



**A Brief History of  
the Mission of the  
YMCA**

## **The History of the YMCA's Mission**

A great place to start when getting involved with any organization or corporation is to find out why the organization was begun. This is particularly true in regards to service and ministry organizations because they are born out of a sense of meeting peoples' needs. In this area of meeting needs, the YMCA has a rich history and a clear sense of purpose.

### How the YMCA was founded

Sir George Williams was born in a farmhouse in southern England in 1821. He was brought up in the Church of England. However, when young George arrived in the city to become an assistant drapers apprentice, he found his faith lacking. He managed to find a new young workers who, by their example, encouraged him to give his own life more completely to Jesus Christ. On June 4, 1844, twelve men, led by George Williams, founded the Young Men's Christian Association, and thus the YMCA was born.

### The original Mission Statement

“The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) seeks to unite those young men, who regarding Jesus Christ as their God and Savior, according to the Holy Scriptures, desire to be His disciples in their faith and in their life, and to associate their efforts for the extension of His Kingdom amongst young men.

It was also decreed at this time that difference of opinion on other matters, however important, should not interfere.

### How the YMCA came to the United States

Around 1850, Thomas Sullivan of Boston was organizing groups to pass out pamphlets that explained the message of God's love in Jesus Christ. From his journal in 1851 we read this,

*“In October of 1851, I read this newspaper account of this new organization in London that had been formed for young men who had pledged their lives to Jesus Christ and needed a wholesome alternative to life on the street. I thought this*

*would fit my young men just fine. So I traveled to London to visit the YMCA, and upon my return summoned together other concerned Christian leaders to consider establishing a YMCA in order that these young men be nurtured in their Christian faith. We agreed to start the first YMCA in the United States.”*

By 1855, there were 24 YMCAs across the United States from New York to San Francisco and from New Orleans to Detroit and Washington DC. The first national meeting was held in New York, forming a voluntary association of YMCA's in the U.S. and Canada.

None of these YMCAs had buildings at the time - they were simply organized groups that reached out and disciplined young men. It was not until 1859 that the first YMCA building was built in Baltimore, Maryland.

#### How the Y has always tried to reach out to specific needs

Each local organization tailored the programs to the needs of the communities it served.

- To soldiers in the Civil War, they ministered near the lines, in camps, hospitals and prisons.
- To miners in Pennsylvania
- To lumberjacks in Wisconsin
- To railroad workers and passengers in train stations
- To soldiers in WWI and WWII, they provided physical, emotional and spiritual care
- To High Risk kids, they developed a National mini-bike program.

#### How strong leadership helped continue the Mission into the mid 1900s

John Mott was one of the most effective National Presidents of the YMCA and oversaw the YMCA-USA during the early to mid 1900s. His leadership role began in the U.S. in 1915 and continued both in the U.S. and internationally through the mid 1940s. He was such a Christian statesman for the YMCA that he was asked to serve as the Secretary of State for a U.S. President. He declined the position saying, "I feel like I could do more good through the YMCA." His work through the YMCA eventually led him to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Through John Mott's vision for reaching out to people with the love and message of Jesus Christ, the YMCA was greatly strengthened. Much of the international expansion of the YMCA occurred as a result of his vision as President of the YMCA-USA. Here are his thoughts on how to keep the YMCA a vital organization.

*“ If the Young Men's Christian Association is to increase its spiritual vitality and fruitfulness, it must maintain at all costs its distinctively Christian, pronouncedly evangelistic, and aggressively missionary character. This is tantamount to saying that it must preserve its clean Christian aim, its unshakable Christian foundation, and its genuinely Christian control; that it must hold in proper prominence its Christian program and be animated by a genuinely Christian spirit.*

*The Association must steadfastly resist the danger of becoming a mere human institution - in a general sense religious but not emphatically, pervasively, and contagiously Christian. This essential must never be compromised, obscured, or abandoned for the sake of any plausible outward success or worldly advantage for such a course would mark the beginning of the end. Whatever an Association lacks world-conquering power, it is because it has to some extent been conquered by the world.”*

#### Original Mission re-affirmed over 100 years later

*“The Paris Basis expresses that Christ is the center of the Movement, which is conceived as a worldwide fellowship uniting Christians of all confessions. It is consistent with an open membership policy involving people irrespective of faith as well as age, sex, race, and social conditions.”* Kampala Principles 1973

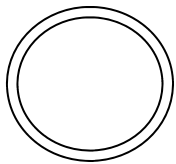
#### The Mission of the Branch Christian Emphasis Committees today

*“Acknowledging the Christian Principles upon which the YMCA was founded, the Branch Christian Emphasis Committees help create opportunities for members, volunteers and staff to reach their potential as children of God through lifting up of Jesus Christ and our Christian Mission.”* YMCAs of Great Charlotte 1999

# The Meaning of the YMCA John 1721 Logo



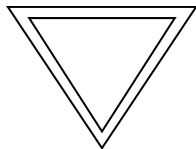
With the great history in mind and ministry outreach focus, let's take a look at how the YMCA emblem represents this organization's history and purpose. Few organizations have as meaningful and rich an emblem as the YMCA. These are all of the parts:



**THERE IS A DOUBLE CIRCLE:** One circle symbolizes the completeness and unity of the total of life and God's created order. The other symbolizes a wedding ring, friendship and love without end, among individuals. Within these circles or rings, the rest of the emblem is placed.



**THERE ARE THE GREEK LETTERS CHI & RHO (XP):** The first two letters of the word Christos - meaning Christ - and in themselves the emblem of early Christianity.



**THERE ARE TWO TRIANGLES:** One standing for the trinity within the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The other, the trinity within man, that of the spirit, the mind and the body.



**THERE IS THE BIBLE:** It is opened to Jesus' intercessory prayer for his followers in the Gospel of John, chapter 17, verse 21. This text was set forth as the foundation of the YMCA:

*"That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."*  
John 17:21

The context of this passage was emphasizing that the followers of Christ should have such love and care for one another and for those around them that the rest of the world would believe, because of this genuine love.

Therefore the complete assembly of all these component parts gives this great organization the emblem.

# George Williams

## Founder of the YMCA

*By Leslie K. Tarr*



Twelve young men met in the inner-city bedroom of George Williams in London, England, on the evening of June 4, 1844. They came to develop strategies to evangelize the hordes of young men who were flocking to seek employment in the British metropolis, and that modest bedroom became known as “an upper room” - the birthplace of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA).

Three years earlier Williams had arrived in London to work as one of 140 draper’s assistance at the firms of Hitchcock and Rogers. A devout Christian, Williams was concerned about the spiritual condition in his new environment. What he saw did not look good. “I found no means of grace of any kind.” he wrote in his diary. “I asked myself ‘What can I do for these young men?’”

### A Simple Plan

A newcomer was elated to discover that a fellow worker in an adjacent bedroom was an active Christian. The two met to consider Williams’ proposal to reach the entire staff for Christ. The physical conditions for accomplishing that goal were far from ideal. Like all assistants, Williams shared a bedroom with as many as five other men. The cramped, Spartan quarters offered no privacy, and at first Williams had to ask his roommates to leave for a short time while he and his newfound Christian ally engaged in prayer.

Their plan was simple. They prayed by name for each of their fellow employees and confidently expected them to become Christians. Williams soon made this matter-of-fact entry in his diary: “We met, our numbers grew, and the room was soon crammed. In answer to prayer, the Spirit of God was present, and we had conversion and conversion.” Soon the young men requisitioned other rooms in which the new believers could meet for prayer. Scores of employees and even the firm’s president, George Hitchcock, professed faith in Christ.

An observer of the spiritual activity at Hitchcock and Rogers commented that when Williams came to the firm in 1841, it was almost impossible for a young man there to be a Christian. By contract, three years later, it was almost impossible to be anything else!

Others became aware of the spiritual fervor at the drapery establishment. Why, wondered Williams and others, should evangelistic enterprise not be attempted on a wider front - in other drapery firms and in business houses? That conviction led to that historic meeting 150 years ago in that "upper room". At that memorable gathering, 11 of the 12 participants, including Williams, were from the drapery firm of Hitchcock and Rogers, and the 12th was from another drapery firm. More than half of those attending has been converted through George Williams' witness.

His family background and early upbringing, however, would seem to provide an unlikely seedbed for such spiritual intensity.

### The Early Years

Born October 11, 1821, at Dulverton, Somerset, George Williams was the youngest in a family of eight sons. Although the family tree of Williamses lists generations of farmers, it quickly became obvious that the youngest member of the family had neither the aptitude nor the desire for country life.

At age 13 his school ended, and after a brief period on the farm, he was apprenticed to a draper in Bridgewater. George's employer insisted that all employees attend the morning service of his church, Zion Congregational Chapel. This was a radical change for the new apprentice, whose family seldom attended church.

Williams' recollection of his own spiritual state at the time as blunt: "*I entered Bridgewater a careless, thoughtless, godless, swearing young fellow*", he wrote in his diary.

That soon change. On a winter Sunday evening in 1837, the 16 year old apprentice attended church and was deeply moved by the Gospel. He returned to the shop, where he knelt in prayer and submission. He later recalled, "*I cannot describe to you the joy and peace which flowed into my soul when first I saw the Lord Jesus had died for my sins, and that they were all forgiven.*"

In the remaining years of his apprenticeship, Williams devoted himself to personal witness to Christ.

## The Challenge of the City

With the formation of the YMCA, Williams and his associates recognized that the influx of young people to urban centers offered an unequalled missionary challenge.

The scope of the YMCA's ministry expanded over time to include lecture courses, libraries, reading rooms and sports facilities. Still, Williams and the other pioneers of the movement regarding reaching others for Christ as foundational and indispensable.

## Triumph and Disaster

Although Williams was deeply involved in YMCA activities, he did not neglect business. He distinguished himself in the Hitchcock and Rogers firm and eventually was made a partner.

In 1853, Williams married Helen Hitchcock, daughter of the firm's president. They became parents of five sons and a daughter. By age 65 Williams had amassed a fortune in business. He also had given a fortune to charity. He contributed generously to the foreign missions endeavors and many denominations; his only stipulation was that the mission must uphold and zealously proclaim the Gospel.

In June 1884, Queen Victoria took advantage of YMCA's 50th anniversary to offer George Williams the honor of knighthood in recognition of his "distinguished service to the cause of humanity." He was now Sir George Williams.

To all appearances, he could look back on an uninterrupted series of triumphs - a dazzling business career, leadership in an interdenominational Christian movement, personal recognition, a happy and harmonious family circle, and esteem as an exemplary Christian.

Just at the climax to that life, however, he experienced a devastating blow. Nellie, his youngest child and only daughter, died suddenly at the age of 19. Family and friends recognized the shattering impact on the grieving father. For Sir George, her death "almost blotted out the sunshine of 70 years." But with the healing passage of time and the Spirit's ministry, he emerged with an even greater compassion and empathy for those who suffered.

## To the Glory of God

In the remaining 11 years of his life, George Williams entrusted the daily concerns of business to his sons, while he intensified his support of Christian endeavors.

The passage of time had taken its toll, and he grew progressively weaker. With his 84th birthday, it was evident to those around him that the end was near. Sir George Williams dies less than a month later, on November 6, 1905.

On November 14, downtown London seemed to come to a halt. Despite a steady rain, crowds lined the streets in silence, as the funeral procession made its way to St. Paul's Cathedral, where George Williams was to be buried. The refrain of George Williams' life, according to his biographer, is expressed in these words:

*“He lived not unto himself, but to the glory of God in the service of men.”*