

The Life of Sir George Williams Founder of the Young Men's Christian Association

By J.E. Hodder Williams

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"They Called Him Mr. Moody"

By Richard K. Curtis,

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(Edited & Revised by Don Cooper as of February 29th 2016)

George Williams was born on a farm about 25 miles outside of London, England on October 11th, 1821, and he died in London, in November of 1905 at the age of 84. He was the equivalent of a multi-millionaire who gave away most of his fortune, a man of God who's life's purpose was to introduce young men to Jesus Christ, who was "knighted" by Queen Victoria for his moral influence on the nations of the world, whose Young Men's Christian Association had, in 61 years, at the time of his death, developed 7,773 Associations, worldwide with 772,000 members.

How did all that happen? One Sunday evening in the winter of 1837, at the age of 16, shortly after arriving in the big city, fresh from the farm, to work in the clothing industry, he found himself sitting in the back seat of a little Congregational Chapel, earnestly seeking Christ to make sense of his life. He heard the Pastor, The Rev Evan James clearly explain the Gospel message. He wrote in his diary: "I was on the downward road. I saw that this road would certainly lead me to spend my eternity with the devil and his angels, and I asked myself, "Cannot I escape? Is there no escape?".....Then he heard the Pastor say: "This is how you can escape: Confess your sins, accept Christ, trust in Him, and yield your heart to the Savior".

On his return from Zion Chapel George Williams knelt down in his bedroom on the second floor, at the back of the shop in which he worked, and gave his heart to God. "God helped me" he said very simply, in speaking of his conversion, "to yield myself wholly to Him. I cannot describe to you the joy and peace which flowed into my soul when first I saw that the Lord Jesus had died for my sins, and that they were all forgiven."

George found one other young man out of the 140 who worked in that establishment, who was a committed believer in Jesus. Together, when they weren't working the 12 to 14 hours per day, required by their shop, they agonized in prayer together, for the other young men with whom they worked, that they too, would come to know the Savior in a personal way.

7 years after his conversion to Jesus Christ, on the evening of June 6th, 1844 a core of 12 young men met in George William's upstairs bedroom, reaffirming their faith in Christ, and hosting the "first meeting" of the Young Men's Christian Association, for the purpose of mutual encouragement, and winning, through their prayers and witness, other young men. At least 6 of those additional 10 added to their number, had been won to Christ by the ardent prayers and faithful witness of George Williams himself. The movement grew until 60 to 80 of the young men in their shop met regularly for prayer and Bible study, learning how to share their faith with others. It didn't take long for Mr. Hitchcock, who owned the business to begin to see the changed attitudes and zeal to joyfully work for their boss, and he began to ask what was making the difference. They winsomely shared their faith with him, he also placed his trust in Christ, and began to attend all the meetings, and began to finance the outreach. They quickly voted to make him the "Secretary" of their Association, and began to ask, "If God has blessed us in Mr. Hitchcock's establishment, why can't we begin to duplicate the process in other Clothing Establishments in London. Each with their own Young Men's Christian Association. And so the multiplication process began & God blessed the movement mightily.

Within 7 short years, a Boston Sea Captain and Missionary, Thomas Valentine Sullivan, with six colleagues, on December 29th, 1851, founded the YMCA in the United States, at the Old South Church in Boston, Massachusetts.

In 1837 the great American Evangelist, Dwight L. Moody was born in Northfield, Massachusetts to Unitarian parents. At age 17 he was selling shoes in his uncle's Boston Shoe Store. At age 18 (in 1855) his Sunday school teacher at the Mt. Vernon Congregational Church in Boston, Edward Kimball, led the poorly educated, yet enthusiastic & wildly humorous, Dwight, to faith in Jesus Christ. That moment of saving faith for Moody was "an elixir, joyous, cleansing, and reassuring. "I was in a new world. The next morning ... the sun shone brighter and the birds sang sweeter... the old elms waved their branches for joy, and all nature was at peace... it was the most delicious joy that I'd ever known." Moody was living proof of Ii Cor. 5:17: "If any man is in Christ, all things have become new." He wrote to his folks in Northfield, "I am going to join the (Young Men's) Christian Association tomorrow night. Then I shall have a place to go... I can have all the books I want to read, free from expense. Only have to pay one dollar a year. They have a large room and the smart men of Boston lecture to them for nothing and they get up and ask questions."

He eventually moved to Chicago, and years later became the president of the Chicago YMCA, started what became Moody Bible Institute and was engaged in successful evangelistic crusades in England, Scotland, Ireland, and in the U.S. with hundreds of thousands of people coming to Faith in Jesus Christ. "Moody always regarded his Y experience with grateful tribute and tender nostalgia..."The YMCA (he said) has been of great help to me. I think I owe nearly all my success, just to the help it has been to me." "It has been the nurturing mother of my soul".

In the same year that Moody gave his heart to Christ (1855), the first World Convention of the YMCAs was held in Paris, France. Under George William's strong conviction that no Association anywhere in the world should have denominational, sectarian, or doctrinal distinctives, which accepted some and rejected others, from the fellowship, but that each Association should concentrate only on winning young men to faith in Christ, should feed workers into the local churches, and should each be "autonomous" at their local level. What came to be known as "THE PARIS BASIS" (The basis on which all Ys should operate), was adopted and disseminated to all Associations around the world clearly stating: "THE YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATIONS SEEK TO UNITE THOSE YOUNG MEN WHO, REGARDING JESUS CHRIST AS THEIR GOD AND SAVIOUR ACCORDING TO THE HOLY SCRIPTURES, DESIRE TO BE HIS DISCIPLES IN THEIR DOCTRINE AND IN THEIR LIFE, AND TO ASSOCIATE THEIR EFFORTS FOR THE EXTENTION OF HIS KINGDOM AMONG YOUNG MEN".

By January of 1877, a Young Men's Christian Association was established here in Lansing, Michigan. (Within 20 years of the launch of the Lansing Y, it should be noted, that in Springfield, Massachusetts, Luther Gulick, the President of the YMCA Training School had a student by the name of James Naismith, an ordained Presbyterian minister from Canada, who was given the assignment of inventing a game that could be played indoors in the winter, that would attract young men into the YMCAs to hear the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. Jim Naismith invented the game called Basketball). Tom Izzo wasn't around back then, but for the past 24 years he's been very grateful to Jim Naismith, with MSU having their eyes set on another National championship, by the end of this year.

A classmate of Jim Naismith at Springfield College was Amos Alonzo Stagg who developed the game of American football, went on to the University of Chicago to establish a mid-west football powerhouse there before the University fired him because they felt football was too rough and physically damaging to young men. The University of California snatched up Stagg as their coach and for the next 2 years they came back and trounced Chicago so badly that Chicago decided to drop their football team altogether and put more emphasis on academics. The University of Wisconsin still has a line in their current "fight song" harking back to the Amos Alonzo Stagg coaching days... that goes "On Wisconsin, On Wisconsin, run right through that line. Run the ball clear round Chicago, a touch down every time."

As late as 1930 Juan Carlos Ceriani Gravier, a teacher in Montevideo, Uruguay introduced a new indoor soccer-style game played on indoor basketball floors during the winter in YMCAs, so soccer players could keep in shape during the bad weather. The game was called "Futsal". In 1956 the rules were revised in the Sao Paulo, Brazil YMCAs so seniors could compete. And in

December of 2002 the "Asociacion Mundial de Futsal (AMF) was founded. It is currently composed of 40 national federations and 3 continental bodies. So the YMCA continues to produce athletic events with profound National and International impact, all of which were initially introduced to draw in young athletes to hear and respond positively to the Christian Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Lansing, Michigan YMCA eventually built (where the Lansing City Hall & Police City Jail now stands) a basketball gymnasium, a bowling alley, Prayer Rooms, Reading Rooms and held regular Bible Studies, and Christian Lecture Series, drawing young men by any means possible to introduce them to Christ and to change the moral character of their lives.

In 1937, with a theological liberalization and secularization being experienced in our once biblically based Ivy League Colleges and Mainline Protestant Denominations, the YMCA of Lansing, formed a CHRISTIAN EMPHASIS COMMITTEE, to keep the "C" strong in the YMCA, and the first Annual GOOD FRIDAY BREAKFAST was held that year. Through the years each Good Friday Breakfast was preceded by a series of Lenten Luncheons.

From its inception in the 1840s, until the 1930s, (following in the tradition of George Williams, and Dwight Moody), the YMCA was evangelistically-Protestant in its leadership and membership, maintaining a consistent emphasis on confession of sin, and personally receiving Jesus Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior. Taking Jesus literally when He said in John 3:7, "You must be born again". Starting in 1937 with the founding of our Lansing Christian Emphasis Committee, that original evangelical emphasis was renewed. In the past 15 to 20 years, all too aware that the Christian Church was made up of 3 branches, we had the Bishop of the Lansing Catholic Diocese and the Priest of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church both speak at our annual Good Friday breakfasts. Our current CEO/President, Jeff Scheibel is Roman Catholic and our last CEO/President for 20 years, Tony Fragale, was Greek Orthodox. And no two leaders have been more enthusiastically supportive of our Christian Emphasis programming and outreach than those two leaders. We are blessed with the heart-warming, personalized caring touch of Jeff.

In 2014 with a yearning for spiritual revival throughout the YMCA's of the United States, after a nationwide search, Larry Whittlesey, a retired Nazarene Pastor became the Executive Director of the U.S. Missions Network working through our National YMCA Headquarters in Chicago, and with Ys across the country. On April 3rd, 2015, Larry was our guest speaker at our 78th Good Friday breakfast at the Crown Plaza Hotel. And November 16th through 18th 2015, the first annual National Conference was held in Orlando, Florida.

In November of 2014, after 20 some years of the Silver Bells In The City, which was pretty much a secular celebration of the coming of the Christmas season, we believe, with God leading Jeff Scheibel, our CEO and President, along with the 12 members of our Lansing Y Christian Emphasis Committee, decided to launch the First Holiday Prayer Breakfast to emphasize the true meaning of Christmas. The current committed committee members include our Chairperson: Heather Cooper Kim, Pastor Coye Bouyer, Charlene Cosby, Amanda Furtaw, Pastor Abe Garcia, Minister Linda Gardner, Jason Helman, Anne Hill, Boyd Meyers, Youth Pastor Chris Rollins, Minister at large: Arthur Thomas, our past Chairman Emeritus/Historian, Don Cooper and our CEO and President: Jeff Scheibel.