

Some YMCAs seek to reclaim 'C' in the name: The Y's Christian heritage

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The wooden box, not quite big enough to hold a pair of shoes, sits on the reception desk, just inside the Sherwood, Oregon, YMCA. Once a day, Roger Button empties the box, finds a quiet place to sit and prays over the slips of paper he finds inside. He prays for someone's son struggling with drug addiction; for a friend who needs a job; for more blue, figure-8 rubber exercise bands. "Sometimes people mistake the prayer box for a suggestion box," Button shrugged, unbothered.

As the first ordained chaplain to serve a single branch of the Portland-based YMCA of Columbia-Willamette, Button is one of the people gradually trying to replant the Christian values at the heart of the YMCA—and, in this case, in the Pacific Northwest, where church affiliation is relatively low.

There are 2,686 YMCAs in the U.S. They operate autonomously, interpreting their common charter according to the needs of their communities, said Mamie Moore, a spokeswoman for the YMCA's national office in Chicago. No one keeps track of how many Ys are reclaiming their Christian heritage, she said.

A conference last October in Colorado for YMCA chaplains drew about 90 people from 40 Ys around the country.

The regional Y in Oregon is reminding people who see it as a good place to work out or find dependable child care that the "C" in Young Men's Christian Association still means broad Christian values inspired by Jesus' life.

"My role here is to minister to the staff and members who call the Sherwood YMCA their home," Button said. "I feel blessed to be able to be here and be a listening ear."

Many of the people he listens to aren't churchgoers, he said, but again, that does not bother him. He describes himself as a "Metheran" or a "Lutherist," the child of Christian parents from two denominations who didn't go to church very often. As an

adult, Button shifted from the Church of Christ, in which he was ordained, toward the Quakers. “I think of myself as pan-denominational,” he said.

Another official convinced that the organization has a significant spiritual role to play is Bob Hall, president and chief executive officer of the five-county regional YMCA around Portland. “There are a lot of hurting people in the world,” Hall said, citing economic troubles, personal trials and a longing for community and spirituality, if not religion.

“We’re not a church. We’re not a denomination. We’re not an army,” he said, referring to the Salvation Army, which is, in fact, a church.

“We’re not in the business to replace churches, but many people who step inside a YMCA may never set foot in a church,” he said. “Our mission, our purpose, our reason why is to teach, train, equip and see people taking responsibility for their own physical, mental and spiritual well-being. We believe in the whole person.”

In his effort to “illuminate the C” in the Young Men’s Christian Association, Hall reactivated the chaplaincy—there hadn’t been one for decades—hiring ordained minister Bob Reichen as vice president for mission advancement. Reichen ministers to staff, volunteers and members across a five-county region.

“We were founded on Christian ideals: love, respect, honesty, responsibility and service,” Hall said. Stated so simply, they describe any moral person, but he insists that they are inspired by the life of Jesus and foundational for the YMCA.

The YMCA was founded in Britain in 1844, at a time when the Industrial Revolution drew young men to London for work. George Williams and a group of businessmen wanted to offer a Christian alternative to the sordid street life. The first YMCA offered beds, Bible studies and wholesome activities. By 1854, there were 397 YMCAs across seven countries, claiming 30,369 members.

Since the Portland YMCA opened in 1868, attention to its core values has fluctuated, but the time is right to reclaim them, Hall said. The local YMCA served 86,000 individuals with early childhood centers, before- and after-school programs, youth sports and teen development programs, three health and fitness centers, and a camp.

“These are all tools for building character,” Hall said of the facilities and programs. A person can build muscles or strength at any fitness club. But at the Y, “we offer an

opportunity to exercise, challenge your mind and encourage your spiritual life.” –
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