

THE GUILD OF ST. RICHARD

It was a blessing to grow up in Rhodesia. We enjoyed first-world standards, and a freedom only found in countries where wilderness plays a central role. The beautiful, diverse scenery and wildlife made it a special place. And those of us who travelled abroad soon learnt to appreciate Rhodesia's wonderful climate. Warm sunny days balanced cold winter nights, and comfortable summer nights compensated for hot summer days.

I grew up in Bulawayo. It may have lacked a few big-city attractions, but life wasn't dull. Forms three and four were a memorable period for me. A popular guy in our crowd served as an altar boy at St. John's Cathedral on the corner of Rhodes Street and Sixth Avenue. Somebody, perhaps even he, suggested a church youth club might attract young people to join the congregation. He had a sizeable group of friends, so with the youth club's success assured, he became its first president.

Peter and Jean, my cousins, were his close friends, and among the first to join. A week or two later, they suggested I join them. I hesitated because I imagined the church youth club would involve Bible study and religious discussion. My cousins persuaded me it was nothing like that, and it would be fun. So, I risked it.

During the first couple of club evenings, we met other young people and chatted about common interests. The youth club met every Friday night in the church hall and proved an ideal start to the weekend. Many parties and other social events had their origins there.

Just as the youth club hooked us, the priest in charge told us we'd need to be confirmed to maintain membership. Along with me, two or three others attended religious instruction at the cathedral after school to prepare for our confirmation. No one appeared to enforce the policy, and I heard nothing more about it. Still, the parties were worth it.

Club membership expanded until it reached a natural fit for the size of the church hall. The members comprised a diverse group of young people, ranging from fifteen to eighteen years of age. The inter-denominational nature of the youth club's membership proved to be the first flaw in the church's plan to attract young people. Members invited their friends to join, irrespective of their religious leanings. A few members of other denominations attended the evenings in secret, hoping their parents wouldn't discover where they went each Friday night.

Irrespective of the evening's planned activities, they almost all transitioned into dances. In those days, boys also danced. The boys outnumbered the girls, so those not keen on dancing faced limited choices. They could congregate in the kitchen for a cup of tea and listen to budding young raconteurs relate the stories of their action-packed week. Or they might gather outside on the pavement for a quick smoke. Alternatively, they could drift back into the hall and watch the dancing.

I joined at the start of Form Three, which made me one of the youngest regular male attendees at the youth club. Most of the girls around my age flitted around the older boys, particularly the sixth formers. Besides, I was shy, and not yet in my dancing phase. But it wasn't all bad news for the wallflowers. Those were the days of rock and roll and flared skirts. The girls looked like colourful spinning tops on the dance floor, and we knew which ones possessed, er... legs to die for!

One year, the popular priest who ran the youth club, and a lady chaperone, took a group of us away for two nights over the Rhodes and Founders long weekend. The bush campsite comprised two large and three small rondavels, and an open-sided kitchen and dining area. The girls occupied one large rondavel, and the boys, the other. Our priest and the lady chaperone each occupied one of the small rondavels.

Day one, dinner was a braai under the clear Rhodesian night sky, spangled with a million stars. The campfire crackled and spat as we sat around it, chatting and drinking tea and coffee. Soon, a chill breeze arrived, and the boys, with most of the girls, retired to the boys' rondavel.

By this stage of the youth club's existence, its average membership had aged a year or two and included members working in their first jobs. Our popular priest must have had second thoughts about running such a camp.

With almost double the numbers, the boy's rondavel became crowded. We all lay on our mats or sleeping bags in a daisy formation, with our heads toward the wall and our feet pointing into the middle.

I was one of the youngest males and still shy. As I lay there, listening to the chatter across the room, I noticed *churchy* stuff going on nearby. A few of those good Christian folk were following the biblical instruction to *love thy neighbour*. Outside, it was dark and cold. Inside, it was warm and even darker.

The party broke up in the early hours, and the beautiful, sunny winter morning arrived, with everyone a little weary. Our priest must have spent the evening planning the day's activities. A long morning ramble followed by an afternoon hike up a large, steep hill did its job. A late first night together with the day's tiring activities took its toll. The second night's socialising was significantly shorter than the first. After that camp, our understanding priest became even more popular.

The youth club's future looked promising, but then the church transferred our priest to another parish. They appointed a 'new broom' to replace him, and the changes were immediate and devastating.

First, the new priest introduced a group of younger members to the youth club. The existing members did not react well. 'But they're just babies,' we all said. They looked like first formers. Even worse, they looked like good kids—earnest, wide-eyed, scholarly types—nothing like the sporty, fun-loving existing members. They just didn't fit with fourth and sixth formers, and the club's growing number of working members.

A rule change for membership of the youth club made regular church attendance a requirement. Few of the existing members qualified. In two evenings, with the new priest in charge, the membership evaporated. The new broom had indeed swept clean. The church youth club soon closed, with almost no new young parishioners gained over its carefree existence.

As my year in Form Four ended, so did the Guild of St. Richard. Soon afterwards, I advanced to the Lower Sixth Form and learnt how to dance. But it was too late for those Friday night dance parties I enjoyed from the sidelines.