

# STATEMENTS

**O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs**  
**in collaboration with The Aspen Institute, Religion & Society Program**

**Author:** Rebecca Wiebke and Rees Wimmer

## **Statements:**

Between “words” and “scripture,” the middle ground in the spectrum of faith expression is “statements.” We define this as an organization that displays a clear profession of faith or claims guidance by religious principles. This is most often seen where there is mention of a faith or religion in the mission statement, the statement of purpose, the overall mission, or a similar assertion. When an observer sees the explicit mention of faith in a guiding statement, there is a strong and clear indication that the organization aligns with some specific religion/faith and that it is a core aspect of their existence.

There is great diversity in the types of organizations that fall into this category. The YMCA, which will be detailed below, is an example of an organization in this category. When looking on the website, it is clear that there is a religious association. However, when a lay person thinks/learns about the types of work that this organization pursues, they might come up with a laundry list of activities, none of which are considered “religious.” These organizations are grounded in faith, but may not be associated with faith by their activity.

We find this group very interesting because there are many non-profits that at first glance might not seem or might not present itself as inspired by faith, but when looking on the website it becomes clear that faith is a core part of their identity. Thereby, community members who hear about the organization, donate to the organization, or receive the benefits of the organization might not be aware of its faith identity.

## **Case Study: YMCA**

The YMCA, also known as the Young Men’s Christian Association, is a global nonprofit organization that provides a variety of programs and services to promote youth development, healthy living, and social responsibility. Although it is clear from the full name of the organization that there is a faith component, the group is more commonly referred to as “YMCA” which does not blatantly reveal a religious association.

When looking at the YMCA’s [website](#), it is not overtly evident that you are interacting with a faith-based organization. However, the mission statement presents a clear profession of faith. This indicates a strong connection to a faith background and indicates that religious principles

guide the organization.

The mission statement of the YMCA is as follows: “To put Christian principles into practice through programs that build healthy spirit, mind and body for all.” A mission statement falls into the “statement” category because it is where an organization expresses core values and tenants and, in this case, reveals the organization’s guidance by religious principles.

Given that the YMCA displays a high degree of faith inspiration on the spectrum, it is useful to consider how this comports with the actions of the organization. First, the YMCA was founded in 1844 as a Christian organization aimed at providing support and guidance to young men. While their aim has since expanded to include people of all ages and genders, their website clearly still emphasizes their Christian roots and values.

The YMCA lists four core values on their website—caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility. While these values are not explicitly religious, they could be understood to reflect the Christian values of love, integrity, and service. Conversely, a person not familiar with those Christian tenants may not perceive that connection and could understand those values to be completely secular.

In terms of activities and services provided, the YMCA offers chaplaincy services, which provide spiritual support and guidance to members and staff. This service is available at many YMCA locations and suggests that the organization values spiritual growth and well-being. Also, the YMCA’s website includes resources for prayer and reflection, including a daily devotional and an online chapel. In addition, the YMCA provides many other services that are not faith related. These services are varied and many but include child care, sports and recreation, water safety and swimming, and education and leadership.

Overall, while the YMCA has evolved over the years to become a more secular organization, their Christian roots and values are still evident in their mission, core values, and chaplaincy services, but their programming does not make this evident. Their partnerships with faith communities and emphasis on prayer and reflection also suggest that the organization values spiritual growth and well-being. However, the messaging on the website is subtle and there is plenty of evidence of more services that are not faith-based than services that are faith-based. The YMCA is a great example of an organization that is rooted in faith principles, as evidenced by Christianity being a core part of the mission statement, but does not appear overtly religious to the casual observer and offers services to all community members.