally was the Christian work but sometimes you need to make it a bit more explicit and so part of my job was to look at the YMCAs look at the buildings to see if there was any indication at all to see if there was any indication at all of the Christian emphasis, of the Christian background, why it starts and where it started and the church's involvement. Sometimes I tried to link up with local churches because occasionally there was no link at all with local churches. And I don't know if I was successful or not but at least I tried.

Int: How well was it received?

Ron: Well think everyone was very kind and very understanding of what I was trying to do and I made a lot of friends in the process. It meant a lot of travelling and reception generally was really good as people tried cos they knew anyway, the professional in the YMCA, they knew the backgrounds they knew what they should be doing but sometimes they needed some encouragement and new ways of looking at it. For example, once or twice I suggested they should have quiet areas, where people could go and relax, pray or

read and sometimes inter-faith because we were dealing people of faiths other than Christian and so therefore it seemed to me we had a responsibility to provide for their needs as well as the Christians and non-Christians there.

Int: Do you remember anywhere that was adopted or taken on board?

Ron: I don't remember any specific ones now. The other things I tried to do was get a sense of unity of praying because we didn't have any when I started a prayer calendar, so I began a calendar which went out to all YMCAs they had it in front of them that on a certain day in the month, that month, then the YMCA with all others would be praying for that YMCA. At the national council at the staff meetings on Mondays we used to use that and pray for Birkenhead or Liverpool or Manchester whichever was in the list. And I felt although it wasn't a terribly exciting thing to do it was worthwhile and the sense of unity in the YMCA was always important.

Int: You mentioned about YMCA's beginnings and how you felt it was important that how it began and the ethos behind it continued on, what was it specifically that you were hoping would continue and develop?

Ron: Well you can't in my view have a YMCA without a recognition of the background that it was Christians who started the YMCA in 1844 that since then generally has been Christians who have been giving the impetus to YMCA work and so my job was to try and encourage people to recognise that and somehow display it without being ostentatious or without putting people off but to have it there and be willing to talk about the Christian faith. So again whether you're successful or not I don't know but during those years I also had quite a lot of International experiences which have impacted on me a lot for example I was on the planning committee for a big International event in Austria I think in 1976 something like that and I met up with all the other people from the European YMCAs and it was a marvelous event and two coach loads came from UK and two interesting things happened there, one was the main keynote speaker was a Norwegian and he was absolutely brilliant giving the keynote address to a thousand young people on the Tuesday morning but on the Wednesday he came to me and he said I really need to go back to Norway will you take on the next two keynote addresses and I sank back and I had to say yes and it was privilege to do it but I started from nothing I had no resources there, even if you don't use your books or your library you like to have them there to think about it so I was up most of the night on Wednesday night and gave the address on the Thursday and Friday it wasn't of a quality I must say of his cos he was brilliant but we managed.

Int: Do you remember what you talked about?

Ron: The important thing there was that I met a Palestinian group for the first time, I had been unaware really of the stories of the Palestinian people and I was quite ashamed in many ways but they were a dynamic, youthful, happy group of young people who were dancing and singing late at night and I got to know them fairly well and that started me on a whole new oath of interest and concern about the Palestinian people and so after that I took one or two or three groups of YMCA secretaries professional workers to Israel Palestine to meet with the Palestinian YMCA and to get to know the struggles they were having. Having heard the stories of the 1947 and their families and how the families had left their homes but had kept the key hopefully to return one day to their place. And the YMCA secretaries came with me and we had a very special time when we went to 'BEDSAHUR'??? Which John Grey will often talk about because when we got there to meet with the YMCA secretaries and the YMCA people there was a barricade across the road and the Israeli army said it's been declared a military zone and so you can't come and I said

well I want to meet your communing officer. Well this commanding officer came and she was really beautiful and very friendly and she said not at first but eventually after discussion with other they let us in so we were unusual group to be in there on that particular day and time.

The other experience I had was in a roman catholic church in Beit Sahour were we were having a celebration of communion and suddenly there was some applause at the back of the church and we wondered what it was and it rippled through the church in the middle of a service, and it was the 'MUFTI'?? Of Jerusalem, the key person from there Muslim community coming into the church and standing at the front of the church and saying this is a house of god and everyone was just astonished and then he went on to say how we needed as Palestinians to work together for the future but I fear that many, many groups have been there and many delegations. I also went on a delegation with what then was the British council of churches - church leaders most of them hadn't been there before and I remember them saying at breakfast in Jerusalem the first day, we must try and be even handed and then we looked at the window and the Israeli army just fired tear gas into a girls' school playground for we could see no reason. And that canned the balance little bit but we went on to meet people and we went to Gaza and saw the awful conditions in Gaza and these were leaders of the URC church, Anglican bishop, Methodist leader of a church, I was very privileged to join them but it was not my first visit and I sense that if they really dug deep then they would see the Palestinian suffering. And when we got back, I was asked to present the report to the British council of churches assembly, I did that and had some flack and some real criticism from the Israeli people, the friends of Israel and people like that cos it was not biased but honest and therefore veered towards the Palestinian people who were suffering so that was a major thing all from that youth event that took me right through into the Palestinian situation and I still have contact with the people in Jerusalem.

Int: And what was it about YMCAs work in Palestine that really attracted you?

Ron: The two big YMCAs in Jerusalem, one of them had very clear interfaith work young people from the Arab, the Jewish and the Christian people and I thought that was very spending that they did this. The other YMCA in east Jerusalem did a lot of work with young people in Jerusalem but also in 'BEDSAHUR'?? Where they had a very good Centre for training, for training for post-traumatic stress, I don't mini it was called that then but the children who has seen awful things, the young people who had seen their families suffer and sometimes they are very disturbed and they did a lot of work with them. Also in Jericho they did a lot of training and there was a major Centre, I'm not sure if it's still going, but a major Centre that was training Palestinian people in car mechanics, in practical work, in architecture, in all the trades because many couldn't get work. So that was all a big impact on me.

Int: So taking it back to your involvement with YMCA Norfolk, you first got involved as diocesan youth officer youth worked with YMCA England as the Christian training officer, how did you find yourself back in this area, backing YMCA Norfolk again?

Ron: Oh well that goes round a long way.

Int: Well let's go!

Ron: When the work finished the YMCA in I think it was 1982 my role finished...

Int: Your role as the Christian training officer?

Ron: Yes, and then at the same time as I'd had that role full time work in the YMCA, because I needed accommodation I'd been to the bishop of St Alban's and it was Robert Runcie then who became arch bishop and they found a very small parish near Welling Garden City and said well if I would just look after that there was a house available so at weekend not only did I have some weekends away with training course with YMCA, I also had a small parish and whenever I could be there I was taking services on the Sunday, weddings and funerals and my work with the YMCA was fairly flexible I could work later or earlier and get back for these. On Saturdays unless I was at a training course or a bug meeting golf YMCA I was almost inevitable I had wedding r visiting and so I tried to keep always my link with the Anglican Church because I felt I was ordained to be a priest and I didn't want to lose that though I couldn't wish for a better career and life than working with young people in the YMCA and my contact there.

So when it finished, the job finished in 1992 I had a decision to make whether I Was going to continue with the Parish or not and I actually I trained as a school inspector for church schools and I did lots of different work some consultation work for the YMCA for example there was an interest or concern about Bangladeshi community in East London and widened what could be done by the YMCA in that area so I was commissioned to write a report and lots of visits to that part of the world and one or two jobs fir the YNMCA although I wasn't working for them and then after that I rested from the parish and went up to live in Buxton near Huntingdon, no YMCA contact there, but I kept in touch with the YMCA in Hertfordshire and I Was on the committee there for a long time and also Watford and St Albans and then my wife died while I was at Buxton and I had always decide to come back to Norfolk at some time and I'm a Norwich City supporter and I wanted to be back here so I decide to come back but at the same time I made contact with a friend of mine whose husband had died and although I was 80 something we got married three years ago and that was really special, both season ticket holders at Norwich City enjoying last year and suffering this year but it's still good fun!

Int: So what year were you ordained?

Ron: I was ordained in Ripon Cathedral in 1957

Int: So you were ordained prior to getting involved with YMCA?

Ron: Oh yes, yes. I was a curate in Leeds and in those days, I don't know if it's still the same but the raw young curate going into the housing estate which was fairly poor in Leeds we were always given the youth work to do, it was shock cos although we had been at university and theological college and had some experience of teaching and y youth work but no hands on but straight into youth work there which was pretty tough. But I think it was probably the best start you could wish for instead of being in a leafy suburb, the people were great. One of the young people said to me once that how much does thee earn and I said well about £315 a year and he said thou's in a dead end job!

Int: Look and see what's happened. So your life presidency with YMCA Norfolk, how did that come about?

Ron: Well they're very kind and generous because I left Norwich and went off to National Council and I don't know at what stage they decided to do that but it kept my link to Norfolk and no which and I was on the committee which appointed John Drake when he came here and then when he came here and he often says to me as soon as I came you left! But that was coincidental. The other thing I remember especially about YMCA in those

days was that we had the Centre at Dunford. Dunford was an absolutely beautiful place in Sussex and a lot of work on YMCA work had gone there over the years and Edward Robinson, a wonderful Baptist minister, a scholar and wrote books about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and translated German spoke German fluently, he was also involved with the YMCA and I admired him a lot and learnt a lot from him and he was especially concerned that Dunford should continue as a Centre for learning and ecumenical work s. SO Dunford was quite important intros days. I met a number of people there and we once did a Bible study for whole weekend published it. It wasn't a great success but we had a bishop from Finland who I met in the YMCA games in Sweden cos I was chaplain of the YMCA games in Sweden one year, and I met him and I decide we would try do a special approach to a bible study, interactive and get a stories and stories that matched in with the bible and publish it. Yes, that was a good week in itself irrespective of whether the book sold well or not. The other small publication which I was responsible for was small pamphlet which I was responsible for called Circles of Experience. Trying to look at the spiritual. Spirituality and how every experience in life can be a pint of moving in a spiritual direction not just special Christian events that if you reflect on them and work on them they can teach us something. And I was very involved for a number of years the British Council of churches youth unit. I was chair of the youth unit of BCC and we did a fair a bit of spirituality and young people.

Int: You mentioned the YMCA games? Tell us little bit about that and your involvement in the games.

Ron: Yes, I was really there as chaplain and leader of worship cos worship took place every day. The games were competitive but not over competitive, all games are competitive if they're any use!

Int: Did they take place on a regular basis, did people come from across the world?

Ron: No these were European YMCA games, most of the games are played there, it was a good event and again, I think from my point of view it was the people I met there. It's always been through my life at the YMCA different people I met and I just motioned a few minutes agog about The British Council of Churches and I I felt very strongly that the YMCA being an ecumenical movement and involved in a major conference in 1910 in Edinburgh which in some ways kicked of the ecumenical movement again. John Armott, one if the famous peel in YMCA was there, very involved, taking a key leadership role. I felt that the YMCA had lost its connection with the national churches and although it's called now Churches Together, it was then the British Council of Churches, I with my friend from Scotland both decided we both ought to be where possible at those meetings, at those assemblies every year. And I also was on the international committee and the youth committee so I spent perhaps not too much but a lot of time with the church leaders and the church people because I felt we needed to be at the Centre of it rather the on the periphery and for the churches to the see that YMCA was concerned about that side of things.

Int: From your time beginning to your time now, how do you see things have changed?

Ron: Well I'm full of adoration for what goes on in Norwich and in Norfolk I think it's become more professional and wider. Care for the mentally disturbed and at each point that there are more people coming gin who are professional in their own field not necessarily in youth work but in other aspects of the work that the YMCA are involved with. I don't know so much about the other YMCAs in England now but I know this one in Norwich and Norfolk have a vision of the Christian dimension and gets into practice through

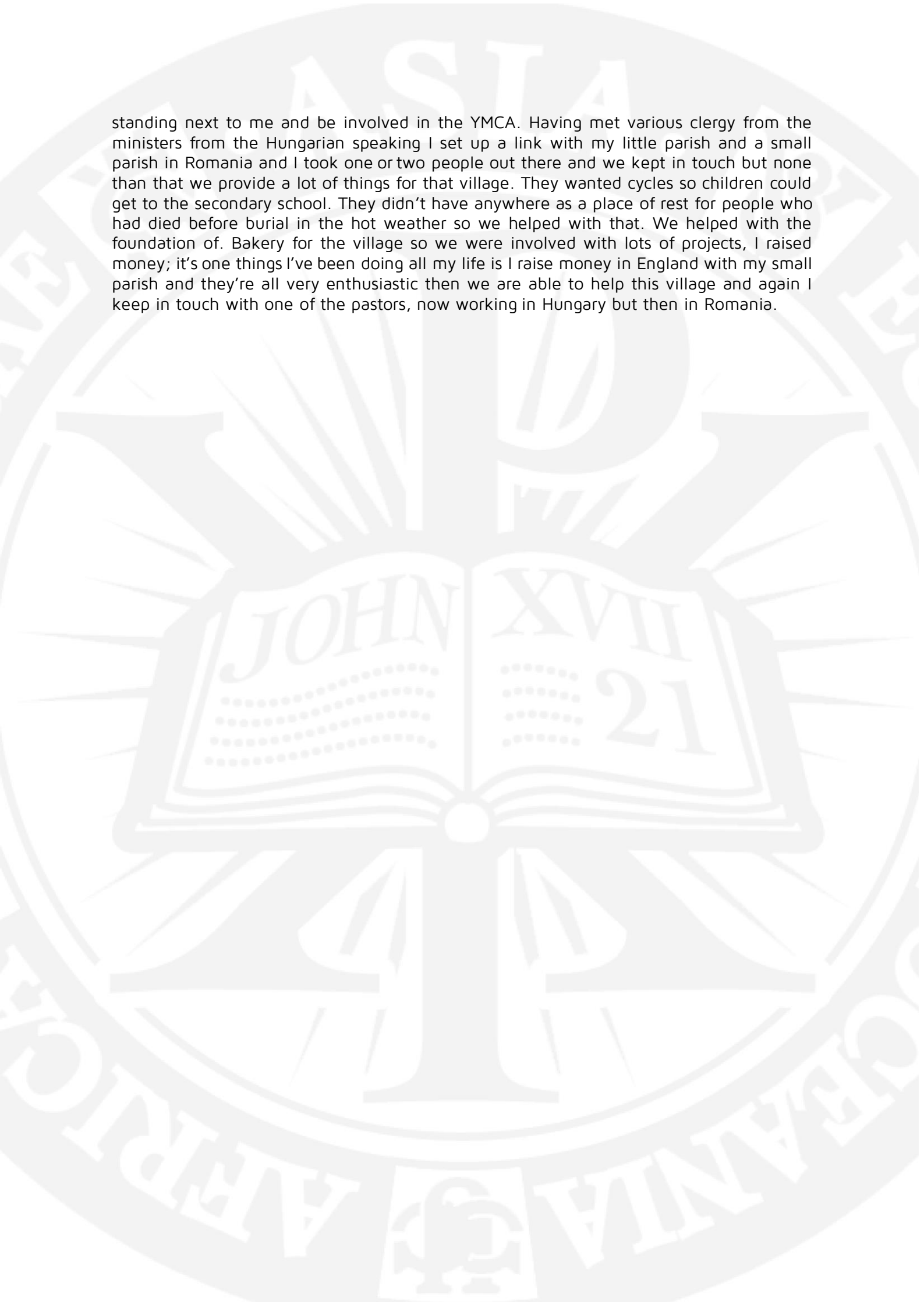
care and love and each year they have presentation it's an annual meeting that's very formal then a presentation by young people of how the YMCA changes their lives and it's a wonderful event I just think it's so good. It's not just a presentation by the professional people but by young people and sometimes they can hardly say what's happened to them, there's a big hall and lots of people there and their stories are sometimes awful but really wonderful the way the YMCA has helped them and encouraged them both in accommodation provided for them, in care in counselling, in finding work, in all the areas they were lacking; I just think it's a wonderful way of doing it and I think people hear about the YMCA work.

Int: What would be your hopes for YMCA going into the future?

Ron: Oh I'm not sure, I'm perhaps too old to tell them what I hope for just that this work continues. A work of caring and love for young people and in a very practical way because it's all very well talking about it and saying things but I think YMCA demonstrates both in this country and worldwide how its involved with the poor of the world and the disadvantaged and I keep in touch through the European YMCA to hear a little bit of what's going on because I haven't said when I finished with the YMCA nationally, after about 3 months, the European YMCA asked if I would be a consultant to Romania and so the revolution had taken place with Chocheskow etc. in 1989 and the YMCA had been not been in allowed in at all during communist time. And even where in difficulties before the communists came so there was desire to restart the YMCA in Romania. I mean I put this as a high priority in my experience because I went out 24 times to Romania generally for two or three weeks, I organised training courses nationally for young people to learn something about the YMCA but also about how to manage organisations because most people had no experience about democratic way about organising things and so sitting up magnet groups, setting up a group in a village or a city to start a YMCA was not easy.

There are some YMCA people who were at that stage very old who hold remember the YMCA originally. They had a big national Centre which took ages to get back from there government because legally it was not thought to be YMCA but eventually got it back and became a very good central place. So I visited from north to south and east to west YMCAs to get them started. Again, how successful I'm never sure but I know that's its going well now. The other interesting thing is that there were two YMCAs in Romania, there was one the Romanian YMCA and there was the Hungarian speaking YMCA because in 1917 part of Hungary had been taken over by Romania and so there was no meeting between them and the Hungarian people generally in Romania felt very second class and perhaps one of the things I was reasonably successful at was bringing the Hungarian speaking YMCA and the Romanian YMCA together and meeting together and sharing things together whether its continued I'm not sure bias they were very different approaches, different backgrounds, different links with the churches. The Romanian was orthodox and the Hungarian was a reformed church so there was that problem last well. One of the things in Romania was that the YMCA was under some suspicion of being linked with masonic things because of the triangle and there were some awful leaflets I found in churches about the YMCA so I did have some meetings with the Archbishop if the orthodox church about this and I think in the end they recognised that we were a Christian organisation. No links with masonic. I remember once there was a service one going on and the archbishop of Romania looked across at me and invited me share in the breaking of the bread, in communion which I was very moved by.

I was very fortunate in having a superb translator fir my work in Romania and we've kept in touch since. She now lives in Paris and we've met together since then. Susanna was brilliant she could interpret an orthodox sermon for 20 minutes instantaneously, just



standing next to me and be involved in the YMCA. Having met various clergy from the ministers from the Hungarian speaking I set up a link with my little parish and a small parish in Romania and I took one or two people out there and we kept in touch but none than that we provide a lot of things for that village. They wanted cycles so children could get to the secondary school. They didn't have anywhere as a place of rest for people who had died before burial in the hot weather so we helped with that. We helped with the foundation of. Bakery for the village so we were involved with lots of projects, I raised money; it's one things I've been doing all my life is I raise money in England with my small parish and they're all very enthusiastic then we are able to help this village and again I keep in touch with one of the pastors, now working in Hungary but then in Romania.