

**Apostolic Awakening – Hoerde 1919 a Model
International Weekend
16-18.8.2019
in Schoenstatt**

**Foundation, Setting Out, Growth
YMCA Munich**

**Thomas Römer, YMCA Munich
17 August 2019**

Dear friends in the Schoenstatt Movement,
Thank you very much for your invitation. My wife and I are very happy to be with you.

In these days we are looking at the exciting processes by which founding initiatives develop freely, and how they have the power in their development to become what was in them at the beginning. In the Movements there is a process of growth that is also endangered. I imagine it like a tree. It grows out of a seed or cutting, and grows, it yields its fruits. Movements are organisms.

1. My background: the YMCA, Munich

I would like to start my meditation with saying something about my background. I come from a consciously Evangelical-Lutheran family. Many of my ancestors were Evangelical pastors. I myself became an Evangelical pastor and belong to the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Bavaria.

However, my own experiences with the Christian faith, and my conscious turn towards Jesus Christ are connected with the YMCA in Munich. Since my tenth year I have been a member of the YMCA in Munich. At the time I was in a youth group.

2. The start of the YMCA in the 19th century

Today the YMCA is over 130 years old. It was founded in 1886.

However, the beginnings of the YMCA Movement began already in the middle of the 19th century as more and more young adults moved from the country to the towns. Young Christians saw the inner and outer suffering of many of these uprooted young men. Bible groups and youth work started that also saw to accommodation and other social problems of the young people.

In England George Williams (1821-1905) founded the very first YMCA in London.¹ That was on 6 June 1944. So this year we are celebrating 175 years of the YMCA all over the world.

Today the YMCA is a worldwide Movement. It is present in over 120 countries and has about 60 million members.

Our founder, George Williams, arrived in London when he was 20 in order to work as a draper's assistant with Hitchcock & Rogers. The everyday lives of the young men from the country was difficult. They usually had a six-day week, working 13-16 hours a day. The young men were cooped up in tiny dormitories at night far away from their families, and left to their own devices. Taken out of their usual social ties, many of them went astray and took to drinking, and ended in life-threatening difficulties.

In June 1844 what is now called the starting shot for the YMCA took place: a group of young men around George Williams met in the Hitchcock and Rogers building in order to consider what could be done to alleviate the catastrophic working conditions in London, and for the many young men who had hardly any orientation in their lives. The result of their discussion was the foundation of the first Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Through founding their association they wanted to gather Christian men for a common spiritual meeting, and help them to become aware of their social responsibility. This association became a worldwide Movement. George Williams and his associates found many imitators.

3. The Paris Basis

In 1855, in conjunction with the World Exhibition in Paris, 99 young men from nine nations, who were members of such Christian associations for young men, met in Paris.

Despite the difference of their associations, they had one thing in common: Jesus Christ was an absolutely essential part of their lives, and they wanted young men all over the world to get to know Jesus Christ and allow him to influence their lives. They expressed this in a statement that still today forms the foundation and mission statement of the YMCA all over the world. We call this statement the "Paris Basis:

"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 faith and in their life, and to associate their efforts for the extension of his Kingdom amongst young men."

¹ In what follows I am quoting Tilo Brenner, CVJM Allendorf, who based himself on the book: *"Die Größ des kleinen Anfangs. Eine Idee läuft um die Welt"*, by Siegfried Fischer.

The YMCA started as an association for young men. Today its membership is open to everyone: Men and women, boys and girls from every people, confession and social level, form the worldwide community of the YMCA.

4. The founding charisms of the YMCA Movement

From the beginning three charisms were alive in the YMCA Movement.

4.1. Evangelisation

Opening the way for young people to discover the Christian faith. What matters is to open up access for young men, the young generation, to faith in Jesus Christ. All events, projects and programmes are designed to bring and testify to the love of Christ.

4.2 Social work

Youth work, YMCA work was understood as making a contribution to creating a humane city and society. It was a battle against every form of degrading the young people, the young generation.

Sport plays an important part in our youth work. In this connection many YMCA members talk enthusiastically about basketball, because it really was discovered by the YMCA.

The social aspect is very effective. Many YMCA members take on an important part in standing up for social justice in their towns and cities. In Bogota, Columbia, for instance, and many other places.

At the start of the YMCA Movement in London it battled against the long hours of work. This was successful. For the free time that resulted, it laid on educational programmes in order to give young men intellectual and spiritual education.

One of the first YMCA members, who had suggested the meeting in 1855 in Paris, was Henri Dunant. He later founded the Red Cross.

4.3 Ecumenism

to serve the unity of Christians.

Already in 1855 the world association gave out as its Biblical motto: "That all may be one" (Jn 17).

The 20th century ecumenical movement, particularly at the beginning, is closely connected with YMCA members.

Take as an example John Mott, born in 1865, who became a member of the American YMCA and worked in fulltime service. In 1910 he led the first World Mission Conference in Edinburgh. This Mission Conference provided an important incentive for the start of the Ecumenical Movement in the 20th century. The World Council of Churches took the Paris Basis as a template for the formulation of its basis.

In 1946 John Mott received the Nobel Peace Prize for his commitment to the Ecumenical Movement and his work in international missionary service.

(In Munich we have called one of our houses, which is also a student residence for our YMCA, the John Mott House.)

5. Different manifestations of YMCA

After 175 years there are YMCA's worldwide with very different characters. From the beginning they have been independent organisations. The YMCA exists in over 120 countries and has around 60 million members, but, as I have said, they are very different YMCAs.

In some areas of the YMCA Movement, the Christian roots of our work are no longer so strong or consciously maintained. Just as in Europe, they have forgotten their Christian roots, yet live from the fruits of the tree. Some YMCAs have become well organised sports clubs, or render good social work in their commitment to the young generation.

However, in other areas a spiritual renewal has taken place in the YMCA in the last decades. They have re-discovered the Christian roots of the Movement. On various continents there are missionary networks that orient themselves to the C in the YMCA.

This has also happened in my YMCA in Munich. This was the essential impulse in the Munich YMCA which we owe to Helmut Niklas, among others. He and his friend, Wilhelm Bläsing saw the Paris Basis as a challenge to live in obligatory togetherness. In this way a Christian community for men and women started in the YMCA who take responsibility for the work of the YMCA, and who form and support it.

6. The foundation of the YMCA in Munich

When the YMCA in Munich was founded 133 years ago, the founding text they chose was: **“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3,11)**. This has remained an important statement for the YMCA in Munich.

With that I have already shown you an important process for the development and growth of a community and Movement. It needs sayings that show the founding impulse and the founding charism of the community and Movement:

For the YMCA in Munich it is this statement in the Letter to the Corinthians: It shows that we base ourselves on the Gospel, on Jesus Christ. He is what matters. He is the basis. This has nothing to say about the structure of the YMCA, it can differ, and, because it is addressed to the young generation, it is also adaptable. The basis remains, but the organisation can change.

An example: This year the young collaborators of the YMCA in Munich have tried out a new format for their leisure time: A leisure time for young people who enjoy computer games. Also here the goal is to bring the love of Christ home to the young people, and the show them how to deal responsibly with the games, as well as creating a genuine community around the table.

The other statement that has been given to us is the Paris Basis, which is also mentioned in the Constitution, which we have to have as a German association. The Paris Basis mentions the charism and calling we have. All that we arrange, organise and do, has its starting point in this Basis.

Thus the Paris Basis states:

“The YMCA seeks to unite ... young men ...” **Unite** is the decisive word. In the YMCA we are concerned with an alliance of people “who regard Jesus Christ as their God and Saviour” – to quote the Basis.

This makes a special characteristic of the YMCA visible. It was effective from the beginning. There were two forms of membership: a membership for participants and another for those working in the association. The principle was: Open membership – everyone can be a member, including non-Christians, but there is a Christian leadership, the active members are Christians.

7. An awakening – the community of collaborators

In 1967 a community of collaborators started in the YMCA in Munich; they unite for a year in order to carry out the work of the YMCA. Always for a year – some have been doing this for over fifty years, and everyone knows that they have united themselves to the YMCA and this community of collaborators for the rest of their lives. However, there is no promise that lasts longer than a year. This creates freedom. It is the condition for this association.

At the start of our community for collaborators there were many sermons and much reflection on the *Ecclesia* of the New Testament. We understood that as a community of collaborators we can and may live *Ecclesia*. We often reflected on an article by the theologian, Emil Brunner, entitled “The *Ecclesia* of the New Testament and the YMCA”. His main statement was: By its very nature the YMCA is Church, or it isn’t the YMCA. And by its nature it is a work; he called it a charitable institution, or it isn’t the YMCA.

The community of collaborators that started in this way in Munich has about seven hundred members today. All age groups from 16 are represented. The oldest is 93. The basic decision fifty years ago was that we wanted to make space for ourselves and to live in union with one another. Thus, on Monday evening there are no open events in the YMCA, instead there is a meeting of collaborators for preparation exchange, Bible studies and prayer.

8. A secular, communitarian and serving order

In preparation for today I asked one of those with responsibility for the YMCA in Munich how he would describe the YMCA in Munich. He replied: We are a secular, communitarian and serving order.

I think this hits the nail on the head:

We are secular – we live wholly in this world, we work and live in the neighbourhood, we are involved as citizens, etc.

We are communitarian – we live in connection with one another, we know about one another, we want to remain united in love for one another. We are brothers and sisters with our Brother and Lord Jesus in our midst. We are a community under the conditions of a city without living together as a community.

We are a serving order – Service is for us an attitude that is part of spreading God's kingdom: it happens through service.

9. Vision of the Kingdom of God

John Mott, for many years the president of the YMCA World Alliance, had a vision: In his generation the Gospel for the people throughout the world. Such visions of the "Kingdom of our Master", Jesus Christ, that "spreads" with speed and urgency, is part of YMCA. In our generation the Gospel of Jesus to all the people in Munich, in Germany, in Europe, and in the whole world.

The YMCA is a platform where Christians of various traditions can meet without fear, and focus on Jesus. We experience this also in Munich.

10. Christian Movements – foundations of the Holy Spirit

The YMCA is a foundation of the Holy Spirit. That is a central statement of each Movement. The Christian Movements are foundations of the Holy Spirit. They are an answer to the needs of the times, they are charisms given by God to the world and church. Renewal and growth require receptivity on the part of these Movements for the speaking and work of the Holy Spirit. They need ears that are attuned, and courageous hearts to give the Spirit space, and to obey him trustingly.

I am convinced that in the past God has often renewed the Church and world through individual saints. The saints of our days are the Movements. We notice how God connects the charisms and the Movements, he doesn't mix them, but they serve one another and in this way a new form of the Church becomes visible.

11. On the way to a new form of Church

I put it to myself in this way: It is a privilege that Jesus has called me to belong to this Movement of the YMCA. I have moved from the institutionalised Church into the space of the Movements. I notice that the power and the music of the Kingdom of God is here. He renews his Church. The Church is not a discontinued model, it has a future and will bear witness to God's kingdom, proclaim and spread it. The new form of the Church can already be recognised: It is a Church with Jesus in its midst, with people who live Jesus' new commandment. A Church in community, less hierarchical, more a network, it serves not governs, it is poor, but empowered.