

# Going Upscale: The YMCA and Postwar America, 1950–1990

Clifford W. Putney  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Brandeis University

Y.M.C.A., it's fun to stay at the Y.M.C.A.  
No man, no man does it all by himself  
Young man, young man, put your pride on the shelf  
—The Village People

Few tales—at least for an American sports historian—can exceed in interest the transformation of the Young Men's Christian Association from a collection of evangelical young men (“the light-armed cavalry of the Lord”) into a largely secular, “family-oriented” organization, 45 percent of which is female and 45 percent of which is also under 18. Founded in England in 1844 and brought to America in 1851 for the express purpose of keeping young men in the cities from sin and debauchery, the YMCA soon established itself as a pioneer in the field of athletics: initially because these seemed a better means of attracting young men than religious tracts and reading rooms.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the YMCA story was captured by C. Howard Hopkins in his massive 1951 work, *The History of the YMCA in North America*. But that was over 40 years ago, and since then the “Y” has extensively reinterpreted its historic Red Triangle ideals: sport, religion, and social reform. This essay attempts to explain that reinterpretation, and to provide a cultural history of the “Y” since World War II. Its three sections recount the YMCA's emphasis on world citizenship in the 1950s, its insistence upon domestic reform in the 1960s, and its preoccupation with sport and “wellness” in the 1970s and 1980s.

## The “Y” in the '50s: Suburban Growth and World Citizenship

Among the events of the 1950s, none more affected the “Y” than suburban growth and its attendant phenomenon, the Baby Boom. These events not only materially benefitted those metropolitan “Ys” farsighted enough to open suburban branches; they also intensified Association-wide trends begun in the 1930s—particularly an increase in women members.

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1. See Clifford Putney, “Character Building in the YMCA, 1880–1930,” *Mid-America* 73:1 (January 1991): 49–70.

Women were no strangers to the “Y,” of course; they had been exercising there since World War I. But although local associations had been given the right to admit women and determine their own membership policies in 1933, it was not until the postwar period that female membership really skyrocketed: from 5.9 percent in 1934 to 13.5 percent in 1950 to 21.9 percent in 1959.<sup>2</sup> Why this rise in the number of women members? Louis Nelson believed it to be related to the fact that most of the new suburban associations were “family serving YMCAs,” open to all members of the family. He also pointed out that whereas only 17 associations offered family services in 1931, a full 338 did so in 1956.<sup>3</sup>

Nor was this growth in family services surprising considering the demographic changes among “Y” males, more of whom were either boys or adults, and more of whom (at least of those over 18) were married: specifically 69.6 percent in 1957 as opposed to 45.6 percent in 1942.<sup>4</sup>

These tendencies toward family membership may not have made the “Y” unrecognizable. But they did cause it to lose much of its former concern with jobs and other issues of pertinence to young men (its traditional constituency) and to concentrate instead on things which would be of interest to families.’ In particular, the “Y” pondered family survival in the nuclear age. “[T]he rearmament program, military remobilization [the Korean War], and related factors . . . raise perplexing problems for the young people of our country,” acknowledged the *National Council Bulletin* in 1951. And many youths evinced feelings of: a.) “futility, that there is little use in planning for education, vocation or marriage, because of the uncertainties and risks of the future”; or b.) “fatalism, that they are in the grip of forces beyond their control.”<sup>6</sup>

Among these “risks” and menacing forces was communism—specifically the threat of worldwide communist domination. “The youth of today is disturbed,” averred the YMCA’s Clifford Gregg, “by a conflict of ideologies—the Communist world against the free world.” The free world, for its part, promoted “justice, tranquility, the general welfare, the blessings of liberty.” But communism threatened to destroy these boons, replacing liberty with “dictatorship,” tranquility with “revolution,” and justice with godless exploitation.’ To fight communism and promote world order, many in the “Y” advocated producing “world citizens”—people who would represent

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2. Elmer L. Johnson, *The History of YMCA Physical Education* (Chicago: Association Press, 1979), 317.

3. Louis E. Nelson, *A Study of Services for the Family in Family-Serving YMCAs* (New York: Association Press, 1956), 85, 8.

4. “Characteristics of YMCA Members,” *National Council Bulletin* (January 1959): 1.

5. R.H. Espy, “The Present Day Challenge to Christian Leadership,” *National Council Bulletin* (March 1955): 1.

6. “Young People and the Present World Situation,” *National Council Bulletin* (January 1951): 1.

7. Clifford C. Gregg, “The Spiritual Challenge of the Centennial Year,” *National Council Bulletin* (June 1951): 1.

“Americanism at its best.”<sup>8</sup> Others such as George McGhee also stressed “Y” involvement on the religious front, where foreigners supposedly were seeking “to purge their religion of the non-essentials and to revitalize its basic truths.”<sup>9</sup>

But could the “Y” preach democracy and ecumenism overseas if these were not first implemented at home? William Overholt for one thought not. In particular, he believed “the disunity of the Christian churches of our time” to be “one of the major factors limiting [the acceptance of Christianity] as an alternative to the idolatries of the modern world.”<sup>10</sup> It was not so much the “Y” which Overholt held responsible for Christian division; rather he blamed the Protestant churches. Years before the “Y” had come into being, he wrote, “the fragmentation and division [of Christianity] continued apace, reaching a kind of ultimate frustration in the hundreds of sects and denominations in the United States.”<sup>11</sup>

Overholt’s implication that the moral high ground belonged not to the churches, but rather to more inclusive organizations like the YMCA, marked the beginning of a new era in “Y”-church relations. Whereas the Association had once viewed itself as a conduit through which unaffiliated young men passed before joining “the church of their choice,” now it was felt that the pilgrimage need progress no further than the “Y” itself, an agency far better equipped than the churches for promoting world-wide Christian unity. In large part, of course, the YMCA’s distancing itself from the churches arose as a result of its need to become reconciled to the growing religious diversity of its membership. Protestants may have remained in the majority, but by 1951 nearly two-fifths of the Association was made up of Catholics and Jews. Such a large and growing number of non-Protestants convinced many that if the “Y” were to remain openly religious, its Christianity would somehow have to be broadened until it became either descriptive of or at least non-objectionable to the preponderance of its membership.

Throughout the 1950s, numerous YMCA authors debated this issue. Some wished to know where the “C” was in YMCA, others what it meant. and still others whether it were possible for the “Y” to be a Christian organization accepting of those with alternate religious faiths. R. H. Espy, for his part, concluded that the “Y” ought to remain strictly Protestant, since otherwise it might “be diluted by its desire to serve young men of all confessions and faiths.”<sup>12</sup> But the majority of “Y” officials believed that for the “Y” to be religious, it need not support a particular creed.<sup>13</sup>

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8. Glen Heathers, *Young People and World Citizenship* (New York: Association Press, 1950), v. 14.

9. George C. McGhee, “The Y.M.C.A. in Today’s World,” *Y Work with Youth* (May 1951): 3.

10. William Overholt, “The Ecumenical Opportunities of the YMCA,” *National Council Bulletin* (March 1958): 1.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Espy, “The Y.M.C.A. Reaffirms its Mission,” *Christianity and Crisis* 15 (October 17, 1955): 132.

13. “Membership Inclusiveness and Religious Effectiveness?” *National Council Bulletin* (March 1950): 6.

In the end, both sides agreed that however they defined religion, theirs was certainly a religious era. Indeed, noted the *NCB* in 1954,

[t]here is apparent in America a spiritual seeking and hunger. In this day of crisis, the heritage of our Christian faith becomes even more precious, and more Americans are turning to their churches for communion with God and the renewal of their religious faith.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence of the churches' revival abounded everywhere in the 1950s in the form of new buildings and increased membership. Yet some wondered if deep down this boom were fueled more by secular than religious impulses. Alan Hugg in a 1950 Columbia Ph.D. thesis speculated that among rank-and-file YMCA members at least postwar religiosity was but a gloss. Wrote Hugg:

Although continuing to use the words and phrases of traditional Christian thought, Y.M.C.A. objectives have in fact often become predominately secular in nature. 'Democracy' and 'respect for the individual' have in turn also become symbols of unity which [are] surrogate for concepts that are poorly understood if at all.<sup>15</sup>

One likely contributor to the evanescence of the 1950s religious revival was what religion and leisure historian Gordon Dahl calls the postwar "leisure revolution." As job benefits increased, he writes, and as the standard work week shortened from 60 hours in 1900 to 40 hours in 1950, people's commitment to such traditional, self-denying values as the Protestant work ethic declined.<sup>16</sup> This decline did not, of course, sit well with old school leaders of the YMCA, many of whom believed, in Dahl's words, that "leisure was still something to be earned by work and to be spent in constructive activities."<sup>17</sup> The challenge, as these men saw it, was for the "Y" to take hold of people's "newfound leisure time," and to prevent it from being "squandered thoughtlessly."<sup>18</sup>

Ensuring that people spent their leisure hours constructively was no easy task. After all, argues Dahl, most Americans had by 1950 "moved to a new moral equilibrium—an equilibrium which allowed more pleasure for less pain."<sup>19</sup> And this meant that whereas associations had once labored to show how recreation *could* build character, now they had to demonstrate why it *should* do so. In particular, averred Dr. Ellis H. Champlin of Springfield College (an old YMCA school), the "Y" needed to underscore the importance of recreation to democracy. For "democracy is dependent upon the ideals and

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14. "The Power and Unity of Our Faith," *National Council Bulletin* (January 1955): 4.

15. Alan Eddy Hugg, "Informal Adult Education in the Y.M.C.A.: A Historical Study" (Columbia University: Ph.D. thesis, 1950), 189.

16. Gordon J. Dahl, "Protestant Responses to a Leisure Revolution, 1845–1970" (University of Minnesota: Ph.D. thesis, 1947), prefatory abstract.

17. *Ibid.*, 121.

18. James M. Hardy, *Focus on the Family* (New York: Association Press, 1966), intro.

19. Dahl, "Protestant Responses to a Leisure Revolution," 121.

behavior of the people,” he believed; “[and] while physical education makes no exclusive claims for influencing behavior. thinking people regard it as a very potent series of learning experiences. which encourage the practice of fair play, cooperation. courtesy and other wholesome and constructive relationships.”<sup>20</sup>

But while Champlin took the highest aim of physical education to be “personal and social development in terms of all-round fitness to live the good life in our democracy,”<sup>21</sup> other “Y” men still preferred to laud fitness for its spiritual benefits. “When body physique. pleasure. stimulation of the mind and other aspects become an end in themselves.” warned the Rev. O. C. Sappenfield, “the spiritual purpose of the YMCA is lost.”<sup>22</sup>

One thing upon which both Champlin and Sappenfield could agree was that if YMCA gymnasiums were to remain either “laboratories for democratic experience”<sup>23</sup> or places for “developing Christian character,”<sup>24</sup> they would first have to resist the proliferation of what E. O. Harbin (former “Y” staffer and author of such best-selling works as *Phunology* [1945] and *Games of Many Nations* [1954]) called “uncivilized” and “woefully inadequate” leisure-time interests—interests such as “bridge, dancing, auto-riding, and the movies.”<sup>25</sup>

It was for the purpose of counteracting these “stereotyped. tinsel, and hollow activities . . . devoid of nourishing elements that would enrich life” that Harbin had, in 1935, created the Church Recreation Movement: a movement which lasted roughly into the mid-1950s.<sup>26</sup> Many of the certifiably “wholesome” activities popularized by Harbin and the Church Recreationists (including such things as nature study, bead and leather craft, skits, games, stunts, folk-singing and, in particular folk-dancing) found quick acceptance in the YMCA, which no less than Harbin was in the market for ways by which excess leisure time could be put to good use. In the end, however, folk-dancing and leather craft proved no match for the forces working to undermine the old Protestant mind-set. Prosperity in conjunction with the instant gratification promised by both Hollywood and Madison Avenue finally convinced most Americans that recreation need only be prized for its own sake, and not because it elevated either soul or society. Thus while a 1958 *NCB* article noted that “participation and enrollment in programs of YMCA physical education have greatly increased over the 15 years.” it lamented that fully 35 percent of those who used the “Y” “indicated they

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20. Ellis H. Champlin, “Physical Education and the Good Life,” *National Council Bulletin* (January 1956): 5.

21. *Ibid.*, 4.

22. Ray M. Snyder, “Christian Discipline in YMCA Physical Education,” typewritten MS, 1965, Babson Library Archives, Springfield College, 5.

23. Champlin, “Physical Education and the Good Life,” 4.

24. Snyder, “Christian Discipline in YMCA Physical Education,” 5.

25. Dahl, “Protestant Responses to a Leisure Revolution,” 107.

26. *Ibid.*, 115.

didn't know, weren't sure, or didn't feel qualified to comment about the purpose of their YMCA."<sup>27</sup>

### The "Y" in the '60s: The Hazards of Being Relevant

For various reasons, YMCA movement into the 1960s was accompanied by a sharp devaluation of the "world citizenship" ideal. Khrushchev's notorious "shoe-pounding" tantrum in the United Nations, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the country's growing involvement in Vietnam, and the numerous Third World nations intoning "Yankee go home" all worked to convince Americans that the world was a larger and scarier place than they had hitherto thought.

Besides, there was enough happening in the United States itself to divert "Y" attention from the world scene. Middle-class emigration to the suburbs, for example, and the ever-dwindling number of city-bound Protestant farmboys brought many inner-city YMCAs into direct contact with urban blight. And evidence that the palatial residence halls of the 1910s and 1920s were devolving into flophouses and same-sex trysting places only heightened YMCA interest in domestic reform. With pockets of cities resembling what the YMCA's Mark Shinnerer called "spreading sores which threaten to become killing cancers," dreams for world unity had to be put on hold. "The new frontier of American democracy is the great cities of America," wrote Shinnerer. "It is up to you and to me to decide whether or not American democracy at home lives or dies."<sup>28</sup>

In its push to save democracy in the 1960s the "Y" took on more than just urban poverty: it also faced a whole phalanx of difficult social issues: issues ranging from homosexuality (which the "Y" dealt with under the heading "Code H") to the need for more and better paid "Y" female employees. "We are living in a revolution," summed up Judge Leon A. Higginbotham, "and the YMCA is involved."<sup>29</sup>

The question over just how involved to become, however, caused a rift between the Association's oldstyle liberals and its more radical visionaries. "Basically our boards have been Protestant, white, and Republican—sort of WASP nests," admitted Chicago Secretary Bruce Cole in 1966. "Basketball and swimming won't disappear from the 'Y' schedule," promised another Association secretary, "but we won't ignore the social questions. God, it's late enough but we're really moving now."<sup>30</sup>

An early casualty in the rush to make the "Y" more relevant was that long-time YMCA staple, character-building. Already diminished by the 1950s' "world citizenship" campaign, character-building finally succumbed

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27. "The YMCA's Place in Health and Physical Education," *National Council Bulletin* (June/July 1958), 8–9.

28. Mark C. Shinnerer, "The YMCA on the Big City Frontier," *National Council Bulletin* (March 1962): 1.

29. Leon A. Higginbotham, "We Are Living in a Revolution and the YMCA Is Involved," *National Council Bulletin* (October 1968): 3.

30. "New Shape of the YMCA," *Newsweek* 111 (July 11, 1966): 86.

to the 1960s' penchant for placing society's health above personal morality. As Richard Richards, author of *The YMCA in the Streets*, put it, action had now passed from "the home or street corner gang or the Y gym" into "city hall, the welfare office, or precinct station," leaving the Association's new breed of employees hostile "to the seemingly stagnant and irrelevant activities which pass as program in too many YMCAs."<sup>31</sup>

Scarcely less imperiled than character-building was that other "Y" fixture, Christianity. According to a 1966 *Newsweek* article, "local officers now generously admit Jews and even atheists with only a wink at the traditional pledge of Christian faith."<sup>32</sup> A few, of course, opposed secularization, one "Y" man complaining in 1965 that the very word 'Christian' "has been so broadly interpreted by our Associations that it now means anyone of good will."<sup>33</sup> But in general most approved of the YMCA's becoming more "realistic"<sup>34</sup>—a stance reflected in the 1966 decision by 800 "Y" secretaries to redefine Jesus. In the words of that decision, "Jesus was not popular with the ruling class in government and religion." Instead he was a "rebel," a figure to be respected, not for his divine parentage, but for the intensity of his social commitment.<sup>35</sup>

Mickey Clampit in a 1969 study of the YMCA's Camp Becket in the Berkshires noted that "in membership, in ritual, and in symbolism [the camp] was largely non-Protestant and even non-Christian—linked to the broader Protestant tradition only by the concept of man's duty to build the kingdom of heaven here on earth." The muscular, blue-eyed, character-building Jesus who had once played such a large role in the camp's religious life was gone, noted Clampit; moreover, nothing, not even Jesus the "rebel" had arrived to take his place. The old "Chumship Service," wherein boys had taken Jesus to be their personal chum, was also gone. In its place was an evening candle-light service, at the height of which boys rose to pledge their commitment to building a better world.<sup>36</sup>

How, then, was this better world to be achieved? The "Y" had a number of answers to this question, and foremost among them was "by an extension of civil rights," a long-time YMCA objective.<sup>37</sup> As far back as 1910, it was the YMCA's decision "that we go on record as urging all Associations to take definite steps toward the goal of making possible full participation in the Association program without discrimination as to race, color, or nationality."

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31. YMCA Office of Urban Development, *The YMCA in the Streets* (New York: YMCA Office of Urban Development, 1969): 1–3.

32. "New Shape," 86.

33. Snyder, "Christian Discipline in YMCA Physical Education," 1.

34. John R. Burkhart, "The Changing Image of the YMCA," *National Council Bulletin* (March/April 1963): 4.

35. "New Shape," 86.

36. Mickey K. Clampit, "Religious Subculture of the YMCA Camp" (Harvard University: Ph.D. thesis, 1969), 241, 232.

37. "Plan Now for Inter-Racial Progress," *Y Work With Youth* (April 1964): 2.

And in 1967 the National Board voted 294 to 11 that member Associations certify annually that their programs operated “without any discrimination on the basis of race, color or national origin.”<sup>38</sup>

That the YMCA’s goals regarding civil rights had changed so little between 1910 and 1967 testifies to the steadfastness of its commitment. But if the goals and the language remained unchanged, not so the reasoning behind them. A “Y” vote in support of institutionalized racism in 1910, for example, would have belied the Association’s character-building ideal, an ideal which promised to the young man who worked hard endless opportunity. By the 1960s, in contrast it was not the individual but society which had to prove itself worthy. In the words of Mark Shinnerer:

We have reached the level of civilization in this country at which we are unwilling to let people starve. We should move up the scale a step or two to that level at which we are unwilling to let people fail to achieve decent self realization.<sup>39</sup>

Once it befell society to provide for the individual’s welfare, the push to ameliorate society, to make it capable of fulfilling its responsibilities, took on added urgency. Thus when President Johnson announced his “War on Poverty,” the “Y” felt compelled to enlist, and to fight the battle on all fronts—assisting underprivileged youth, aiding handicapped children, and generally doing what it could to ease conditions which bred discontent. As the result of these efforts, says Elmer Johnson, “the YMCA might well have achieved its finest hour.”<sup>40</sup>

Such activism required money, however, and in the process of procuring funds the “Y” violated long-standing tradition by going beyond its members to seek government grants. “The YMCA has always taken responsibility towards its poorer neighbors,” explained National Board President Wilbur M. McFeely.

There have always been camperships for boys who could not pay, free membership and clubs and even YMCA branches for children, teenagers and adults in neighborhoods where residents can pay only token membership fees. But now the need is so great, the problems of our inner cities so critical and the costs of remedying them so high, that no independent, voluntary agency can ‘go it alone’ and do effective work.<sup>41</sup>

McFeely’s decision to seek government aid was startling enough. But there were other, equally significant departures from tradition in the 1960s, including: a.) the decision by youth recruiters to relax customary restrictions

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38. “Y Takes Positions on Public Issues,” *YMCA Bulletin* (October 1971): 13.

39. Shinnerer, “The YMCA on the Big City Frontier,” 1.

40. Johnson, *The History of YMCA Physical Education*, 351.

41. Wilbur M. McFeely, “Urban Action Offers YMCA Chance to Work with New Program, People,” *National Council Bulletin* (October 1968): 2.

against smoking, drinking and profanity;<sup>42</sup> and b.) an end to the Association's political reticence.

Why were these changes necessary? Because, declared the National Council in 1968,

The YMCA, in order to relate maximally to the human disruptions of our time, [must] be prepared to share in the development of public opinion and policy by taking positions on the issues that have deep bearing on the lives of persons.<sup>43</sup>

That the Council meant what it said was clear from its 1971 repudiation of the war in Vietnam. But unfortunately for it, such stands often engendered controversy: controversy so intense as to belie the Association's supposed liberal consensus. In fact, observed Robert Harlan in 1971, there appeared significant disagreement within the Association as to where the Great Society should be heading. "Our present programs no longer seem to function adequately in terms of societal needs," he admitted, "and are under attack from young and old, radical and conservative members and citizens."<sup>44</sup>

Especially discouraging to "Y" reformers was that Association efforts on behalf of the young and disadvantaged should gain so little approbation. Always before the "Y" had considered itself full of solutions; now, however, people were calling it "part of the problem." In Westfield, New Jersey, for example, a black awareness group heavily criticized its local "Y" sponsor. According to the group, the "Y" not only withheld scholarship money from blacks; it also designed its programs with the intention of keeping minorities out. Said one group spokesperson: "The Y has 'white' written all over it."<sup>45</sup>

Some linked the YMCA's social failures, together with the acrimony they engendered, to a breakdown in moral values, a breakdown particularly evident among American youth. Thus in a 1968 *Y Work with Youth* article entitled "The Fraudulent New Morality," Paul Popenoe blasted the "lack of self-control" and "lack of self-discipline" he saw being displayed by America's young people.<sup>46</sup>

More conciliatory than Popenoe was the National Board's 1968 handling of a fiery anti-law and order resolution—a resolution proposed by youth leaders. Although the Board rejected the resolution, it did agree to a compromise which, while not calling incarceration itself unjust, did at least concede that "law and order is too often a manifestation of racism." After the compromise, the Board and its youth met again for a "discussion [which] left each age group somewhat baffled. What they regarded as the rigidity of the

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42. Johnson, *The History of YMCA Physical Education*, 351.

43. "Council Suggests Six Steps for Tackling Urban Problems," *National Council Bulletin* (June/July 1968): 3.

44. "45th Council Asks End to War; Drops Age of 'Youth' Members from 36 to 30 Years of Age," *YMCA Bulletin* (June/July 1971): 2–3.

45. "Black Awareness Group Declares White All Over Y," *YMCA Bulletin* (March 1970): 9.

46. Paul Popenoe, "The Fraudulent New Morality," *Y Work With Youth* (January 1968): 2–4.

Board's agenda and the lack of accommodation in the YMCA's structure was frustrating to the young men and women."<sup>47</sup>

No matter how "baffling" the 1960s' generation gap, "Y" leaders maintained throughout that, though "differences are real . . . a new generation can learn to live together and accept each other truly."<sup>48</sup> Thus when he heard people saying that the teen-age YMCA group Hi-Y was dead, that it was irrelevant to contemporary teen-agers, and that its programs no longer worked, James G. Stooke vehemently disagreed. "The position of our YMCA branch laymen, staff, and this paper is that Hi-Y is not dead," averred Stooke, "nor absent, nor silent. Instead it is a program with as much dynamic potential in today's complex teen-age society as it had with its Chapman, Kansas. beginning in 1889."<sup>49</sup>

As it turned out, Stooke was largely wrong. For one thing, Hi-Y (its name too reminiscent of pot-smoking) did in fact die out everywhere but the Midwest. Its modern-day equivalent is the YMCA "Youth Leaders" program. Second and more importantly, events seemed to gainsay Stooke's pledge of frictionless intergenerational relations. At the Association's 1969 St. Louis Convention, for example, "militant" students, "disenchanted with the prospect of a Saturday spent in what they regarded as fun and frolic when it could be devoted to 'serious' topics," attempted forcibly to effect a program change and had to be turned back by guards and "a squad of hard-nosed riot police."<sup>50</sup>

Considering the 1960s' race and generational tensions, it is little wonder that YMCA physical education programs remained outside the limelight. Except for the 1962 Sputnik crisis (during which "Y" leaders expressed concern regarding young America's "softness" vis-à-vis Soviet children),<sup>51</sup> Association emphases were less on the gym and more on such comparatively "relevant" programs as "Interracial, intercultural day camp" and "Coed high school camp for the disadvantaged." Gary Lautens found the plethora of new programs confusing, and in a humorous 1965 piece for the NCB joked about how hard it was becoming simply to work out at the "Y." Only after he had turned down dancing lessons, cooking classes, language instruction, and a host of other programs, wrote Lautens, was he finally allowed access to his local gym.<sup>52</sup>

YMCA directors may never have actually discouraged people from exercise in the '60s but it is likely that they considered exercise less central to the

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47. "Youth and Adults Debate Law and Order at Fall National Board Meeting in Chicago," *National Council Bulletin* (November 1968): 2.

48. "Barriers Between the Generations," *Y Work With Youth* (March 1968): 1.

49. James G. Stooke, "Is Hi-Y Dead?" *Y Work With Youth* (October/November 1968): 1.

50. "Convention '69," *YMCA Bulletin* (August/September 1969): 2-5. At issue were student demands that the "Y" hire more minorities, oppose the Vietnam War, and fight the draft—all of which the Board agreed to discuss; only not under threat of force.

51. Clarence G. Moser, "Fitness for Living," *Y Work With Youth* (October 1962): 1.

52. Gary Lautens, "Sure, You Can Still Exercise at Y—Just Don't Tell Anybody About It!" *National Council Bulletin* (October 1965): 9.

Association's overall purpose. This view received confirmation in a 1971 survey of "19 Noted Americans." The "Y" deserved praise, the experts agreed, for having become "more active in major societal frontiers." Yet "the majority felt a disproportionate amount of YMCA resources is still being invested in recreational activities for middle-class members." "Most of the experts," reported the survey, "agreed the YMCA should shift from a leisure-time organization to one that is relevant to the major changes and social issues of our time." Or as one authority put it, "The YMCA should quit being what it has been and devote its resources to major community and societal problems."<sup>53</sup>

It is, of course, likely that had the YMCA ever implemented this advice it would have encountered major opposition. For despite its alleged social irrelevance, Elmer Johnson notes that "physical education continued [throughout the '60s] to be the major area of interest for members: 226,000 groups (55 percent of all groups) were now involved in aquatics or other physical education interests."<sup>54</sup>

The sheer number of people being attracted to the "Y" was also growing. By 1969, total membership stood at 5,548,848—a 45.7-percent increase over 1959. By no means were all of these impassioned young men and women committed to eradicating social injustice. Many were "businessmen who flock to the Y for noontime workouts."<sup>55</sup> These latter may well have constituted the YMCA's equivalent to Nixon's "silent majority." For the time being they waited; but once the Great Society burst into fragments, they were to rise up and make their voices heard.

### **The YMCA and the "Me Generation": Looking Good: Feeling Good**

Social activism in the "Y" crested in 1972, when the National Board proposed dropping the foundational 1855 "Paris Basis": a pledge committing the "Y" to the evangelization of young men. "Changing conditions of the world and changing language," noted *YMCA Today*, "have given rise in recent years to the feeling that the time had come to reconsider this statement."<sup>56</sup>

The main objection to the Paris Basis was its narrowness. Young men and Christianity were no longer the Association's chief foci, the Board maintained; rather inclusivity and social reform were being stressed. And this was reflected in what the Board hoped would become the Association's new covenant, two of whose promises were: a.) "to welcome into its fellowship and service men and women of all ages, of all races, of all nations, and of all religious points of view"; and b.) "to strive for societies founded upon social justice, peace, and the recognition of the dignity, freedom, and equal worth of all persons."<sup>57</sup>

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53. Burkhart, "19 Noted Americans Talk on the YMCA," *YMCA Bulletin* (December 1971): 8–9.

54. Johnson, *The History of YMCA Physical Education*, 345.

55. "New Shape," 86.

56. "Paris Basis: Replace, Modify, or Reaffirm?" *YMCA Today* (June/July, 1972): 10.

57. *Ibid.*, 11.

Nor was this all. For in addition to reformulating the Association's goals, the Board had a "5-year plan" whereby those goals could be achieved. And this plan specifically called for the implementation of those things the Association had been stressing throughout the 1960s namely:

Eliminating personal and institutional racism; changing the conditions that foster alienation, delinquency, and crime; reducing health problems by strengthening physical and mental health; strengthening family structures; and joining people from other countries in building international understanding and world peace.<sup>58</sup>

These were all admirable goals. But were they attainable within the span of five years? Of this the YMCA appeared less and less sure, signaling that perhaps the 5-year plan was not the beginning of an era, but an end.

The first setback encountered by the 5-year plan came in 1973, when the World YMCA, meeting in Uganda, soundly defeated the National Board's alternative to the Paris Basis. Openly concerned that abandoning the Basis would be tantamount to abandoning Christ, the World "Y" expressed its wish "to retain the Christian identity and purpose of this world movement."<sup>59</sup> Equally detrimental to the 5-year plan were flagging moral energies. As YMCA member Elise Brett put it, "[Americans] are in a less buoyant mood than Americans are popularly supposed to be in, because of the Vietnam War, the ghetto problem, violence used as a means of civic or political protest, crime in the streets and the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King."<sup>60</sup> Brett herself saw these problems as spurs to even greater social reform, but others demurred. Many, in fact, appeared tired of endlessly being asked to give of themselves; never being congratulated for their efforts but only asked to give more. It was the beginning, believes sociologist Robert Bellah, of an "era of limits"—limits both material and emotional.<sup>61</sup>

A 1973 *YMCA Today* article written by evangelist Billy Graham proved to be prophetic of the new mood. "I know," said Graham, "that there are many problems facing America today: the Middle East war; fuel shortages; inflation; balance of payments; disillusionment in government . . . But," he continued, "it's becoming clearer to me that the main problem—and I know this sounds simplistic, but it's true—the main problem is in the hearts of men." Those who insisted "that the fulfillment of the Gospel message is exclusively to be found in the act of physically binding up a sick world" were wrong, Graham asserted; having oneself healed through an acceptance of Christ was also imperative.<sup>62</sup>

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58. "National Board Approves 5-Year Goals," *YMCA Today* (May 1972): 6.

59. "World YMCA Meets in Uganda, Reaffirms Its Christocentric Character," *Christian Century* 90 (September 5, 1973): 360.

60. Elise M. Brett, "Got Enough to Worry About Now?" *National Council Bulletin* (November 1968): 5.

61. Robert N. Bellah, *e. al., Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 266.

62. Billy Graham, "Rising to Opportunity," *YMCA Today* (Winter 1973): 4-5.

Graham's plea for Christian renewal brought mixed results. On the one hand, a long-time commitment to ecumenicalism and the religious diversity of its membership precluded a "Y" return to religious exclusivity. On the other hand, incidents such as Watergate were inclining many to accept Graham's contention that a nation's moral worth resided not in government, but rather in the hearts of its citizens.

A distrust of government in turn changed the way organizations like the "Y" viewed themselves vis-à-vis society. In 1970, for example, "Y" leaders were praising the Great Society while chastening themselves for failing to live up to its precepts. By 1980, in contrast, "Y" leaders were judging the Great Society bankrupt while finding solace in their own moral integrity. "In an era of chaos, confusion and pessimism," summed up a 1979 publication. "the Y is still to be trusted."<sup>63</sup>

Another contributor to the YMCA's embattled image of itself during the 1970s was the eclipse of its erstwhile allies, the mainline Protestant churches. Communitarian in an age of privatism, unable supposedly to distinguish the topical from the eternal, and in general suffering from what Robert Bellah calls "quasi-therapeutic blandness," the mainline churches were in bad straits.<sup>64</sup> Ever since the 1960s, their impact on society had been receding, both in numerical terms and in terms of overall influence. As the YMCA's Paul Limbert noted in 1974, "The religious scene in America today is confusing if not chaotic. While mainline churches struggle to keep deficits down and membership up, fringe groups are booming."<sup>65</sup>

But it was not only churches; families, too, were in trouble. Indeed, noted one "Y" publication,

[at a time when] the church is facing lessened influence; family life is openly ridiculed in the mass media: [and] education has abandoned character building the Y may be the only values-oriented, human care organization serving all religions, races, ages, and communities which is still strong enough to make a difference.<sup>66</sup>

The fact, of course, that the "Y" aspired to satisfy *all* segments of society gravely hampered its ability to instill in people very definite notions of right and wrong. Still, maintaining "values" ("basic beliefs about what is good or what ought to be")<sup>67</sup> was essential; the very fact that there appeared to be such a dearth of them made the Association's task even more imperative. As an article

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63. Russ Kohl and Win Colton, eds., *Enriching Parenting and Family Life Through YMCA Program: A Resource Manual for YMCA Professional Directors* (Foster City, CA: The National YMCA Family Communications Skills Center, 1979), 4.

64. See Steven Tipton and Mary Douglas, *Religion and America: Spirituality in a Secular Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

65. Paul M. Limbert, "How Open and Still Christian?" *YMCA Today* (Fall 1974): 16–17.

66. *Y into the 80s*, misc. pamphlet. n.d., Babson Library Archives, Springfield College. 10.

67. National YMCA Values Education Center, *Values Education and the YMCA* (LaGrange, IL: National YMCA Values Education Center. 1979), 10.

in *YMCA Today* put it. "The recent accent on values has developed in response to the turmoil in America in the last few years. Corruption in every layer of government, increasing crime in the streets—and elsewhere, drug addiction among school youths, the whole horde of all-too-familiar modern problems has raised community to the immediacy of front page news."<sup>68</sup>

In order to preserve values, the "Y" moved to strengthen individual conscience and the family. For the family, it founded the National YMCA Family Communications Skills Center in Palo Alto, California (1970). For individual conscience, it established the National YMCA Values Education Center in Akron, Ohio (1974). Both these institutions were entrusted with disseminating values, and toward this end they relied heavily on then-current models of "values clarification."

In some respects, values clarification harkened back to the YMCA's old character-building days. In other ways, however, values clarification differed profoundly from the past. For one thing, values clarificationists, while acknowledging the importance of values, refused to label one set of values better than another. Whereas the character-builders knew what kind of product they wished to turn out, values clarificationists were taught never to impose their values on others. Simply put, said Jerry Glashagel, "*there are no right or wrong answers. You are dealing with feelings, opinions and personal concerns. Whatever the individual wants to share is appropriate for him. Whatever he says is 'real.'*"<sup>69</sup>

By assisting individuals to grow however they chose, the values clarificationists believed they were reducing rather than exacerbating social chaos. This was because they thought society depended to a large degree on people with a high sense of self-esteem. "We believe," wrote one, "that the strongest people in our families, neighborhoods, communities, and nation are those who believe in themselves and have a healthy self-image."<sup>70</sup>

Cultivating respect for individual values was to remain an important YMCA goal throughout the '70s and '80s. But at the same time that the "Y" was filling its literature with praise for the individual and his/her values, much of its material wealth was being directed toward the body and its needs. This is not to say that the push toward fitness and a fixation on values were mutually exclusive phenomena—quite the contrary. Both, for instance, catered to the individual: values clarificationists ensuring that he/she felt good about where he/she stood on things, and physical therapists seeing to it that he/she felt good—period. Both were also in their way repudiations of civic-mindedness, the idea that the individual's well-being is linked to the well-being of society.

Not everyone in the "Y" had lost his/her taste for social reform, noted Leonard Duhl in a 1975 address before the Association's physical education directors. But clearly many had. For in Duhl's words:

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68. Jerry Glashagel, "The Values Element—What Is It?" *YMCA Today* (Winter 1976): 7.

69. *Ibid.*, 13.

70. James F. Bunting, *et al.*, "The YMCA from 1939 to 1979," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16 (Winter 1979): 93–93.

We have been through a period in the 1960s where we were inundated by a tremendous amount of stuff—a lot of challenge; so much so that we have had an overload and we have almost pushed it away. We do not know much about riots and poor folks and a lot of other things anymore. We have sort of pushed it away. There is what Peter Marin said in *Harpers*: a triumph of narcissism—we are only concerned about ourselves.<sup>71</sup>

Narcissistic concern for oneself and physical well-being differed from the rugged individualism of yesteryear. Then one had striven to remake the world in one's own image, to impose one's values on the common herd, and finally to wrest salvation itself from the hands of God. But the attainment of such far-off goals as personal salvation has lost much of its attraction, argues Christopher Lasch; and in fact

[t]he contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation . . . but for the feeling, the momentary illusion of personal well-being, health, and psychic security.<sup>72</sup>

To some extent, this demand for personal security has altered the purpose of the YMCA. It used to be that the “Y” prided itself on equipping individuals with the strength necessary to transform society. Today, however, the emphasis rests more on providing for the individual's “personal” needs. In the words of National Board Chairman Sam Evans, “Your local Y is committed to your local community and your personal wellness.”<sup>73</sup> Not only was the “Y” committed, in the 1970s and 1980s, to providing its members with a sense of well-being; it was also set on achieving this state as quickly as possible. The “leisure revolution” and its vitiating effect on the old Protestant work ethic had not abated since the 1950s. By the 1970s, people appeared doubly inclined to store up their treasure neither in heaven nor in personal savings accounts. Instead, they lobbied for immediate fulfillment of their desires. As one YMCA guide warned in 1978, “participants and parents want immediate payoff and will easily drop out of a program if this is not the case.”<sup>74</sup>

In the 1950s, the “Y” had responded to like demands for an “immediate payoff” with an old-fashioned array of “wholesome” activities—activities which were fun but at the same time character-building. By the 1970s, in contrast, the “Y” appeared less eager to elevate the public's leisure time and more ready to admit that recreation could be a good in and of itself. Once this change in attitude was finalized, physical educators could cease justifying

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71. YMCA Physical Education Society, “YMCA Health and Physical Education: A Plan for the '80s.” report of conference held at the Sheraton O'Hara Motor Hotel [city unknown] on October 16–17, 1975. Babson Library Archives, Springfield College. 15.

72. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1978). 7.

73. Sam Evans, “A Few Words.” *Discovery YMCA* 6:1 (Spring 1988): 4.

74. YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles, et al., *YMCA Staff Notebook* (Los Angeles YMCA of Metropolitan Los Angeles, 1978), 1–1.

their product on the grounds that it built character or team spirit. Instead, they had merely to announce that, in the words of “Y” staffer Bob Kleinmann, “done right, exercise feels incredibly good.”<sup>75</sup>

Of course, therapeutism is not the only contributor to the post-sixties fitness boom, writes psychologist Barry Glassner, because “it is also for profoundly social reasons that we’ve directed so much attention to our bodies in the 1970s and 1980s.” In particular, he points to the fact that TV is making appearances more important than ever before; and “increasingly, the ideal images are also the standards against which our employers judge us.”<sup>76</sup>

One sign of employability being linked to fitness is the YMCA’s burgeoning involvement in corporate training programs. Virtually non-existent in 1979, these programs (wherein “Ys” strive to improve the health of corporate workers) are now common.<sup>77</sup> Nor is their influence merely quantitative. For as *Time* noted in 1986:

In cities and suburbs across the country, the Y is shedding its image of servicable shabbiness and putting up gleaming facilities that rival the ritziest of private clubs.<sup>78</sup>

The spectacle of the “Y” going upscale does not please everyone. In particular, Washington, D.C., writer Arthur Levine expresses dismay that his posh new downtown “Y” offers neither low fees nor much access to children. “What I found was not a Y at all,” he writes, “at least not the Y [I] had known in the past, but something else entirely: a fancy new health club for the rich, disguised in the tax-exempt, non-profit wrappings of the YMCA.”<sup>79</sup>

Bob Kleinmann, however, sees nothing wrong in making the “Y” “every bit as viable as its commercial competitors.” “When I was growing up,” he remembers, “the YMCA was an outfit that did a lot of good—but didn’t do very well, if you know what I mean.” But those days are disappearing, he says; and soon the “Y” will be known less for its “\$1-a-year teenagers” than for its state-of-the-art exercising equipment.<sup>80</sup>

Is Kleinmann right that the “Y” will one day symbolize nothing but sport? Certainly it appeared so at the height of the 1980s. But recent articles in *Discovery YMCA* suggest that the fitness boom may be ebbing, and that the “Y” ought once again to combine sport, religion, and social reform: the three elements of its historic Red Triangle.<sup>81</sup>

75. Bob Kleinmann, “Why Exercise? It Is Virtue Rewarded,” *Discovery YMCA* 1:4 (May/June 1983): 19.

76. Barry Glassner, *BODIES: Why We Look the Way We Do (and How We Feel About It)* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1988), 13, 173.

77. Syma Jelen, “Employee Health: Working Out?” *Discovery YMCA* 5:3 (Winter 1987): 7. In 1986, corporate fitness programs existed in 68 percent of all YMCAs.

78. “Putting on the Ritz at the ‘Y.’” *Time* [127] (July 21, 1986): 65.

79. Arthur Levine, “Serving the Rich: The Washington Y.” *Washington Monthly* 10 (December 1978): 13.

80. Kleinmann, “The YMCA: The Times, They Are A-Changin’!” *Discovery YMCA* 1:2 (January 1983): 11.

81. See for example Paul Duke, *et al.*, “Dynamite Issues for the ‘90s.” *Discovery YMCA* 6:3 (Winter 1988): 22–29; and George Leupold, “The C Is Alive and Well.” *Discovery YMCA* 46 (Spring 1993): 3.