Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE0967

Melbourne Young Women’s Christian Association (Melbourne Y.W.C.A.)

(1882 - 1999)

Born	18820101, Victoria Australia
Died	19991231, Victoria Australia
Occupation	Social action organisation, Social support organisation, Voluntary organisation, Welfare organisation, Women's ref Women's Rights Organisation

Summary

Whilst initially of fundamentally religious character — inherited from founding principles (i.e. Emma Robarts’ Prayer Union founded 1844) – the Young Women’s Christian Association of Melbourne (YWCA of Melbourne) began as other Young Women’s Christian Association’s – predominantly in response to urbanisation and the particular challenges this posed for women (particularly working women). The Association’s life span (before a name change in 1999) saw that focus shift in concert with changing economic and social issues; from urban challenges, to suburban ones and finally to state wide issues (hence the name change to Young Women’s Christian Association Victoria).

Details

The Melbourne YWCA held its first official meeting on April 1 1883, with some encouragement (and very little financial support) from the Melbourne Young Men's Christian Association. Forming some 3 years after the Sydney Young Women's Christian Association (Sydney YWCA) became the first permanent representative of the organisation in Australia (there had been a Geelong association as early as 1872, however this collapsed from lack of membership in 1878), the Melbourne association began with a less economically driven objective to that of Sydney: "the spiritual, intellectual and social improvement of young women" was the original Melbourne objective, as opposed to Sydney's explicit "a Home for women and girls who need it [and then] rooms [for] classes and meetings …[and then a] library".

This early objective, suggesting a favouring of the 'spiritual' over the physical and social wellbeing of young women, did not however preclude the Melbourne organisation from instituting a variety of practical 'women helping women' schemes – particularly as the urban and economic environment altered. Examples of these programs include: the Factory Girls program (instituted in 1885); the 'Midnight Mission' efforts (1890); the organisation as employment agency (1901); the Travellers Aid Society (1910); as well as a variety of sex and health education initiatives; and of course emergency and permanent housing (first hostel opened in 1887).

In addition to these initiatives were those that encouraged sporting activity, domestic training and personal or 'spiritual edification'. Social reform programs however, became predominant in the early 1900's — particularly reform programs designed to address poor working conditions for women. The extent of these programs however, remained fundamentally responsive, fears for 'politicisation' of the organisation, keeping systemic approaches a matter of talk, rather than action. Accounts regarding this issue reveal tensions within the organisation (both at a sate and national level): see for example the resignation of Jean Stevenson from the National Young Women's Christian Association in 1924/25 (Melbourne association General Secretary 1915-1919). This early tension, similar in scope to that between the exclusivity / inclusivity of the word 'Christian' within the organisation's title, and also in the organisations approach to 'non-white' social issues, can be seen as defining aspects in the Melbourne organisations early history.

The Melbourne association responded to World Wars 1 and 2 by assisting with accommodation and food supplies (the 'Garden Army' for example), whilst simultaneously maintaining community services intended to 'build up citizenship and maintain sanity'. Post 1945, the Melbourne branch shifted its focus to accommodate changing 'demands'. Suburban sprawl for example, acted as the impetus for a variety of in-house training programs aimed at alleviating women's isolation in suburban settings (the Home Tutor Scheme, Green Circle, the Correspondence Program etc.). Similarly, migrant employment services became a responsive and defining focus, leading to an official relationship with the Department of Immigration, instituted in 1949.

The last half-decade of the 20th century saw the Melbourne association maintaining its traditional activities (and introducing several new initiatives), whilst simultaneously developing a focus on children's services. For example, in 1970 an after school care program was established in Collingwood and in 1985 a state wide childcare placement scheme was begun. This 'family friendly' approach, emphasised further by the 1975 opening of the 'Family Y' (family accommodation), characterise the Association's post 1970's activities.

By the late 1990's however, the organisation began to 'actively campaign' for more controversial social issues (the anti – sweatshop 'Fairwear Campaign' and the refugee children's service are examples). It is interesting to note that this return to earlier more controversial concerns (workplace conditions and asylum issues), directly preceded a major shift in scope for the Young Women's Christian Association of Melbourne: in 1999 –with Rosemary Hehir as Executive Director– the association reclassified itself as Young Women's Christian Organisation Victoria (Y.W.C.A. Victoria).

Published resources

Book

Dinna forget : stories from real life, Booth, S. C. (Sarah Crisp), 1844-1928, 1908

The Dauntless Bunch : The Story of the YWCA in Australia, Dunn, Margaret, 1991

Y.W.C.A. 1882-1982 : Melbourne pictorial history, Durrant, Leoni, 1982

Thesis

The Mother's anxious future : Australian Christian Women's Organisations meet the modern world, 1890s-1930s, Warne, Ellen Mary, 2000

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

The University of Melbourne Archives
Young Women's Christian Association of Australia

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Created 24 May 2004
Last modified 27 April 2009