

YMCA Spiritual Legacy Series

John R. Mott – Great YMCA Leader of the 20th Century



John R. Mott

(May 25, 1865-January 31, 1955) was born of pioneer stock in Livingston Manor, New York.

At sixteen, Mott enrolled at [Upper Iowa University](#), a small Methodist preparatory school and college in Fayette. He was an enthusiastic student of history and literature there and a prizewinner in debating and oratory, but transferred to [Cornell University](#) in 1885. At this time he thought of his life's work as a choice between law and his father's lumber business, but he

"While life lasts, I am an evangelist."

changed his mind upon hearing a lecture by J. K. Studd on January 14, 1886. Three sentences in Studd's speech, he said, prompted his lifelong service of presenting Christ to students: "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God."

Mott couldn't sleep all that night and hunted up Studd for a private talk. That encounter changed his life--and the world. Mott was to demonstrate a living faith in Christ and became a notable evangelist, a YMCA leader and a co-founder of the Student Volunteer Mission. He labored to pull all Christians together to win the world for Christ in his generation.

In the summer of 1886, Mott represented Cornell University's Y.M.C.A. at the first international, interdenominational student Christian conference ever held. At that conference, which gathered 251 men from eighty-nine colleges and universities, one hundred men - including Mott - pledged themselves to work in foreign missions. From this, two years later, sprang the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions.

Mott was graduated in 1888, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, with a bachelor's degree in philosophy and history. In September of 1888 he began a service of twenty-seven years as national secretary of the Intercollegiate Y.M.C.A. of the U.S.A. and Canada, a position requiring visits to colleges to address students concerning Christian activities.

During this period, he was also chairman of the executive committee of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, presiding officer of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, chairman of the International Missionary Council. With Karl Fries of Sweden, he organized the World's Student Christian Federation in 1895 and as its general secretary went on a two-year world tour, during which he organized national student movements in India, China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Europe and the North East. In 1912 and 1913, he toured the Far East, holding twenty-one regional missionary conferences in India, China, Japan, and Korea.

From 1915 to 1928, Mott was general-secretary of the International Committee of the Y.M.C.A. and from 1926 to 1937 president of the Y.M.C.A.'s World Committee. During World War I, when the Y.M.C.A. offered its services to [President Wilson](#), Mott became general secretary of the National War Work Council, receiving the Distinguished Service Medal for his work. For the Y.M.C.A. he kept up

international contacts as circumstances allowed and helped to conduct relief work for prisoners of war in various countries. He had already declined President Wilson's offer of the ambassadorship to China, but he served in 1916 as a member of the Mexican Commission, and in 1917 as a member of the Special Diplomatic Mission to Russia.

The sum of Mott's work makes an impressive record: he wrote sixteen books in his chosen field; crossed the Atlantic over one hundred times and the Pacific fourteen times, averaging thirty-four days on the ocean per year for fifty years; delivered thousands of speeches; chaired innumerable conferences, and received dozens of awards. At 81, the Nobel committee awarded him one of the highest honors given on earth--the Nobel Peace Prize. He died at his home in Orlando, Florida, at the age of eighty-nine.

In His Own Words:

"It is our duty to evangelize the world because all men need Christ. The Scriptures clearly teach that if men are to be saved they must be saved through Christ. He alone can deliver them from the power of sin and its penalty. His death made salvation possible. The Word of God sets forth the conditions of salvation. God has chosen to have these conditions made known through human instruments. Christians have a duty to preach Christ to every creature. The burning question for every Christian then is: Shall hundreds of millions of people now living, who need Christ and are capable of receiving help from Him, pass away without having even the opportunity to know Him?"

"The young people's movements of our day, like our own...YMCA, need nothing so much as some mighty objective to call out the best energies of mind and heart. We find precisely such an objective in the sublime enterprise of filling the earth with a knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the deep. If we would save our Christian young people's movements from their perils of ease and luxury and selfishness and slothfulness and unreality, we must necessarily take up some great and scriptural object like this, and give ourselves to it with holy abandon."

"I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day; the night cometh, when no man can work.' Therefore, friends, in view of the awful need of men who tonight are living without Christ; in view of the infinite possibilities of the life related to Christ as mighty Saviour and risen Lord; in view of the magnitude of the task which confronts the Church of this generation; in view of the impending crisis and the urgency of the situation; in view of the conditions which favor a great onward movement within the Church of God; in view of the dangers of anything less than a great onward movement; in view of the great cloud of witnesses who gathered around us last night, of those who subdued kingdoms and wrought righteousness – yes, in view of the constraining memories of the Cross of Christ and the love wherewith he hath loved us, let us rise and resolve, at whatever cost of self-denial, that live or die, we shall live or die for the evangelization of the world in our day".

Rev. Tom Welch
Central Florida YMCA
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