

Celebrating the life of Jim Thomson

20 January 2024, Comrie Parish, Scotland

Remarks by Kerry Reilly, National General Secretary of YMCA Scotland

When Jim asked me if I would speak at his Memorial service about his YMCA career, I replied saying:

'It would be an honour to speak about your YMCA work but to do it justice would probably take many hours, which I am certain the minister would not agree to! I will try my best to cram as much into a short speech as possible.'

I don't know about you, but I've never met anyone else quite like Jim Thomson: someone who touched and changed the lives of so many people, literally all around the world. Over the years that I'd known and grown to love Jim, he captivated me with stories of his YMCA life and work, and I would gladly listen to him recount a story I'd heard before, because there was always some new detail or fact that I didn't know. And of course... his sparkling wit was legendary.

The last time I saw Jim, I'd just returned from a visit to Kenya, and I shared with him that his photograph still hangs on the Boardroom wall at YMCA Kenya in Nairobi where he served as the National Secretary. He replied by asking me which airline I had flown to Kenya with. When I said 'Ethiopia Air' he said, 'Oh dear....did I tell you about the time I flew with Ethiopia Air and the door fell off the plane?' That was Jim...he had a story and a YMCA memory for every occasion. Of course, there was a serious side to nearly every story and mission that Jim was on: On that occasion he was flying to see YMCA's work in a feeding shelter for 8,000 famine victims.

But perhaps we should start at the beginning....let me share in Jim's own words how his association with YMCA began in 1960 in Glasgow:

“I went to the cinema one evening and during the interval there flashed on the screen an appeal for people to volunteer their help in various youth organisations in Glasgow. Next morning, the only organisation I remembered was the YMCA, I called them, was asked to go to a community hall in a new housing scheme the next evening and found myself the leader of a youth club with 90 fairly unruly members! “

Within six months, Jim was working full time for Glasgow YMCA as their Youth Work Secretary, but Glasgow and Scotland could not keep hold of him. In 1965 Jim accepted an offer to become the National General Secretary of Kenya YMCA, from where he then went on to serve as the African Refugee Secretary, the World Refugee Secretary and for a short period as NGS of YMCA Scotland before returning to work at World YMCA again.

I could continue to give a chronological history of Jim’s service to YMCA in Africa, Asia, South America and here in Scotland, but as I’ve already said, Jim was a storyteller and I think his stories tell a much more powerful tale of his work and impact. Indeed, for those that are interested, Jim has written a detailed biography. To give a flavour of the global reach and impact of Jim’s work I’m going to quote from that biography:

At the World Council meeting in Buenos Aires in 1977 I reported that I had visited, drawn up projects, secured finances, liaised with Governments, UNHCR, and National YMCA movements engaged in refugee work in Bangladesh, India, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Pakistan, Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Zaire, Austria, France, England, Cyprus, Chile, Guatemala, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Lebanon, the Occupied West Bank, Jordan and Gaza.”

There are so many stories that I could share of how time and time again Jim responded to crisis and challenges, more often than not caused by Civil war, famine or both. Some of them are so horrific in terms of the number of civilians killed in conflicts and refugees fleeing danger, it takes your breath away.

Jerry Prado Shaw the retired Director of the International Group of the YMCA of the USA was working in South America and recalls fondly Jim's work and willingness to help at the drop of a hat.

I still remember one of our first encounters when Jim was Secretary for Refugees of the World Alliance of YMCAs, and I was a young executive organizing the YMCA movement in Costa Rica. I called Jim for help. It was February 5, 1976, one day after a 7.5 magnitude earthquake had devastated a densely populated area in Guatemala. Some 23,000 people were reported dead, and 1.2 million were left homeless, among them thousands of children. As the closest and newest YMCA in the region, we were compelled to reach out to the community to assist. I called Jim to ask if the World Alliance would consider providing some assistance, and his response was firm, caring, and empowering. "We do not have any resources at this moment, but go ahead, we will support you to the maximum limit of our capabilities."

And that was Jim – even when there was no money or things seemed impossible. he found a way.

Jim told me a story about how coming across a wooden hut in Addis Ababa where Dese YMCA was working with 8,000 people in a feeding shelter. In the hut were 35 children who were suffering from measles and there was no medication and no treatment for them. So, went to the bazaar, bought every blanket he could find, somehow commandeered a flatbed truck and transported the children to the district governor's house and asked for a phone. He called Bati, a village in northern Ethiopia (172 miles away) where he knew there were village people who would look after the children. When they arrived in Bati, several huts had been cleaned out in preparation for the children and food prepared. That simple action by Jim to save those 35 children was the start of Bati Children's Home, which went on to save the lives of over 250 abandoned and orphaned children.

Some of Jim's most striking stories come from his work in Asia. From building a hospital on the Mekong River to supporting Bangkok YMCA's work with 15,000 Vietnamese boat people and 10,000 refugees from Laos who had crossed the Mekong River. But Jim himself

acknowledge that the biggest and most complex work that he undertook was in Vietnam with refugee settlement camps as a result of the war.

In April 1974 as it became clear that Saigon was going to fall most NGOs, foreign personnel, Americans and South Vietnamese were evacuating. Not Jim, He literally flew into the danger zone as others were evacuating.

On the morning after the city fell, Jim and two of his colleagues Masaichi Yamashita & Yukio Miyazaki decided to defy the foreigner's host arrest rule and go to the Ministry of Social Affairs to see what the YMCA could do amidst the chaos of transition. In the end, because of the boldness and bravery of Jim and his colleagues, YMCA was the only International NGO that was allowed to remain and continue their work feeding people until the new regime had its own plans in place. Eventually of course Jim and Yukio were deported, but none of the Vietnamese YMCA staff were sent to the notorious 're-education' camps.

One my second to last meeting with Jim, he told me that for the last 50 years he was haunted by the words of one young female YMCA volunteer in Saigon. Before the fall of the city YMCA volunteers and staff risked their own lives to help with the evacuation of people onto boats from the beaches and themselves refused to leave. On the day that the city fell, one of the young female volunteers hitched a lift into the city and found Jim. She asked him a simple question 'What do you want me to do next?' She could have jumped on a boat and got herself away but she stayed and that simple question haunted Jim for 50 years "What do you want me to do next?" In other words, ***the work is never finished.***

When I met Jim a couple of months ago to talk about his YMCA career I asked him: how did you keep going in the face of such atrocity and human suffering?

- I could go home to Mary and the children
- I could go out for a meal, write a report and go home
- And of course, there amongst all the suffering there were moments of surreal humour and fun.

Carlos Sanvee, Secretary General of the World Alliance of YMCAs and Juan Simoes Iglesias Secretary General of YMCA Europe both wanted to be here today to honour Jim, but for different reasons were unable. We are grateful to have John Phillips, World YMCA Director of Communications here today to represent Carlos and the World Alliance of YMCAs.

Carlos said:

“Jim was a YMCA icon, a pioneer, and a legend. We all stand in awe of what this great man brought to our organisation. As I stood in awe of him at his 100th birthday party he addressed me in perfect Swahili – far better than my own. We thank Jim for everything – he will live long in our collective memory.”

Bart Shaha, a predecessor of Carlos’ as Secretary General of the World Alliance of YMCAs said:

“I first met Jim in Chittagong, Bangladesh, in 1974 when he visited our YMCA ... serving as the Secretary for Refugees at the World Alliance of YMCAs.

In Chittagong, the YMCA was started by local leaders in 1973 and I was appointed as its first General Secretary in October of that year. Thus, the visit of Jim Thomson from the World Alliance was of great importance and so we organized a special cultural programme inviting not only YMCA members, but also several Government officials, including religious and other social leaders. I still recall the tremendous impact Jim made in his speech on that day as he shared the immense world-wide work of the YMCA and narrated moving stories from his own life. People listened to him in wonder and amazement as he even interspersed his talk with interesting sentences in Hindi, which he still remembered pretty well! On the following day, I had many queries on how one could be a member of the YMCA.

Jim was a person with a deep vision of YMCA work based on crucial and emerging needs of people. A person of deep faith and a great thinker, he did not keep his vast experiences of life to himself, but also shared it with others.”

Even after Jim retired from his YMCA service, he continued to share his knowledge and experience with others, speaking at YMCA Europe’s General Assembly in Madrid in 2016 and

the YMCA175 event in 2019. Juan Simoes Iglesias, Secretary General of YMCA Europe said of Jim:

“Jim's legacy, commitment and inspiration are more present than ever today. He is a reference for all of us across Europe and the world as we search for authentic and impactful ways to build peace, reconciliation, integration of minorities and positive social transformation. In fact, this week in Brussels during our strategic meetings regarding YMCA Ukraine's response to the war and the humanitarian work with displaced persons and refugees, I referred to Jim in different moments highlighting his outstanding service in those fields.”

We often talk in the YMCA about standing on the shoulders of giants, and Jim to me was one of those giants. A man who committed his life's work to work with refugees around the world, wherever and whenever there was a need.

In closing I wanted to leave the last words to Jim. When a colleague of his emailed Jim to convey concern about his health, Jim replied by saying:

“.....You and I were given lives filled with love, friendship and opportunity. So -----.

I have no time for regrets. Too busy sorting books.

Be happy dear friends,

Jim”

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