

YMCA seeks to reclaim the “C” in its name

January 15, 2010

SHERWOOD, Ore. (RNS)—The wooden box, not quite big enough to hold a pair of shoes, sits on the reception desk, just inside the Sherwood 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.

Requests vary. Someone’s son struggles with drug addiction. A friend needs a job. Somebody wants more blue, figure-8 rubber exercise bands.

“Sometimes people mistake the prayer box for a suggestion box,” Button said with a shrug.

Roger Button, chaplain at the Sherwood YMCA in Sherwood, Ore., helps make sure the Christian message of the Y is delivered. (RNS PHOTO/Randy L. Rasmussen/The Oregonian)

As the first ordained chaplain to serve a single branch of the Portland-based YMCA of Columbia-Willamette, Button gradually is trying to replant the Christian values at the heart of the [YMCA](#).

The regional Y is reminding people who think of 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.”

The United States is home to YMCAs. 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. But an October conference in Colorado for YMCA chaplains drew about 90 people from 40 Ys.

"We're not a church. We're not a denomination," said Bob Hall, president and chief executive officer of the regional YMCA. "We're not in the business to replace churches, but many people who step inside a YMCA may never set foot in a church.

"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."

Hall likes to say he's trying to "illuminate the C" in the Young Men's Christian Association. He has reactivated the chaplaincy—there hadn't been one for decades—hiring a 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," Hall said—love, respect, honesty, responsibility and service. "They're in our DNA," he said.

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 been more profound at some times than others. But the time is right to reclaim them, Hall said.

Last year, 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 founded in 1926.

“These are all tools for building character,” Hall said of the facilities and programs. Someone 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.”