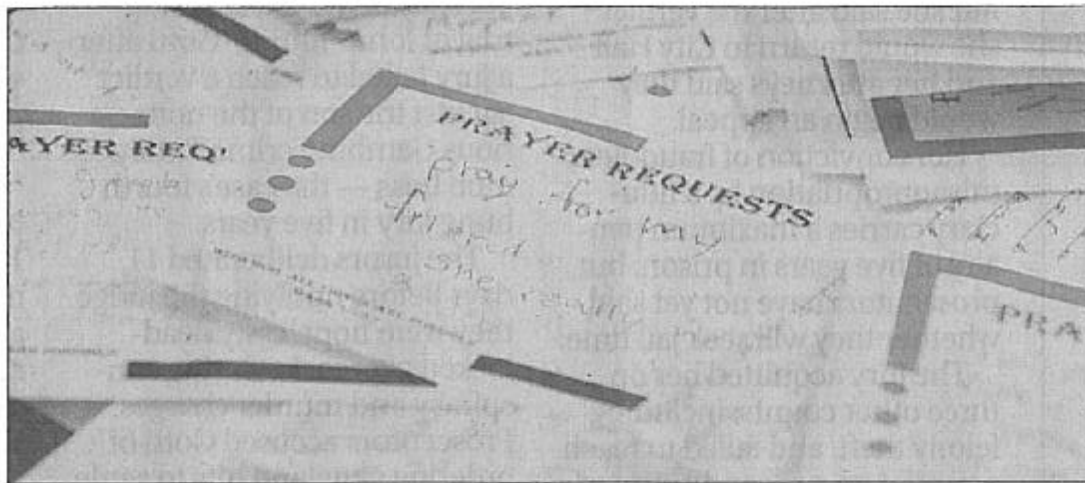


# Regional YMCA seeks to 'illuminate the C'

Amid the hoops and child care, there's a renewal of the association's Christian values

By **NANCY HAUGHT**  
THE OREGONIAN



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**Members, volunteers and staff of the Sherwood Regional Family YMCA drop prayer requests in a wooden box at the reception desk. The YMCA of Columbia-Willamette is reasserting its Christian values and commitment to strong minds, bodies and spirits.**

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 and prays over the slips of paper he finds inside:

- For someone's son struggling with drug addiction.
- For a friend who needs a job.
- For more blue, figure-8 rubber bands.

"Sometimes people mistake the prayer box for a suggestion box," Button shrugs. That doesn't bother him. Gradually, he's replanting the Christian values at the heart of the YMCA.

Button is the first ordained chaplain to serve a single branch of the YMCA of Columbia-Willamette. The regional Y is reminding people who think of it as a good place to

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## YMCA: Mission is well-being in all forms

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work out or find dependable child care that the C in Young Men's Christian Association still means Christian values inspired by Jesus' life — but broadly applied across denominational lines.

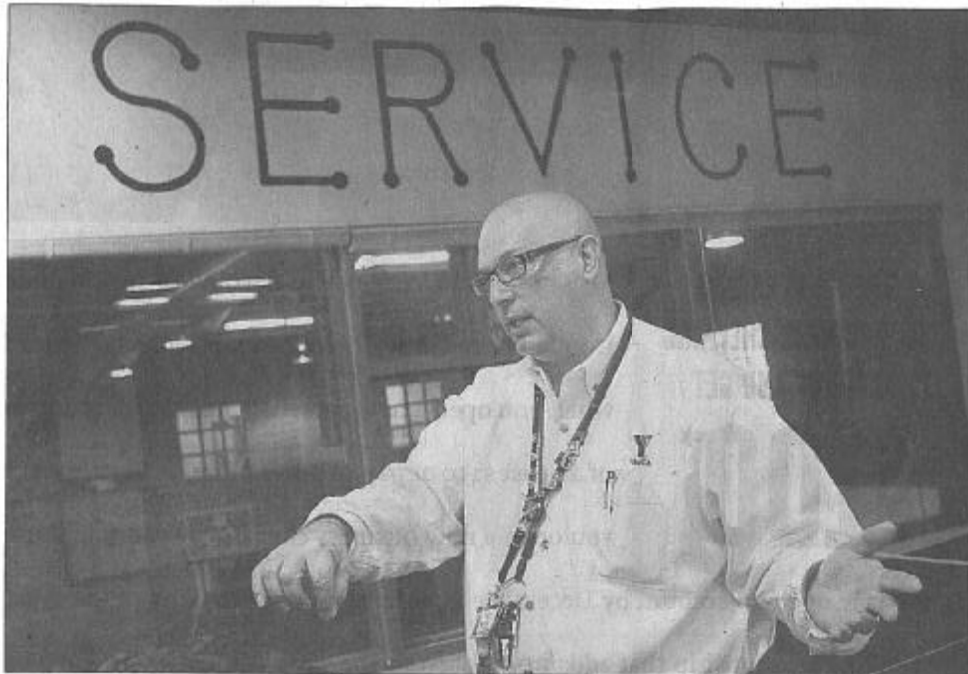
"My role here is to minister to the staff and members who call the Sherwood YMCA their home," Button says. "I feel blessed to be able to be here and be a listening ear."

Many of the people he listens to aren't churchgoers, he says, but again, that doesn't 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 says. "We're all on the same team."

There are 2,686 YMCAs in the United States. They operate autonomously, interpreting their common charter according to



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Roger Button, chaplain at the Sherwood YMCA, sees himself as a "pan-denominational" minister who tries to connect with anyone who uses the Y, regardless of the person's spiritual background.

the needs of their communities, says Mamie Moore, a spokeswoman for the 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 representing 40 Ys. The YMCA of Columbia-Willamette branches aren't the only ones flexing their spiritual muscles.

"There are lot of hurting people in the world," says Bob Hall,

president and chief executive officer of the regional YMCA, which offers programs in five counties surrounding Portland and Vancouver. Economic troubles, personal trials and a longing for community and spirituality — if not religion — have convinced him that the YMCA has a significant spiritual role to play in the region.

"We're not a church. We're not a denomination. We're not an army," he says, 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 says. "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 hasn't been one for decades — hiring the Rev. Bob Reichen as vice president for mission advancement. Reichen ministers to staff, volunteers and members across the whole five-county region.

"We were founded on Christian ideals," Hall says: love, respect, honesty, responsibility and service. 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. "They're in our DNA."

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, 397 YMCAs existed in seven countries, claiming 30,369 members.

Since the Portland YMCA opened in 1868, attention to its core values has been more profound some times than others. But the time is right to reclaim them, Hall says.

Last year, the YMCA of Columbia-Willamette served 86,000 individuals with early-childhood centers, before- and after-school enrichment, youth sports and teen development programs, three health and fitness centers, and Camp Collins, founded in 1926 and beloved by generations of Oregonians.

"These are all tools for building character," Hall says of the fa-

cilities and programs. Someone can build muscles or strength at any fitness club. "We offer an opportunity to exercise, challenge your mind and encourage your spiritual life."

At the Sherwood Regional Family YMCA, Button and the staff minister to 9,600 members, whether they realize it or not, whatever their spiritual background may be. It's possible — if not probable — that the teenager shooting baskets, the children in swim lessons, the older woman learning to use weight machines in the fitness center have no idea what the C in YMCA means.

But little things, such as holding doors open, greeting people by name, offering encouraging words, are subtle but strong ways to reach out, Button says. And once people know him, they slip a prayer into the box or stop by his office to talk. More than once someone has said to him, "This is what church ought to feel like."

He's under no illusion that all YMCAs are like Sherwood. "That's why they say, 'When you've seen one Y, you've seen one Y,'" he says. But he works with staff and volunteers to embody Christian values and "watch for teachable moments."

"We witness constantly," he says, paraphrasing St. Francis of Assisi. "If we have to, we use words."

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