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THE
WORLD'S
YOUNG
WOMEN'S
CHRISTIAN
ASSOCIATION

AN INTERNATIONAL
CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S
MOVEMENT

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File

Pamphlet

WHAT IS THE YOUNG WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION ?

The Y.W.C.A. has always claimed that, given certain fundamental principles as a basis of work, its methods can be infinitely adapted to varied and changing needs. The great variety of its activities make it difficult to give a brief and categoric answer to the question "What is the Y.W.C.A.?" In one country the name will suggest hostels, in another clubs, in another employment bureaux, in another Bible Study Groups. Physical education, planned recreation or camps may be outstanding characteristics in yet other countries. The ideal is more and more recognised however as a balanced programme including many if not all of these things, and perhaps others. Similarly the membership varies from country to country. Adolescents may predominate in one, business women in another, industrial girls in a third. In some countries the National Association, or the local groups of which it is composed, have a very close relationship with the Church, in others it has no definite connection. In many countries it has always been in the van of the women's movement, co-operating closely with women's organisations such as the National Council of Women, in some it has followed its own special lines of work quite independently.

The distinctive place of the Y.W.C.A. in the world of today is sometimes questioned in view on the one hand of the many organisations now dealing with specific women's questions, and on the other the present tendencies to absorb all religious activities within the framework of the Churches, to organise work for men and women in common rather than separately, and to create new societies, either national or international, which claim almost all the leisure time of girls and young women. From what has been said already it will be seen that each country will give an answer to the question "What is the Y.W.C.A. ?" in the light of its own experience.

THE YOUNG WOMEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION AS AN INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION.

An answer to the question may however also be given from an international point of view. It may be asked if groups so varied in character and manifold in activity can have any true international manifestation. That they can is abundantly proved by the history of the World's Y.W.C.A., the international organisation formally constituted in 1894 by representatives of the national Associations of Great Britain, Norway, Sweden and the United States of America. Since that time it has come to include affiliated national Associations in thirty countries and work in process of development in at least twenty more including in its ranks about a million women and girls. Its headquarters office was located for nearly forty years in London, but in 1930 was moved to Geneva, with a view to closer contact with other international organisations.

The central legislative body is the World's Council, which meets not less than once in every four years, and is composed of representatives of all fully affiliated Associations, whose vote decides all changes of policy. Associations at a less advanced degree of development have the right to send delegates to take part in discussions, but without voting. Those countries where Association work is still in a pioneer stage or not nationally organised are invited to send visitors to attend Council meetings. In the intervals between such meetings the carrying out of the Council's decisions is in the hands of the officers, i.e., the President (Dutch), the Treasurer (Swiss) and eight Vice-Presidents, of whom three are Europeans, one North American and four from the Far East or the Pacific Area, and the Executive Committee, which consists of thirteen members, at present (1935) drawn from nine nationalities, and elected not to represent their respective countries but because of their capacity for approaching questions from an international point of view. The World's Y.W.C.A. is not a supra-national body, but represents the sum of the views of its voting members. Each National Association is free to organise its work on the lines best suited to its needs, provided only that it accepts the World's Basis or one in conformity with it. The work at headquarters is carried on by a staff of secretaries whose work is by correspondence and visits to draw the Associations throughout the world more closely together for their mutual help and to advise them, according to their stage of development, as to the best ways of meeting the needs of their various categories of membership.

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES.

The principles of work of the international organisation have their roots in the origins of the national groups already mentioned. The earliest, that founded in England in 1855, was made up of two impulses — one to unite young women with a view to the development of their spiritual life, the other to meet the needs of young women obliged to leave their families in order to earn their living and having no suitable places in which to live. These two complementary activities are characteristic of the Association everywhere. Prayer — service — fellowship — are words which recur in all Association literature and are of the very genius of its life. By the Y.W.C.A. they are interpreted in Christian terms. While the Association has continually sought new ways of meeting the varied needs of its members, it has never changed its essential purpose, which is expressed in its Basis,¹ and in its Aim, "to bring young women to such knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour as shall manifest itself in character and conduct."

PRINCIPLES IN ACTION.

It is natural that these principles should continually urge to action as new needs arise. The periodical Conferences of the World's Y.W.C.A. have not only resulted in a deep sense of fellowship between women of many nations, but have also been occasions for wider vision; it was at Geneva in 1906 that a feeling of responsibility was aroused for women and girls in the Far East; at Berlin in 1910 the general questions involved in industrial and social problems were first seriously discussed; in 1914 at Stockholm the Association studied its place in the Women's Movement. The Great War naturally broke in on the regular course of the Association's development, but it brought new opportunities for the enlargement of the scope of several national Associations, and ultimately opened the way to the extension of the work to countries hitherto untouched. At the next international gathering, in Switzerland, in 1920, many severed links were forged afresh and the study of the great social, industrial and international problems as they affect women was taken up once more; and the next meeting in Austria, in 1922, led to a great impetus in special work for young girls. At this same meeting it was decided to make an addition to the Aim of the World's Y.W.C.A., calling upon all national Associations "to promote right principles of social and international conduct by encouraging the development of a right public conscience such as shall strengthen all those forces which are working for the promotion of peace and better understanding between classes, nations and races".

¹ "Faith in God the Father as Creator and in Jesus Christ His only Son as Lord and Saviour, and in the Holy Spirit as Revealer of Truth and Source of Power for life and service, according to the teaching of Holy Scripture."

CO-OPERATION.

This recognition of a wider scope for the activities of the World's Y.W.C.A., both in its component parts, the national Associations, and in its corporate capacity as an international body of Christian women, has led in recent years to closer contact with other organisations and groups concerned with the same problems, especially those which approach such problems from the Christian point of view, and those which aim at securing for women their rightful place in national and international public life. It co-operates with the World's Young Men's Christian Association, the World Student Christian Federation, the World Alliance for Friendship through the Churches, the World Bureau of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, etc.; it is a member of the Liaison Committee of Women's Organisations which exists to make recommendations to the League of Nations and to take up special studies on women's questions, and of the Disarmament Committee of Women's International Organisations. The World's Y.W.C.A. is also in constant touch with the Secretariat of the League of Nations and the International Labour Office, receiving from both much help and advice and being able in return to supply needed information about special problems of women and girls, gathered from the experience of Association secretaries in many countries.

CONCLUSION.

Among the women's organisations there are few which approach women's questions from a Christian and at the same time an international point of view. The Y.W.C.A. sees therefore as a very important part of its work today the education of women leaders who shall have this standpoint. It has exceptional opportunities in that it unites women of varying age, class and occupation, while its methods of group work provide large numbers of women and girls with opportunities for independent activities and scope for the use of their special powers and capacities. It is the task of the World's Y.W.C.A. to help the national groups to see their work of training Christian personalities in relation to a world setting, which in these days calls as perhaps never before for women who will proclaim their conviction that in Christ is to be found the answer to personal, national and international need.

News of the Associations in the different countries, and notes on subjects of current interest to leaders and members throughout the world will be found in "The World's Y.W.C.A. Monthly", price 2 francs (Swiss) per annum.

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(Elected by the World's Council, 1934.)

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