

The Laity Minute

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I am a fan of old movies. I especially love films from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. I simply don't believe they will ever make them like that again. Most of my favorite actresses and actors come from this era. I can never get enough of Jean Harlow, Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn, Lorretta Young, Greta Garbo, Myrna Loy, and Marlene Dietrich. Of course, who can forget the great Joan Crawford. She was one of the first Golden Era actresses who were Hollywood trailblazers. Every time I watch her, she seems larger than life. She commanded the screen and was a force with which to be reckoned. Isn't it interesting to know that even with all of that super-powered presence, she possessed a height of 5'3"? This tiny person had the stature of a 7-foot-tall NBA player and those around her knew she was not backing down from anything or anyone.

In the Methodist church, we have our own Joan Crawford. Marjorie Swank Matthews stood barely 5 feet tall and was our first elected female Bishop. She was elected in 1980 by the North Central Jurisdictional Conference in Dayton, OH. People who knew her said she was small but had a presence no one could match. The Methodist church has always had women who preached and conducted ministry. However, history in the UMC was changed forever with this formal recognition.

Bishop Matthews was born in Onaway, Michigan in 1916. She was a scholar of the Bible, deeply schooled in the Wisdom literature. She earned numerous degrees including a doctorate in Old Testament scholarship. She became an elder in 1965 (at age 49) and was the second female district superintendent in the UMC. All of this is quite amazing since ministry was her second profession. Before her service, she worked as a secretary for an auto parts manufacturer for almost 20 years.

She was known for her firm leadership and intellect. However, she had quite a sense of humor, too! When her stole was placed around her neck at the Service of Consecration, she joked about her height. She said, "Don't give me a crozier (a pastoral staff). It will make me look like Little Bo Peep." But, she also took her job very seriously. Even through all the heavy burdens of her position, the scrutiny of being a woman in leadership, and pressure from media, she never relented. Her 5-foot stature stood taller than any negativity.

Just before Bishop Matthews retired in 1984, she gave an interview to the Milwaukee Sentinel. "I don't think many people know the weight of responsibility (of being a Bishop). I feel a great deal of hope for the church....trying to do what it can for the hurting in the world." The interview ended with her saying she sees a church which is becoming extremely cautious, "almost to the point of being afraid to take risks." She stated, "I would think the fear of taking risks is really detrimental to the church."

In a video interview, she said she knew being a female Bishop was hard to accept for some people. Bishop Matthews said she knew what a national monument felt like because people came to see her, look at her, but were not sure what to say next! But, she thought, "God is interested in persons who are willing to be used in the ministry of the church more than the sex of the person being called."

Similar to Joan Crawford, Bishop Matthews was a pioneer in her field. As small in stature as both women were, both were resilient, focused, and purposeful. They changed history in their own respective ways. I, for one, am inspired by her legacy and hope that the UMC can be all she hoped it would be.



Bishop Marjorie Swank Matthews

1916-1986