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Youth for Christ is a movement of God, not just an institution or organisation. For the past seven decades, the Holy Spirit has motivated, led, and empowered men and women to take the life-changing message of Jesus Christ to young people in every corner of the world. This is that story.

“Movement” implies action; thus the chronicle of Youth for Christ’s ventures and adventures is dynamic and vibrant, not static and staid. This book, therefore, will not attempt to be the definitive and ultimate description of YFC—an impossible task. And you will not find an exhaustive history. Instead, see this book more like a photo album, containing snapshots in time as we’ve tried to capture sharp pictures of a ministry in motion.

The story of Youth for Christ through the past seventy years is about people—all types, in all places: scores of men and women who have staffed the international office, hundreds of national leaders in countries worldwide, thousands of paid and volunteer staff in local programs working directly with youth, and the countless thousands of young people and families impacted by the ministry. And each of these groups would approach the history of YFC from a unique perspective.

For many, describing Youth for Christ means highlighting the significant events, international turning points, and important ministry leaders. But for most, the account is much more personal, relating to Spirit-led boldness, relationships formed and deepened, and changed lives. This book attempts to do both—highlight leaders and events and also relate representative stories.

The first section, Youth for Christ through the Years, describes YFC’s history through the parallel tracks of Calling, Courage, Compassion, Creativity, and Commitment, each featuring stories of the called, courageous, compassionate, creative, and committed men and women of YFC. A timeline marking significant events also runs along the bottom of each page.

Next comes Parade of Nations, ninety-seven pages, each briefly displaying the ministry of a country through photographs, captions, Milestones, and Highlights. Note: YFC is active in countries that are not described for various reasons and in others where the ministry is being pioneered.

The final section, Our Presidents, features international leaders, their challenges and impact.

As you read, thank God for his presence, provision, and power in this movement “geared to the times, anchored to the Rock.” And celebrate all he has done and is doing in Youth for Christ. But remember: The best is yet to come!
CALLING

SEVENTY YEARS. THREESCORE AND TEN. THE LIFE, THUS FAR, OF YOUTH FOR CHRIST.

“A God, we want this kept on a miracle basis. We want everyone to know that God’s hand is on this movement.”

A MOVEMENT OF GOD.

Why would young couples potentially bankrupt themselves by renting Soldier Field, the largest venue in Chicago, for a free youth rally? What would cause a pastor to trade the security of a church for the unknown of a fledgling organisation? What motivated Christian leaders across the U.S. to begin holding YFC rallies?

CERTAINLY NOT MONEY OR FAME.

Only God’s Call. As with Isaiah, they heard God say, “Whom should I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?” And they also responded, “Here I am. Send me” (Isaiah 6:8).

Knowing that God had called them to the work of evangelism and convinced that all people are lost and doomed save for their faith in Christ, they believed God wanted them to take his message throughout the land and the world. They saw the wave of young people entering society, many returning from war, and set their sights on winning youth for Christ.

Although unaffiliated officially, YFC rallies sprang up across America and other countries, with Chicago fast becoming the epicentre of the movement. In an all-night prayer meeting, Torrey Johnson expressed the heart of these leaders when he proclaimed, “O God, we want this kept on a miracle basis. We want everyone to know that God’s hand is on this movement. We want folks to see that this is too big and too great for any man or group of men to accomplish by themselves. We want folks to say, ‘God did it!’”

Torrey Johnson mortgaged his house to get the money to rent Chicago’s Soldier Field. And on May 30, 1945, just three weeks after V-E Day in Europe, a huge rally with at least 70,000 people was held in that majestic stadium featuring 500 uniformed nurses, a 5,000-voice choir, a 300-piece band, and eight grand pianos. Gil Dodds ran the track, soldier Bob Evans gave his testimony, Percy Crawford preached, and hundreds came forward to accept Christ.

Just seven weeks after the Soldier Field rally, forty-two delegates met at the founding YFC International Convention at Winona Lake, Indiana, to hammer out a constitution and elect Torrey Johnson president. They adopted the seven-point Statement of Faith of the National Association of Evangelicals. On September 20, 1945, Youth for Christ International incorporated in the state of Illinois.

As word spread about God’s amazing work through the rallies in America, the ministry spread to other countries.

1937 – Evon Hedley begins a Youth Fellowship called Brantford’s Youth for Christ in Brantford, Ontario.

1943 – Jack Wyrtzen and George Beverly Shea begin Youth for Christ meetings in the Gospel Tabernacle Auditorium on New York’s Times Square on Saturday nights in connection with Word of Life.

May, 1943 – Roger Malabary (inspired by Jack Wyrtzen’s rallies) and Willard Munson, organist, hold the first YFC rally in the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Danville, Indiana. Roger is the pastor of that church.
This report is from YFC’s first anniversary magazine, December 1945:

Yesterday the weird chemistry of war mingled American and Japanese blood on the shell-scarred turf of Iwo Jima, as a frightened world looked on with incredulous horror. Today all is quiet—the guns, the planes, the shells, the bombs—for peace has come.

But in the hearts of American Christians, Iwo Jima again bids for strong attention, for on Thursday, September 24, Youth for Christ took the little island citadel by storm . . . .

They decided to hold the first rally on September 27 in the island’s largest Air Force chapel.

Over 600 jammed the building that night, sang such hymns and choruses as “I Love to Tell the Story,” “At Calvary,” “Every Day with Jesus,” and “For God So Loved the World” and heard Chaplain Price’s message on the sacrifice of Christ.

When the invitation was given, several responded. So popular did the initial rally become that many of the men urged making it a weekly affair.

Yes peace has come to Iwo Jima, and some twenty thousand troops still stationed on the island stand a good chance of hearing about a greater peace—eternal peace with God—for on Iwo, as in hundreds of other places, Youth for Christ is on the march.

During the course of the huge rallies in Chicago, the Hearst newspapers carried a full-page story of the new youth movement now reaching half a million lives world-wide every Saturday night.

In March 1946 Torrey Johnson, Billy Graham, and others formed the first overseas team to Europe.

Christian leaders in other nations for the first time heard the name “Youth for Christ” and decided to use it for their growing youth ministries.

That same year, missionary Dave Morken began YFC in and around Shanghai, China. Dave and his team preached all over South China with as many as 30,000 attending rallies every night in Xian. In the dramatic days of 1947 alone at least 30,000 people were won to Christ. In 1949 Mao Zedong and the Communist takeover forced most of the missionaries and other foreigners out of China. YFC held rallies as long as possible to encourage the local people in the crisis. Morken was the last man out of China after being held by the Communists for several weeks. Then he, Dick Hillis, and others won an estimated thousand converts a week in Formosa (Taiwan) over several months. At one time at least 30,000 Taiwanese were enrolled in follow-up Bible studies.

On April 7, 1947, missionaries Cyril Johnson and Walter Corlett held a rally in the Tiger Theatre in Calcutta, India. They decided to call it “Youth for Christ” without knowing about YFC and enlisted Hubert Mitchell to be the speaker. Hubert had had contacts with YFC in Chicago and suggested that they join the movement out of the USA.

They did, and on that day India Youth for Christ was born.

Boris Besmernty founded France YFC in 1946. In August 1948 a Super Rally of 22,000 was held in Nimes.

In 1947 Jimmy Ferguson and Des Riley began Youth for Christ in South Africa. Soon after that they were pioneering YFC in North Africa.

February 26, 1944 – Dick Harvey begins YFC in the Municipal Auditorium in St. Louis, Missouri, with more than one thousand people.

April 1, 1944 – Twenty thousand people pack out Madison Square Garden with 10,000 turned away.

April 17, 1944 – Moved by all the other YFC start-ups, Torrey Johnson calls Doug Fisher, and they begin planning for Chicagoland YFC.

May 27, 1944 – The opening rally of Chicagoland YFC is held in Orchestra Hall for over 2,000, with Billy Graham speaking.

Summer, 1944 – Chicagoland YFC rallies are held in Orchestra Hall for twenty-one weeks with an average attendance of 2,500. Some weeks hundreds are turned away.

1944 – The Philadelphia Youth Center becomes Youth for Christ under Walter H. Smyth.

Summer, 1944 – Inquiries come to Chicagoland YFC about starting Youth for Christ in Tampa, Miami, Atlanta, Augusta, Columbus, Toledo, LaCrosse, Milwaukee, Kenosha, Racine, Rockford, Belvidere, Chicago Heights, Gary, Sunnyvale (Washington), Los Angeles, and Bermuda.

October 21, 1944 – Twenty thousand attend the Victory Rally in Chicago Stadium.
National programs and local chapters sprung up around the globe. At the YFC Convention at Winona Lake in 1948, Torrey Johnson reported that the international office was in touch with 800 chapters in North America, and Billy Graham announced that YFC teams had gone to 46 countries the previous year.

This has been the pattern ever since. Men and women with a heart for God and for youth sense him calling them to minister to a nation, a city, a village, a neighbourhood, a school, or an institution . . . or just to a group of young people in a park. Then, faithful to the Spirit’s leading, they begin loving youth for Christ’s sake and begin the ministry. From those early days and the massive rallies, YFC has moved to the inter-personal so that today 27,000 full-time, part-time, and volunteer staff around the world are working with teens.

In 1994, Maher el-Hajj was 16 years old, living in Beirut. His good friend in school had committed suicide, finding no meaning in life. This really shook up Maher. Another friend invited him to the YFC Christmas all-day event that December. Maher had a great time, so he came the following week to a club meeting where he heard John Sagherian speak on how Jesus could give meaning to life. Maher gave his life to Christ, was followed up and discipled. Over the next few years he was trained in youth leadership, and he joined the YFC staff first as a volunteer, then as a full-time worker.

After leaving YFC staff for a few years to work with another Christian organisation, while remaining as a YFC volunteer, Maher returned and became the National Director in Lebanon in January 2012.

In 2000, Sandy Mira Rakotoarisoa became a Christian through the YFC English club in Antsirabe, Madagascar. Then he was discipled, mentored, and coached. Sandy led ministry teams, learned English, and was involved in radio ministry. In 2003, he attended the Young Leader Track of Youth for Christ’s Staff Conference and General Assembly in Brazil. Afterward, he completed a three-year ministry diploma course under Youth for Christ Madagascar and the YFCI two-year Young Leader Development and Empowerment Process.

In 1944, John Huffman begins YFC in Boston with an estimated 5,000 people on the esplanade in front of Hatch Memorial Shell.

September 9, 1944 – John Huffman begins YFC in Boston with an estimated 5,000 people on the esplanade in front of Hatch Memorial Shell.

January 6, 1945 – Hubie Mitchell leads the first YFC rally in Los Angeles. By this time the movement has spread to Kansas City, Grand Rapids, St. Petersburg, Charlotte, Shanghai, Paris, Norfolk, Minneapolis, Oklahoma City, Cape Town, Rio de Janeiro, Manila, Tokyo, Frankfurt, and many other places.

May 30, 1945 – The massive Chicagoland rally is held at Soldier Field.

July 19, 1945 – At the founding YFCI Convention at Winona Lake, Indiana, forty-two delegates hammer out the YFCI constitution and elect Torrey Johnson President.

August, 1945 – Billy Graham is hired as the first full-time staff member of YFC. He speaks at his first rally in Jackson, Mississippi.
Fianarantsoa, Sandy’s home province, is situated on the southern part of the Madagascar highlands. With a population of 2.7 million people, it is the province of the Betsileo tribe. This area has a high unemployment rate with drugs and alcoholism as the major problems among the young people. Children as young as twelve years of age are sexually active.

Youth for Christ had made frequent mission trips to the region, speaking to community, political, and church leaders and reaching out to young people. After Sandy’s internship year, in 2006 he returned to Fianarantsoa to establish the work of YFC. He married Vola, a full-time member of the YFC Worth the Wait team. Today they have two girls and a boy. Sandy and Vola have an active board, staff, and volunteer teams. They have a strong school ministry, music and dance teams, movie and English clubs, prayer ministry, and radio outreach.

In 1969, Australians Graham and Alexis Barker were students at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. During their first semester, Alexis was assigned to Campus Life as her practical ministry placement, and she became a volunteer in a club led by Ron Hutchcraft. After a night when she and another Moody female freshman student missed the train and had to walk back to campus, Graham decided that he had better accompany her the next week. The way he observed the Gospel woven into an evening of games, discussion, and relationships really resonated with him. Seeing a real, future ministry possibility, Graham signed on two more semesters. Ten months later, after Ron moved to New York, Jack Daniels, the Chicagoland YFC Executive Director, offered Graham a staff position. Then, upon graduation Graham continued working under Russ Knight on the south side of the city.

A year later, in 1973, Graham began seminary at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and was recruited into the internship program at North Area Youth for Christ, under the supervision of Dave Veerman (Executive Director) and Bruce Barton (at Trinity). During this time Graham felt a strong calling to Australia where the Campus Life ministry was in its infancy, and no training was available. So in 1975, he and Alexis returned to Australia as “World Outreach” missionaries and spent the next ten years developing and implementing a local version of the internship program.

In 1985, Graham was offered the opportunity to study for a Psy.D. in clinical psychology back in the States. Having been involved in many counselling situations in YFC, Graham believed this was a God-given opportunity to further build his Kingdom. He and Alexis spent the next five years studying and training under the auspices of the Minirth-Meier clinic before returning again to Australia in 1990 to focus on a counselling and counsellor training ministry under the YFCI umbrella.

Currently, Graham is the training consultant for the ministry division of YFCI with a major focus on writing training materials for senior staff and member care. Over the past forty-five years, Graham has found great joy in seeing and hearing about former Campus Life students who are now in various ministries around the world and former interns who now hold positions of leadership in national and international YFC programs.

Jesus promised the disciples, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). First the Spirit, then the powerful witnessing!

September 20, 1945 – Youth for Christ International is incorporated in Illinois.

October 7, 1945 – Eighteen thousand youth pack the Hollywood Bowl for a YFC rally with Jack Shuler preaching—about a thousand respond to the invitation.

March 25, 1946 – Youth for Christ Magazine begins publication with Ken Anderson as Managing Editor.

1946 – Jack Hamilton starts Bible Clubs in Kansas City.
1946 – The first overseas team heads to Europe—Torrey Johnson, Billy Graham, Chuck Templeton, Strat Shufelt, and Hearst reporter Wes Hartzell. Other nations for the first time hear the name “Youth for Christ” and decide to use this name for their growing youth ministries.

1946 – The first official YFC Convention is held in Madison Lake, Minnesota, with George Wilson as host.
1946 – The first official YFC rally held in Cape Town, South Africa, is led by Jimmy Ferguson, Ron Filby, and Sid Smuts.
Fall, 1946 – Hundreds of communities across the U.S. hold Saturday night Youth for Christ rallies.
At a meeting in September 2011, church and youth leaders agreed to invite Youth for Christ to start in Albania. They also appointed the first steering committee to pioneer the ministry—Orges Hysenaj, Gjergj Lleshi, Miljard Gosturoni, Arlind Veshti, and Erion Sylari. Six months later Orges would become the first national coordinator of YFC Albania.

Sports ministry was one of the first ministries of YFC Albania. Evangelistic soccer tournaments are held bringing together Christian and non-Christian young people. The Gospel is shared at each of these tournaments, and a number of young people become Christians. Some subsequently become volunteers with YFC.

The current ministry features sports, prayer, Internet training, and outreach events. The latest development is in schools. This picture shows children receiving Christmas presents distributed by YFC, part of a strategy to do more work in schools. In the future they hope to continue and develop this each year, as well as start a drugs and alcohol awareness program with older youth in schools.

Milestones


January, 2011: Sponsor offered support to help pioneer a new program awarded to Albania.

February, 2012: YFC Albania officially was registered with the government. Orges Hysenaj was appointed full-time national coordinator in March.

YFC Albania organised a conference with churches in Lushnja on purity and holy living and how to understand and face secular philosophy.

February, 2013: YFC Albania celebrated its first anniversary at a thanksgiving service attended by friends, volunteers, and the YFCI area director.

ALBANIA

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Milestones

1989: A group of leaders from YFC Burton in the UK led by Nick Pittngun shared the Youth for Christ vision to young people in Ethiopia.

1995: Through prayer and careful discussion, the Youth for Christ ministry in Ethiopia was officially established.

1991: Mr. Neamen Misgana became the first national coordinator, followed Mr. Endalkachew Sahele as national director (1996–2001).

2001–2004: Volunteers designed a ministry strategy to reach youth in Ethiopia—very similar to the G21 focus areas.

2004: Alemtsehay Yemane volunteered to be the full-time national coordinator supported by Pochi Seifu and the leadership team.

ETHIOPIA
Youth for Christ began in Guatemala in 1984. Today the focus is the Generation 21 (G21) Project with the following components:

The G21 Club, with middle school students, in private and public educational centres

The “I Abstain Myself” Campaign, which promotes abstinence, to fight back the advance of HIV and AIDS in the youth sector

The Youth Prayer Movement to mobilise Christian youth to pray for other young people, organising Christian youth in their churches in Prayer Triplets, Prayer Walks, Prayer Concerts, and the National Day of Prayer for Youth

Intensive Leadership Formation School (ILFS)—held three times a year, to call out youth leaders and train them in youth ministry

The Gospel Tour with Carpenter’s Tools (20 days in August), sharing the Gospel in schools, public places, and churches, with the goal of reaching 10,000 youth
Soldier Field Rally—May 30, 1945. YFC president, Torrey Johnson, mortgaged his house to rent Soldier Field for this giant rally that attracted more than 70,000 and featured 500 uniformed nurses, a 5,000-voice choir, a 300-piece band and eight grand pianos. Bob Evans gave his testimony, Percy Crawford preached, and hundreds came forward to accept Christ.

Summer Camp. In 2004, YFC started a national summer camp ministry with one camp and 289 students. The year 2014 saw 11 camps with 2,550 students and more than 200 staff/volunteers as leaders. In ten years over 1,500 students have accepted Christ. The goal is to have a high school and middle school camp in each of the six regions.

Approximately 15,000 students at the DC97 Mall Rally in Washington D.C. Beginning in 1985, YFC held a youth training conference in D.C. (and, starting in 1994, also in Los Angeles) every three years through 2003. Anywhere from 10,000 to 20,000 youth from around the country attended these five-day events designed to train them in sharing the Gospel with their friends.

YFC Bible Clubs in the 1950s: This sharpened YFC’s focus as teen specialists with the teen-to-teen approach that continues to thrive to this day.

Campus Life and Lifeline in the 1960s: Emphasising reaching young people outside churches became the most important defining distinction of the mission. Even today, after plenty of innovation, two-thirds of all ministry sites in the USA trace their lineage to one of these two ministry models.

TV Specials in the 1970s: An unprecedented amount of visibility and funding came with Johnny Cash specials (and Barbara Mandrell, and Glenn Campbell). While super-boosting ministries for a short time, it also exposed flaws in the organisation, both important for the future.

DC/LA Movement, from 1985 through 2006: Coalition-building with churches for the cause of youth evangelism led to years of high-profile research and development. Ultimately, these events helped in the development of 3 Story as the philosophy of evangelism training, which continues to serve as the operating system for YFC ministries.

YFC 5 Essentials in 2006: Articulating timeless biblical principles that should mark any YFC ministry site helped to align the mission and offer boundaries for future ministry innovation.
1. Torrey Johnson: 1945–1948
• World—World War II ends, soldiers return from the war, Americans are ready to get on with their lives
• YFC—Billy Graham is hired, annual conventions are held at Winona Lake, Indiana, Saturday night rallies increase in number and attendance, YFC goes international, especially after the 1948 Beatenberg Conference
• Johnson—enthusiastic preacher, organizer, motivator, strong leader, visionary, gregarious person, missions-minded man

2. Robert Cook: 1948–1957
• World—Europe begins to rebuild, U.S. economy grows, Korean War begins and ends, other youth ministries begin, Billy Graham holds crusades
• YFC—World Congress is held annually, YFC ministers in over 80 countries, Directors Schools and talent and quizning contests are held, Lifeline and YFC Bible clubs begin, Million Souls Crusade sends 170 teams across the world, rally chartering begins
• Cook—friend of young people, man of prayer, implementer of the vision, down-to-earth preacher with emphasis on soul-winning, great Scripture memoriser

• World—the Cold War with the Soviet Union heats up, rock and roll is born
• YFC—headquarters moves to Main Place in Wheaton, Illinois, Capital Teen Conventions are held, Teen Teams begin, ministry programs include Saturday night rallies, high school clubs, Lifeline, literature, youth crusades, films, summer camps, and conferences
• Engstrom—Leader, businessman, administrator, consensus seeker

• World—U.S. President Kennedy is assassinated, Vietnam War begins, space exploration accelerates, church attendance begins to wane, rock music comes of age
• YFC—standards for local programs are raised, credentialing of staff begins, balanced life philosophy is developed, some programs begin to move away from rallies and Bible clubs to Campus Life clubs
• Bihl—good preacher, man of prayer, evangelist, leadership developer, radio broadcaster, respected spiritual leader

• World—Vietnam War peaks, President Nixon resigns, Martin Luther King is assassinated, sexual revolution begins, Jesus Movement hits the U.S. west coast, men land on the moon, gas prices skyrocket, Cold War continues
• YFC/USA—direct-mail program for fund-raising is initiated, black leadership program starts, YFC Magazine changes to Campus Life and circulation increases radically, Insight-Impact manuals are published
• YFCI—Sam Wolgemuth is elected president and Ray Harrison general director at First Triennial Convention in Kingston, Jamaica, the constitution and by-laws are drawn up, the office opens in Geneva, Switzerland, Triennial Convocations are held
• Wolgemuth—former businessman, missionary, and director of YFCI Overseas Ministries, quiet, self-assured minister of the Gospel with a world-view, excellent fund-raiser, organisation man, careful planner

• World—assassination attempts made on the Pope and Ronald Reagan, new plague identified as AIDS, wreck of Titanic found, hole in ozone layer discovered, Chernobyl nuclear reactor melts down, DNA first used to convict criminals, Berlin Wall falls, China’s Tiananmen Square massacre occurs
• YFCI—office moved from Geneva to Singapore in 1983, Campus Life Magazine sold to Christianity Today, Triennial Conventions held in Birmingham, England, Hong Kong, Manila, and Nairobi, areas of the world reduced from 10 to 4
• Groen—entered YFC as executive director of Denver Area YFC in 1958, good speaker, visionary, fund-raiser, administrator, promoter, heart for evangelism, risk-taker