

Kicked Out Of The YMCA ...For Witnessing??!

From the Living Waters Newsletter
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We wanted to bring to your attention a recent incident that took place with one of our ministry partners, Larry Lee, who lives in Marietta, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. As you read his account, we are confident that you will see the unacceptable and unfair manner in which he has been treated by the YMCA. More importantly we are confident that you will agree with us in concluding that Larry's civil and religious rights have been violated. This concerns us because it serves as a threat to our freedom of speech in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. When souls hang in the balance we take these matters seriously.

We want to ask you to stand with us and contact both the local YMCA where this incident took place as well as the YMCA International Headquarters. Please feel free to mail letters, call, e-mail or send faxes. However, we do ask that you remain courteous, kind, and loving in your correspondence. It might also be good to give a brief description of what it is you are contacting them about. Please let them know your thoughts regarding this matter. All the necessary contact information is provided at the end of this e-mail. Here is Larry's summary of what happened:

Last Friday afternoon, I went to work out at the local YMCA that my family belongs to. As I approached the building, I noticed two young men hanging out on the front sidewalk just outside the main entrance, apparently having just finished a game of basketball inside. As is my custom in my ministry, I walked up to these guys to see if I could talk with them about Christianity. I almost always start out by asking some fun trivia questions and give dollar bills for correct answers - questions like, "What's the capital of France?" and "Who is the Prime Minister of England?" These guys, who were seniors at a local high school, were bright - they got almost all the trivia right. I told them that I run a local ministry and that I like to turn the tables a bit by giving money away rather than asking for it. They thought that was cool.

I then did what I always do, which is to transition to "the good person test," in which we use the Ten Commandments to see if we are "good" enough in God's eyes to enter heaven. Of course everyone fails the test, but it proves a wonderful point - we need God's grace in order to enter heaven - we need Jesus Christ. These guys were really into the conversation. I told them that even though they didn't pass the good person test, I was going to give them the grand prize

anyway - \$20 - as an illustration of God's grace.

Even though they didn't deserve the \$20, I was giving it to them as a gift, just like none of us deserves to go to heaven, but God offers us everlasting life through Jesus Christ as a gift. These guys were so excited - I told them they could use the \$20 to have dinner on me - they couldn't stop thanking me. One kid stood up and said, "Man, I really appreciate this, thanks man." The other guy said, "Yeah, thanks, this is cool." I gave them some tracts that reviewed the gospel and told them I'd see them around. They thanked me again, and I left to go work out inside.

Much to my surprise, the next morning (Saturday), I received a call at my house from the director of the YMCA. She asked, "Were you at the YMCA yesterday talking to two young men about religion and giving them money?" I said, "Yes." She proceeded to tell me that my YMCA family membership was immediately terminated. I asked her what I had done wrong. She said my behavior was totally inappropriate, that I was interrupting those boys from exercising and that they didn't come to the Y to talk about religion. I asked if it was wrong to talk about Christianity on the campus of a Christian organization. She avoided the question and told me I was no longer welcome at the Y. I repeated my question, to which she replied, "I'm not going to argue with you." I again asked the question, and she hung up on me. I was shocked.

A few days later, I received another call from the YMCA director. She didn't hang up on me this time, although she did threaten to do so when I asked her to please show me the written rule in the YMCA literature that says what I did was wrong. She said I was soliciting, which is against the rules, but I told her that the dictionary says that to solicit is to ask for - and I didn't ask for anything, in fact I was giving things away. She said that my behavior was, and I quote, "bizarre," "uncalled for," and "totally inappropriate." Then she said that what I did could very easily be taken as a sexual advance, implying that I appear to be some sort of homosexual predator offering money for sex. You can imagine my shock. I asked, "What exactly is sexual about telling two guys how they can have everlasting life?" She changed the subject. Ironically, this same director three months earlier would not change the channel on one of the YMCA television sets that was showing a soap opera in which a man handcuffed a screaming woman to a bed, ripped off her clothes and jumped on her to rape her. When I requested that they change the channel, the director's response was, "You can watch a different TV set."

Friends, this whole scenario is unconscionable, unthinkable, and brimming with intolerance. For an organization that claims to stand for tolerance and diversity, this YMCA is neither tolerant of people who preach the gospel nor interested in having a gospel preacher as part of their diverse membership. I hold no personal grudges against these folks; I simply see this as an affront to all Christians and an effort to shut down our right to share the gospel. The sad thing about this incident is that I was never even given the opportunity to explain what happened before my membership was revoked. It was quite arbitrary - I was given no warning.

Even after I explained myself, there was no room for reasoning. The director's mind was already made up and I hadn't even violated any rules. What did I do wrong by talking to two gentlemen about Christianity at a Christian organization and giving them money to illustrate a point?

Is this the way that a "Christian" organization should treat one of its Christian members who was peacefully discussing Christianity with two young men who are seniors in high school, probably old enough to vote this November? Is this behavior fitting for an organization that states the following about its own history on its website?:

Through the influence of nationally known lay evangelists Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899) and John Mott (1865-1955), who dominated the movement in the last half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries respectively, the American YMCAs sent workers by the thousands overseas, both as missionary-like YMCA secretaries and as war workers.

*The first foreign work secretaries, as they were called, **reflected the huge missionary outreach by Christian churches near the turn of the century.** But instead of churches, they organized YMCAs that eventually were placed under local control. Both Moody and Mott served for lengthy periods as paid professional staff members of the YMCA movement. Both maintained lifelong connections with it.*

This is the YMCA's current mission statement: "To put Christian principals into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body for all."

What do you think? Please let the YMCA know and be sure to mention Larry Lee's name. Also, please feel free to forward this on to all your friends.

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We also encourage you to contact the YMCA National Headquarters:

YMCA of the USA, Association Advancement

101 North Wacker Drive, Chicago, IL 60606

Phone: 312-977-0031, Website: www.ymca.net