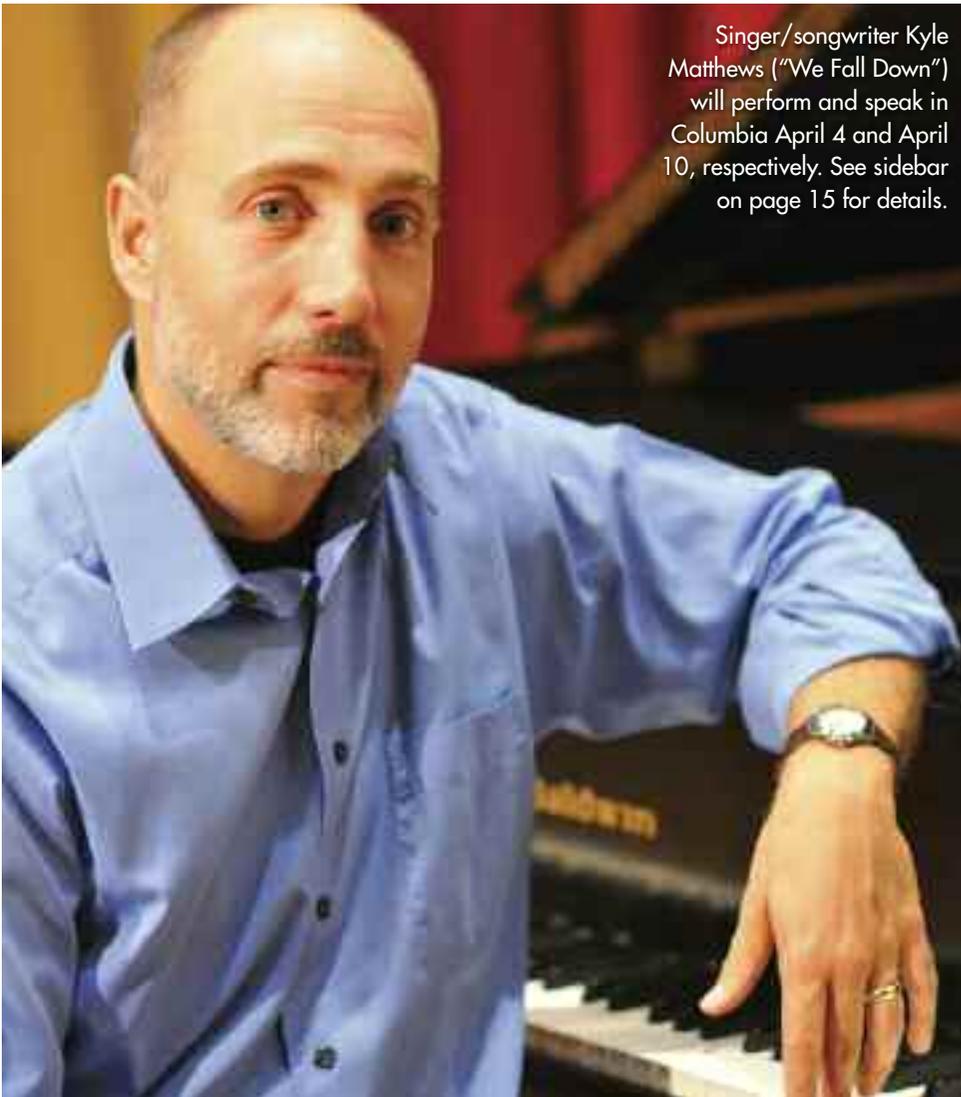


# emphasizing the “C” in YMCA

By Deena C. Bouknight



Singer/songwriter Kyle Matthews (“We Fall Down”) will perform and speak in Columbia April 4 and April 10, respectively. See sidebar on page 15 for details.

In this age of relativism and worldliness, one might assume that no one still considers, ponders, or respects the founding words that comprise that universally known acronym, YMCA. Many of the thousands who enter the doors of one of these institutions daily may only know it by its acronym—not by Young Men’s Christian Association. Yet, in Columbia, staffers, board members, and volunteers have purposed that the Holy Spirit not be ignored.

In fact, there is a separate committee for the five area branches (Downtown, Lexington, Northeast, Northwest and Palmetto Center for Women) called Christian Emphasis. Over the past few years, there have been various activities to glorify Christ’s name, such as an annual Good Friday Prayer Breakfast, that in year’s past was graced by the likes of Chick-Fil-A Founder Truett Cathy. Ongoing, there are Bible studies, prayer before sporting events, and scriptures on exercise equipment. This year, though, those involved in these branches of the YMCA have felt a calling to take Christian Emphasis to a higher level. A week of God-centered activities is planned for April 4-11.

“Certain areas of the country might not call attention to the ‘C,’” says Mark DiNovo, health enhancement director at the Lexington Family YMCA and a member of the Christian Emphasis committee. “We pray for the YMCA, for each other, for our community, and for our nation. We’re all about getting people plugged into the Christian community.”

Trey Love, president of All American Imaging, a sports photography business, was asked six years ago to be on the board of the YMCA and to become a member of the Christian Emphasis committee.

“We’ve got the resources to get the focus back on the real reason for the YMCA—the Spirit side,” says Love. “The Holy Spirit is moving through this place. I see people involved in the YMCA that are pulled in many different directions, yet they are dedicated to doing more for his glory. For me, to be a part of



this—something bigger for God—and to be around other people who are committed to the Lord, that’s why I’m involved.”

**Iron Sharpening Iron**

The Young Men’s Christian Association was founded in London, England, on June 6, 1844. When the Industrial Revolution brought thousands of men from the countryside to cities to work, they often worked 12 hours a day and lived at the workplace in squalor conditions. Rampant was open sewage, poor hygiene, crime, and a breakdown of families. George Williams, a sales assistant in a London drapery shop, organized a Bible study and prayer emphasis time for these people. It eventually became known as the Young Men’s Christian Association, and by 1851 there were 24 YMCAs in Great Britain with a combined membership of 2,700. In 1894, Williams was knighted for his efforts with YMCA and was buried in 1905 under the floor of St. Paul’s Cathedral, among world heroes and statesmen.



George Williams

YMCA was a concept that quickly spread throughout the world. This was unusual for the 19<sup>th</sup> century in that an evangelical idea crossed the rigid lines of all different churches and social classes. This trait would eventually lead to including in YMCAs all men, women and children, regardless of race, religion or nationality.



Considering how the world has changed, and how much the YMCA has evolved to include not only Bible studies and community support, but a myriad of sports, activities, and family programs, its continued Christian emphasis in some parts of the country is an anomaly.

Since 1844, the YMCA has grown to be-

come a worldwide movement of more than 45 million members from 124 national federations affiliated through the World Alliance of YMCAs. There are over 2,000 YMCAs in the United States and more than 4,000 worldwide. Many sports became standard at YMCAs, such as volleyball, racquetball, softball, and basketball, and the Boy Scouts of America originated under YMCA leadership. As a result, the YMCAs have impacted millions of children and families. Never is anyone turned away because they do not know Christ or cannot afford to pay for the Y’s services. Funding by individuals, churches, and businesses allow the YMCAs to offer different types of memberships.



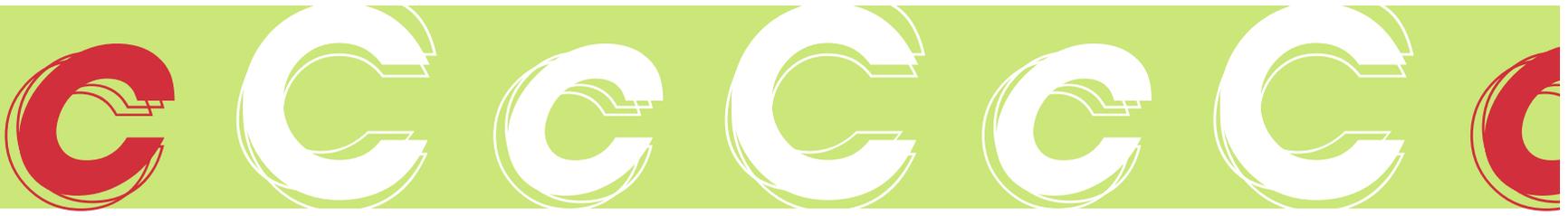
The degree to which Christ and the Christian faith are emphasized in programs varies between individual YMCA associations. However, throughout the years, there have been bright lights of Christian emphasis. In the 1940s, Artist Warner Sallman supposedly painted the head of Christ in the reading room of the Central YMCA in Chicago. This painting became one of the most well known, reproduced approximately 500 million times, making it one of the most popular works of art in history. Sallman, a devout Christian, used it to hold chalk talks, often at YMCAs, where he would sketch the famous painting and give his testimony about Christ.

The Columbia YMCA branches choose to focus on the mission statement: “To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all,” with the emphasis on the part of the statement that addresses “Christian principles,” according to area CEO Bryan Madden.



“It’s a community organization with the purpose to grow God’s kingdom,” he states. “In everything we do, we need to convey our Christian mission and the rationale for it. There is no better organization in the world than the YMCA for promoting family values.”

*To put Christian principles into practice through prog*



**Building the Body**

Christian Emphasis Week is a way to let the local community know that the “C” is still in YMCA, and its purpose is to expose people to both the organization and the Word of God.

Madden says his role that week is to introduce activities and speakers, beginning with the Good Friday Prayer Breakfast at Seawells near the Fairgrounds, where Singer/Songwriter Kyle Matthews will be the keynote speaker.

“It’s a great opportunity for me to get to be able to talk about the YMCA and its mission,” says Madden. “We’re hoping that we get a lot of people coming to us and asking questions about not only the YMCA, but area churches, and about the gospel.”

DiNovo points out that the goal is for as many churches to be involved in Christian Emphasis as possible. “It’s a way to really get people, who might



have just moved here or just don’t know what’s available, plugged into the Christian community. We’re hoping that it will be an annual event that people will look forward to. It’s all about building up the body.”

Love says that in the past the Good Friday Prayer Breakfast has been well attended. However, because it is located downtown, it might be geographically prohibitive for some people living on the outskirts of Columbia. With Christian Emphasis Week, there will be activities at all four branches so that anyone can easily participate.

“We’re stepping out in faith with this event,” says Love. “We have a budget and some funds to really bring him glory. The staff members at the Ys are behind this... driving this. The Spirit is moving through them. What people need to understand is that the YMCA is not just an organization that’s interested in making money. It’s about changing lives, and that’s why I’ve aligned myself with it. It’s an organization that’s doing bigger things for God.”



*Deena C. Bouknight lives in Columbia with her husband and two children. She is a homeschool mom, the literature teacher at Excelsior Academy, and a freelance writer for newspapers, magazines, and books.*

Photos courtesy of Kyle Matthews & YMCA

# Christian Emphasis Week— April 4-11

**Event name:** Mission YFest

**Event day & time:** April 4, from 3 p.m.-7 p.m.

**Event location:** Riverfront Park,  
Downtown Columbia

**Brief description:** YMCA of Columbia is hosting a family friendly event on April 4 to include contemporary Christian artist, Kyle Mathews. The singer of “We Fall Down” will perform from 5-7 p.m. at Riverfront Park. Family friendly activities include: Easter arts and crafts, inflatables, face painting, food and an Easter Egg Drop (hunt). This event is free to the community. Everyone is welcome.



**YMCA Branch events to include:**

**NorthWest YMCA** – Teen Breakfast,  
April 8 from 7:30-8:30 a.m.

**Downtown YMCA** – Good Friday Prayer  
Breakfast, April 10 from 7:30-8:30 a.m.

**Lexington Family Center** – Easter Egg Hunt,  
April 4 at 9 a.m.

**Jeep Rogers YMCA** – Easter Egg Hunt,  
April 11 at 10 a.m.

**For more information about other activities, check out [www.columbiaymca.org](http://www.columbiaymca.org), or call your area YMCA branch.**

Programs that build healthy spirit, mind, and body for all