

THE EVOLUTION OF YWCA'S WORK AND OUR MISSION

Our Founding:

It was 1855, in England, where two women's groups came together, a prayer group and a social activist group, to seek housing for nurses returning from the Crimean War, and, to improve the lives of women caught up in the Industrial Revolution. Here YWCA was born.

Soon, across the Atlantic, many of America's young women were moving into our growing cities, their sights set on becoming self sufficient and on more fulfilling futures.

As was the experience in England, what they found among the mills, bakeries and laundries providing jobs to young women were long working hours, poor and unsafe conditions, and few opportunities for healthy activity.

Concurrently at this time in the U.S., a religious revival was being experienced. As the plight of the new corps of working women became apparent, and as happened in England, women serving the Lord saw a worthy application for their spirit and energies.

It was in this climate that the Prayer Union Circle and Ladies' Christian Association were formed in New York City in 1858, which evolved into YWCA of the City of New York, and that a group of "benevolent ladies" gathered in 1859 to form the YWCA of Boston, the first to use the name "Young Women's Christian Association."

News of great opportunity traveled fast, and by 1890 there were 106 like-minded organizations in the United States that evolved into YWCAs.



Our Purpose

The reasons that compelled our foremothers to found YWCAs are all variations on the theme of meeting the needs of women, especially young women. Many YWCAs shared as their beginning purpose, "To improve the intellectual, social, temporal, and spiritual welfare of women, especially young women dependent upon their own exertions for support."

YWCA Columbus, Ohio formed "To extend a helping hand to our toiling sisters." In Kansas City a YWCA was formed "To care for girls working in slime and filth and working long hours with starvation pay."

Dayton's first sense of purpose developed when women, after attending a YMCA meeting about leading men back to faith and religion asked each other, "How might we elevate the women in our midst?"

In Springfield, Massachusetts, women representing several churches were active as a YMCA auxiliary, but realized they had higher priorities than subservient support for what was a financially plagued YMCA. They declared their independence and reorganized to meet women's needs.

Some founding mothers worked with lightning speed. St. Joseph, Missouri's YWCA founders met to consider organizing a YWCA one week in 1888 and secured and furnished an appropriate space, developed a program, and greeted their first participants the next week. They also, in two weeks in 1913, conducted a horse & buggy door-to-door campaign, yielding \$150,000 (\$3,691,000 today) for a new building.

It is true that Bible studies and religious activities played a mighty role in YWCA work during these early years - but as described in YWCA Chicago's history, it "...was instrumental in developing an

empowering culture," as the doctrines followed reinforced the belief that each member had a right to have *her* voice heard.

These early YWCAs were also drawn to a newly emerging social philosophy. Instead of viewing women in dire circumstances as immoral or lacking enterprise, as did Chicago's "Erring Woman's Refuge," YWCA took their plight as a "sign of the city's inherent social peril." During these times our foremothers volunteered with an innate sense that their efforts both mattered and had the strength of God supporting them.

With their religious sense of purpose coupled with the immediacy of need, YWCAs not only became organizations focused on women's needs, but also ones that took a place at the helm of a new social movement concerned with the reform of society.

Now, 160 years later, the Christian in our YWCA name is a historical reference and one that kindled our commitment to being open minded, empowering, forward thinking, action based, and, inclusive.

Our Early Work

By 1860 New York and Boston had already founded residences and were quickly expanding programs. Boston started women's health services by installing pulley weights on the residence's closet doors for exercising.

New York offered the first typing classes for women so they could move from the assembly line into jobs in an office, and, joined with others to work with male office managers and dispel the notion that the physical stamina it took to type was detrimental to a woman's health.

Our Early Advocacy

In Kansas City it was working conditions at the Armour Packing plant that prompted action from YWCA leaders in the late 1800s. Agnes Fassett, YWCA Kansas City's City Secretary, not only made her way in to see KB Armour himself, but also convinced him to issue her a permit to visit all parts of the packing house and report about conditions and improvements needed. Upon her report of horrible conditions, Mr. Armour responded by taking action to make major changes for the good of the plant's women workers. When she went on to secure public access to water for the residents in the area she found herself negotiating with the hottest gambler in town.

Toledo's early provision of "reformatory work" involved visitation and religious activities in areas off the beaten path. Sometimes when these sites weren't easily found, YWCA volunteers looked further, and ended up securing access to known gathering sites for young women even if it was via a connected saloon.

YWCA advocacy efforts for women's overall advancement were visible from the start. Efforts included influencing decision-makers to improve labor conditions and workers' rights for women, securing women's right to vote, and building access to safe and adequate shelter and medical services. The YWCA Retirement Fund was founded in 1924 as the first women's retirement fund in the country.

Dayton went public with their advocacy efforts in 1886, when legislators were publicly urged to provide 'better legal protection for women against assault.'

In Harrisburg, PA, YWCA women brought attention during the Great Depression to women's work and the low wages that were being justified "due to the times."

The prominently posted the slogan, "Who pays for the bargain when we buy a cheap dress?"

Our Early Empowerment

YWCA were engaged in many activities that had women "doing what they oughtn't." Many YWCAs added physical programs early on, like a basketball team at the Racine, Wisconsin YWCA.

As an outgrowth of the gatherings at their new cafeteria, YWCA Minneapolis created interest in more services, and grew. First, physical programs were added, with gusto. There was a rowing club, bicycle club, and basketball team early on. Then in 1893, a women's "Vigorous Exercise Class" was halted when the police came to the door to see what was shaking the building. The Minneapolis YWCA secured the first building owned and operated by women in Minnesota. Then, the president, in 1911, thought it was time for a pool and raised \$10,000 to build one. This achievement was much to the surprise of the city fathers' who had made it known that "the girls could do very well without one."

Our Early Health Services

YWCA pursued an uplifting approach. YWCA Chicago leaders saw that medical services for women were inadequate and not accessible to those felt to be "fallen women with incurable diseases." By 1877, a health dispensary was opened. Doctors and nurses donated time and supplies, and soon 200 patients were being seen per month.

YWCA New York, along with many other YWCAs, swiftly moved efforts in this area into the public policy realm, advocating for medical services and sexual education classes even if it meant calling these offerings "Positive Health Seminars."

Our Early Call to Eliminate Racism

From its early years, YWCA has been known for its work and commitment to women's empowerment and the elimination of racism.

Knowledge of the additional and deep seated discrimination being endured by women of color and their families steadily grew through the late 1800s. By 1890 the first Black branch to serve women of color had opened in Dayton, Ohio, and between 1890 and 1915 the first YWCA for American Indian Women opened in Oklahoma and seven Black student associations were formed.

Chicago YWCA service to women of color began in 1915 with a residence and educational programs and by 1927 a formal integration program was well underway. Racial Justice was a core effort with specific public attention given to combating the labeling of blood from white and black donors.

During the 1930s YWCAs were encouraged to speak out against lynching and speak out for interracial cooperation rather than segregation, and protecting basic civil rights.

In 1936 YWCAs organized the first co-ed intercollegiate, interracial student conference, in North Carolina and south of the Mason-Dixon Line.

In 1960, the Atlanta YWCA opened its cafeteria to Blacks, becoming the first desegregated public dining facility in the southern U.S.

Efforts to Ensure Lasting Change

Across the U.S, YWCA racial justice work has been based on advocacy and action. Through the 1960s YWCA volunteers at YWCA Kansas City traveled and joined civil rights marches, and organized *Wednesdays in Mississippi* discussions to improve understanding and race relations, and to address issues of race, poverty and unemployment.

At the 1970 convention YWCA members from across the country approved our One Imperative, "To thrust our collective power towards the elimination of racism, wherever it exists and by any means necessary."

Moving Forward, Together

For more than 155 years, YWCAs have built and maintained bridges between the provision of individual services and social change - twin efforts that are necessary to achieve women's empowerment - focusing on racial justice and women's economic advancement. These are the key strategic efforts in place to meet our mission. With these bridges comes our collective power to affect change in the individual lives of the women and girls we serve, and, throughout our communities.

YWCA Mission Statements From Our History

Early: The Young Women’s Christian Association’s purpose is to build a fellowship of women and girls devoted to the task of realizing in our common lives those ideals of personal social living to which we are committed by our faith as Christians. In this endeavor, we seek to understand Jesus, to share his love for all people, and to grow in the knowledge and love of God.

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1967: The Young Women’s Christian Association of the United States of America, a movement rooted in the Christian faith as known in Jesus and nourished by the resources of that faith, seeks to respond to the barrier-breaking love of God in this day.

The Association draws together into responsible membership women and girls of diverse experiences and faiths, that their lives may be open to new understanding and deeper relationships, and that together they may join in the struggle for peace and justice, freedom and dignity for all people.

Addition in 1970: Our One Imperative: To thrust our collective power towards the elimination of racism, wherever it exists and by any means necessary.

The YWCA Mission became the Purpose and Imperative.

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1991: The YWCA of the USA is a women's membership movement nourished by its roots in the Christian faith and sustained by the richness of many beliefs and values. Strengthened by diversity, the Association draws together members who strive to create Women's growth, leadership, and power, in order to attain a common vision: peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all people. The Association will thrust its collective power toward the elimination of racism wherever it exists and by any means necessary.

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2009 – present

YWCA is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all.

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