
BRIDGES



WORLD FELLOWSHIP
OF YMCA RETIREES (WFYR)

August 2025

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KOHEI YAMADA
FROM THE CHAIR



The biggest item on our approaching agenda is the WFYR General Meeting held every four years at the same time and venue as the World Council of YMCAs.

As members attend this meeting we can become more aware of what is going on within the Y and how we can be effective as WFYR. This big event will be held July 18-24, 2026 in Toronto, Canada. July 18 (which may be arrival day for most of us) will be the day of the World Cup Final Match held in Toronto. We will enjoy our first night together celebrating with

YMCA friends.

As this is the official gathering of retirees from 25 or more countries, WFYR is expecting 60-70 participants from around the world. We encourage retirees to attend and enjoy our fellowship as well as feel the World YMCA spirit, combined with leaders' energy and that of youth from more than 100 countries. We have been fundraising, planning our meetings, and shifting our leadership to install our next leaders at this global fellowship.

During our 6 days in Toronto, we would like to think about our capacities for the YMCA Retirees in some countries experiencing grave difficulties. Early Bird Registrations starts this month, one year ahead of this event. Details on the World Council event are available [HERE](#).

I would like to highlight our *Virtual Gatherings* which were held on May 21 and June 18. It is impossible to find a comfortable time for everyone to attend in their time zone. Virtual gatherings twice a year began in 2023. We have shared what is going on in the YMCAs in Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia Pacific, and the Middle East. We have four YMCAs in the Middle East: Egypt, Lebanon, East Jerusalem and the Jerusalem International YMCA.

Unfortunately, they have been facing many political issues and their countries are in confrontation in the area. We realize it is difficult for the YMCAs to provide care for members facing daily difficulties, loss of property, and concern for safety. We felt their strong sense of mission as the YMCA within each country strives to serve their members.

Our next Virtual Gathering will be held on Wednesday October 15, 2025. The speaker will be Peter Dinsdale, CEO of YMCA Canada, who will speak about the coming World Council as the host YMCA. If you are interested in knowing more about the World YMCA movements, as well as WFYR, please join us.

LEN AND JOYCE WILSON
FROM THE EDITORS

Our Chairman Kohei Yamada emphasizes the importance of our representatives from all our WFYR countries to attend the World Alliance gathering in Toronto, less than a year away.

Of interest in this edition of *Bridges* is former WFYR chair Don Anderson's sharing of memories and photos of the very first combined WFYR-World Alliance conference in 2012 in Hong Kong.



Readers of this edition will learn more about the sport of CROPOGO.

Please take the time to watch recent *Virtual Gatherings*, mentioned by Kohei, sponsored by WFYR and focusing on the work of the Jerusalem International YMCA as well as interviews with other YMCAs in the Middle East.

Details are provided by Franco Savoia and Bonnie Mairs along with an inspirational letter from the current director of the YMCA in Jerusalem published in *Tielines*, the Canadian YMCA Alumni newsletter .

Carlos Sanvee, Secretary General of the World Alliance, provides a timely perspective on the current use of the Village People 1970's anthem *YMCA* being associated with political causes.

WFYR is working on its Global Retirement Initiative (GRI) to establish meaningful YMCA retirement in areas of the world lacking designated funding.

Retirees in the USA continue to build homes and community buildings on the Cheyenne Sioux Indian Reservation, South Dakota. USA retirees are also working with stranded youth in Tijuana, Mexico.

President's Ponderings from Graham Clarke, in Y's Retired of the UK, provides his reflections after reading an autobiography of Alexi Navalny, an inspiration for those living and working in difficult and dangerous areas of our world.

HELP WANTED: After nearly twenty years learning and reporting on the activities of WFYR friends around the world, your editors will pass the torch of *Bridges* to a new and dedicated individual or team that will provide leadership for this meaningful and rewarding position. It has been a wonderful experience and has provided us with new friends all over the world. We will continue to assist the new leadership team, however and whenever, to keep the WFYR connections available. Franco Savoia is working with us to ensure a smooth transition.



REV. GRAHAM CLARKE Y'S RETIRED UK A '*PATRIOT*' AMONG MY CHRISTMAS BOOKS

Amongst my Christmas books last year was *Patriot*, the autobiography of Alexi Navalny, the Russian lawyer, opposition politician and anti-corruption campaigner.

In August 2020 during a flight from Tomsk to Moscow, he became ill and was taken to a hospital after an emergency landing in Omsk, having been poisoned. He was put in a coma and evacuated to a hospital in Berlin where he spent a month recovering before returning to Russia to continue his campaigning and political work opposing President Putin and the United Russia Party.



He was to eventually die in 2024 in disputed circumstances while serving a 19-year prison sentence at the age of 47. In his lifetime he was recognized by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience and was awarded the Sakharov Prize for his work on human rights.

Despite what may seem a heavy subject, the book is an entertaining read with a good deal of self-deprecating humor in the way in which Navalny describes the sometimes-absurd levels that the authorities went to in order to manufacture reasons to arrest and imprison him, prevent him from standing for election and undermine the popular Anti-Corruption Movement that he founded.

A number of things have struck me about Navalny's story. One was his physical resilience in the face of imprisonment and physical attacks. Another has been the commitment of his wife Yulia in her support for him and another is the way in which, despite the strength and power of a huge state such as Russia working against him, he never gave up, he never stepped back on working for what he believed to be right.

He will of course never see if his campaigning will bear fruit. Russian Society has not yet changed and does not appear to be changing at present, yet the movement that he started continues.

Although for many of us, our days of being impassioned workers for peace and justice are somewhat limited, people like Alexi Navalny deserve our support not just as examples of the strength of the human spirit but because

they remind us of the importance of standing firm about what we believe no matter the size of the odds against us.

As you read this, there are YMCA colleagues around the world standing firm for what they believe and working to support and encourage young people to develop their skills and understanding to make the world a better, fairer place. They may not be household names but they are just as vital as those who are famous and are worthy of our encouragement, support and prayers.

*"Blessed are the peace makers for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of God" (Matthew 5: 9-10)*



DON ANDERSON

A SHORT HISTORY OF WFYR CONFERENCES



Prior to 2010 WFYR gatherings were held at the invitation of and in conjunction with gatherings of the North American Fellowship of YMCA Retirees.

Starting in 2008, WFYR leadership began working with Bart Shaha, Secretary General of the YMCA World Alliance to have spaces reserved for WFYR members at the 2010

World Council.

Our efforts were successful and 34 WFYR members were present at the 2010 World Council held in Hong Kong. There were 5 from Africa, 13 from Asia, 2 from Europe, 10 from North America and 4 from Latin America. The successful meeting made YMCA retirees visible and a recognized part of the worldwide YMCA movement for the first time.

Since then, 60 WFYR members gathered at the 2014 World Council in Estes Park (USA), 63 in 2018 at the World Council in Chiangmai (Thailand) and 60 in 2022 at the Aarhus (Denmark) World Council.

The message in all this is that the YMCA is a Christian movement and you do not cease to be part of that when you retire from your job.



'FROM VISION TO IMPACT'
COUNTDOWN TO WORLD COUNCIL 2026

“Politically, economically, socially, technologically, environmentally ... the world is changing before our eyes. It is transforming, and so in turn must the YMCA. The 2026 YMCA World Council theme of *Transform* invites us to understand the urgency of adapting, evolving, and growing to meet the profound challenges our world faces,” says World YMCA Secretary General Carlos Sanvee.

“Transformation is for all levels of the YMCA: it’s for those who lead and those who deliver our daily work; it’s for local YMCAs and the communities they serve; it’s for National Movements and regional Area Alliances; it’s for our global presence and operations,” he adds. “Without transformation, we risk stagnation or irrelevance. With transformation, we adapt to challenges and become stronger.”

That’s why the World Council is the premier event in the global YMCA calendar: it is governance, strategy, testimony, partnership, learning, skills-building and our shared YMCA Vision 2030 journey all rolled into one ... and all wrapped up with fun and warmth.

We’re aiming to gather over 1,000 YMCA people from National Movements and Local Associations all over the world, as well as the global partners who share our YMCA vision of a just, sustainable, equitable and inclusive world.

‘Early Bird’ registration is open. Send an email to [Jerry Prado Shaw](#) and he’ll take it from there.





CARLOS SANTEE THE YMCA ANTHEM AND US



A number of YMCAs around the world have been asking me about the use of the Village People's 1970's anthem "YMCA" at big political events, concerned that our name is being associated with political causes.

The YMCA itself of course has no rights over the song. We have nothing to do with who uses it and why, though millions of people may associate us with it. Across over 100 countries and in over 10,000 communities worldwide, we are not a political organization,

but our values will always be seen as 'small-p' political.

The song itself is often seen as a celebration of diversity, unity, and joy, which may be why people choose to use it. Many others have used and enjoyed the song, whether consciously embracing its values or not.

But the YMCA is much more than a song, despite all the associations, of any description, with that great disco tune.

Our YMCA vision is a world where every person lives in harmony with self, with society, and with creation.

Our YMCA mission is to empower young people and communities worldwide to build a just, sustainable, equitable, and inclusive world, where every person can thrive in body, mind, and spirit.

We are not for any political leader anywhere. To take the words of another leader, Mahatma Gandhi, we are for empowering young people and communities to lead the change they want to see.

We pray for and we work for that better world.

zoom BONNIE MAIRS WFYR'S WORLDWIDE VIRTUAL CONNECTION

How do YMCA retirees keep in touch with the wider Y world? Many of us receive *Bridges*, WFYR's newsletter. Some are able to attend area and world level retiree conferences.

Two years ago, Franco Savoia of Canada had a new idea. He suggested WFYR virtual gatherings, using Zoom. The WFYR leadership team supported the idea, and three of us volunteered to work with Franco.



Under his leadership and with the help of our President, Kohei Yamada, we produced four virtual gatherings focusing on different YMCA Area offices: Europe; Africa; Asia; Latin American and Caribbean. This spring we did two more on YMCAs in the Middle East: in May, the Ys of East Jerusalem, Egypt and Lebanon and in June, the Jerusalem International YMCA. If you missed them, you can find the recordings following this article.

The next virtual gathering will be on Oct. 15. We will learn about Toronto, the site of the July 2026 YMCA World Council meeting and our WFYR event. This virtual gathering will allow you to express your ideas for our meeting.

What have we learned in preparing these programs?

YMCAs have wonderful and inspiring stories to share. We have a lot to learn from one another. Some Ys continue to serve their communities under very difficult circumstances including lack of resources and political challenges. Their stories touched my heart.

Time zones are a problem. It is impossible to find a time that works well for everyone. 3 p.m. in Jerusalem, for example, is 5 a.m. in Calgary. We have tried to shift the presentation times to suit as many people as possible. ^[L]_[SEP]

Translation is helpful but not perfect. The Canadian YMCA financed an A.I. translation system that allows most retirees to follow the speaker in their own language by reading the translation on the screen.

Our Open Mike is popular. After the official program ends, people have enjoyed staying on to chat and share with others.

Evaluations are important. We need your opinions and suggestions as we think ahead to the next virtual gatherings.

Please reply to the evaluation email sent to all viewers. It is fun to work together on Zoom. When I log on in New York City for a planning meeting, it is a pleasure to see Franco Savoia/Canada, Guenter Ozdyk/Germany, Alicia Sanjurjo/Argentina and Kohei Yamada /Japan. We have become Zoom friends. We hope to see you on the next virtual gathering.

Below is a listing of the WFYR Zoom meetings held so far. Each is recorded and you may access it by clicking on the link provided and filling in the passcode, also provided. One more virtual gathering is planned prior to the Toronto World Alliance Conference.

June 18, 2025: Jerusalem International YMCA Passcode: qDC.5sAX [LINK](#)

May 21, 2025: YMCAs: East Jerusalem, Egypt, Lebanon.
Passcode: F@=9RrXw ^[L]_[SEP] [LINK](#)

October 23, 2024: World Alliance Update. Passcode:
Passcode: ^W9KFzGB [LINK](#)

May 29, 2024: Africa Alliance of YMCAs. Passcode:
D5dKi@h& [LINK](#)



The following letter from Fadi Suidan, Director General of the Jerusalem International YMCA (JIY), was published in the June issue of Tielines, the Canadian YMCA Alumni newsletter.



Today marks a sobering milestone – 600 days since the war in Gaza began. It is impossible not to reflect on the paradox of time, history, and the shifting sands of conflict and peace in our region.

In June 1967, the world watched as the “Six Day War” transformed the map of the Middle East. In less than a week, Israel had tripled its territory. The war's swiftness was breathtaking. The implications were enduring.

Now, 600 days into a starkly different war, we are witness not to a quick, defining battle, but to a prolonged and agonizing conflict. Thousands have perished. Entire communities lie in ruins. Pain and trauma are etched into the daily lives of millions, both Israeli and Palestinian.

Unlike the Six Day War, which changed borders, this war is changing the very fabric of our humanity. In 1967, even in the aftermath of war, the Jerusalem International YMCA worked with determination and hope to fulfill its founding mission: to be a place of peace, reconciliation and shared dignity for all people. Amidst rising nationalism and religious polarization, the YMCA remained a house open to Christians, Jews, Muslims and all who sought a better way. Programs for youth, music, sports, and intercultural dialogue became our instruments of healing and unity. That mission is more critical now than ever.

Over these 600 painful days, the Jerusalem International YMCA has not stopped working. We have expanded our educational programs for children from both sides of the divide. We have hosted interfaith prayers, refugee support programs and trauma relief initiatives. We have created spaces, literal and symbolic, where Arabs and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians, can meet not as enemies but as neighbors and human beings.

And yes, it is hard. Peace work is never swift. It does not capture headlines. But it is sacred work. It is the slow, daily defiance of hatred. It is a commitment to the belief that even amidst war, we can build peace. Today, as we mark 600 days of a war that continues to erase lives, we invite you, our friends across the globe, to stand with us. Support our work, share our story and never forget that even in the darkest of times, peace is still possible.

Let us be the place where swords are turned into plowshares, again and again, until the work is done.

Photo: Fadi Saudan, CEO, Jerusalem International YMCA

WE ASKED; YOU ANSWERED

Many of our readers have very interesting experiences or observations. Here are just a few. We invite our readers to continue to send us news and photos from your retirees group, personal, as well as local Y news and photos.



YMCA retiree from Germany visits the President of the International Olympic Committee

Manfred Wille from the YMCA/CVJM Wolfsburg was invited to meet with Dr. Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee in March at IOC

headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland. Wille had previously met Dr. Bach as President of the German Olympic Sports Confederation. "He invited me because of my social sports commitment," says Wille.

During the visit he presented Dr. Bach with a colorful picture of an elephant and a lion playing volleyball peacefully and harmoniously. Dr. Bach thanked the YMCA Wolfsburg for its outstanding commitment to the values of Olympic sport.

The visit included a discussion of such topics as integrative and inclusive sport, sport in the penal system, social and competitive sport and volunteering.

"My heart beats for the Olympics," says Wille a sports science graduate. In addition to spending weeks watching the games in South Korea and in Greece, he has published articles in the magazine *Olympische Jugend*.



100 Years of CROPOGO: A Sports Game Invented in the YMCA

Alicia Sanjurjo explains that CROPOGO is a name made up of a combination of three sports: CRO for Croquet, PO for Polo, and GO for Golf. It was invented in 1924 by Jess T. Hopkins at the YMCA International Camp in Piriapolis, Uruguay, where it was played for the first time.

The Piriapolis YMCA Camp no longer exists, but from 1929 until now CROPOGO is played all year round in Ymcapolis, the Argentina YMCA Tourist Center and Camp, located in Sierra de la Ventana, 350 miles south from Buenos Aires.

The game elements are a polo ball and a stick, similar to a golf club with two ends, one shaped in a kind of a spoon and other like a croquet mallet. One end of the stick allows you to hit the ball, as in croquet. The other, which ends in a kind of spoon, allows you to lift the ball to throw it longer distances.

The playing field is an uneven ground with a 9 or 18 hole layout, with many difficulties such as rocks, bushes, grasslands and trees. The objective is to get the ball into the holes and complete the course in the fewest possible strokes with a maximum of 10 strokes per hole. It is easy to learn for children, youth and adults and first-time players soon become enthusiasts.

There are two championships for youth and adults each year, the Masters in January and the CROPOGO Tournament in May. Sixty enthusiasts attended the 2025 event.

The Argentina YMCA named a Committee to celebrate the anniversary of the creation of CROPOGO, which will also be responsible for promoting the game. Anibal Pastorella and Daniel La Moglie, members of Latin American WFYR, serve on this Committee. Photo below is of the participants in the 2025 CROPOGO tournament.





A Tribute to a significant YMCA Friendship Across National Lines

Guenter Ozdyk sent this photo of his wife Margret with Clifford Roberts taken during a long collaboration between the German CVJM Westbund and the YMCA in Sierra Leone.

Clifford became a dear friend. He often hosted and arranged exchanges that were memorable experiences for both groups, and as the political situation in Sierra Leone escalated, he enabled both groups to stay in contact. He assisted support for YMCA partners as well as refugees in camps in Guinea. Dozens of 20-foot containers of relief supplies were shipped to Sierra Leone from Guenter's home town Ludenscheid.

Your editors were moved by Guenter's tribute to the life and service of this unique friend of the YMCA.

We encourage readers of *Bridges* to submit personal examples of retirees and their friends engaged in meaningful YMCA service in troubled or war torn areas of our world.



NATIONAL PROJECT NEARS COMPLETION; ISC HEADS BACK TO TIJUANA



YMCA Alumni USA President Phill Morgan reports the first phase of our YMCA Alumni National Service Project is nearing completion. The Ribbon-Cutting/Celebration is set for Sept. 19- 21 in Dupree, So. Dakota. Four tiny homes have been built by our members, families, and friends in the YMCA of the Seven Council Fires Morning Star Village. The National Service Project began six years ago under the leadership of Lou Falk, Chair. George Painter is the

Construction Management Chair.

Phase 2 --building a twig" (small Y branch in the small, outlying community of La Plant, SD) -- is planned for 2026. La Plant is located between the YMCA's headquarters in Dupree, on the west side of the Cheyenne Sioux Indian Reservation, and YMCA Camp Marrowbone, on the eastern end.



Do you have a YMCA youth sports background? Do you know how to initiate a parent/tot gym or swimming program? Do you excel at marketing and promotion? Have you had experience repairing and maintaining treadmills, ellipticals, spinning bicycles or other fitness equipment? Can you paint walls?

These are just some of the volunteer opportunities that will be available when a new team heads to the YMCA Sports Club in Tijuana, Mexico Sept. 29 through Oct. 6, 2025, hosted by the YMCA Alumni International Service Corps (ISC). YMCA Mexico provides translators for the Tijuana visit.

A group of YMCA Alumni members made their first trip to Tijuana last fall to meet and get to know the children in the Y's migrant center, deliver many donations and do some painting and repairs at two Y locations.

That trip, which also involved leadership from the San Diego County YMCA, led to the development of the first bi-national YMCA collaboration. While the details of the collaboration are being established, much urgent work is needed to support the considerably understaffed YMCA.

Volunteers are reimbursed for their airfare, lodging and non-provided meals. They will stay in a nearby hotel that will be arranged by ISC. Transportation will be provided to the group for scheduled work time each day. However, there will also be free time to explore Tijuana as a group or individually.

Depending on the type of assignment, some team members will be actively working on repairs or improvements, while others may be working in an office with staff to develop new programs or provide training.

Photo: Children in YMCA programs in Tijuana, Mexico



GLOBAL RETIREMENT INITIATIVE EMPOWERING LEADERS IN SIERRA LEONE

Pious Mannah, a committed staff member of YMCA Sierra Leone and a beneficiary of the Global Retirement Initiative (GRI), is leading transformative work in communities across the country.

As manager of a Disaster Risk Reduction project, Pious works directly with schools and local communities to promote climate change education and action. He has established 20 climate change school clubs where pupils are trained on climate science, environmental stewardship, and practical climate solutions.

These young leaders are now initiating school and community-based projects such as tree planting, waste management, and environmental awareness campaigns. Pious is also guiding the development of a climate change primer to be used in schools nationwide—an innovative tool designed to equip pupils with local context and actionable knowledge.

While he continues to make a lasting impact, the support from the GRI gives him confidence that his own future is secure, and that his years of service to the YMCA will be honored.



INDIA YMCA RETIREES CELEBRATING 180 YEARS OF YMCA SERVICE

The retirees, spouses and personal attendees pictured above were part of a three- day National Council of YMCAs of India conference with the theme of “YMCA 180 years – *Joining the Celebration of its Great Legacy.*”

The retirees were honored for their long, dedicated and productive years of service. Retirees were asked for their opinions and input during active discussions on the theme... *Challenges of the Indian YMCA Movement in the present-day context.*

The valedictory message was delivered by WFYR’s good friend T. Thomas. Thanks to Presiden Stanley Karkada and Secretary/Treasurer John Varughese for providing the official report and pictures of the meeting.

WFYR readers always enjoy news forthcoming from India’s “*Vintage Voice*” and look forward to the next edition and news of this year’s 28th annual conference.



[WFYR Leaders](#)

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