

Welcoming the Stranger: Alma Mathews

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Legacy Stories

Alma Mathews

Imagine being a woman with a child, arriving in a new country, not knowing the language, trying to navigate a complex immigration system and not knowing where to go next. This is what thousands of women faced in the late 1800s as they arrived in the new world, often alone to meet their husbands, fathers or other relatives who had travelled ahead.



The Women's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the precursor of United Methodist Women, realized that these women traveling alone were not only in need of help, but also in danger, often robbed of everything they owned.

Helen and James Mathews and their daughter Alma, with the help of others, thus began a new ministry to help the vulnerable women arriving at the docks of New York. They rented a small house, and while two stayed home to run the household, two would comb the docks looking for single women disembarking the ships. They helped the women and their families through the immigration process, and offered a free and safe place to stay at what was then known as the Immigrant Girls' Home. The women then helped the newly arrived get to their next destination, in New York or elsewhere in the country. In the year 1887 there were over 3,000 lodgers at the house, with 808 ships that were met by Methodist women.

When Helen and James had to leave the ministry, their daughter Alma took their place. Alma worked in this ministry for a whole generation — from the 1890s to 1922, and she later continued her work welcoming the immigrant as a greeter on Ellis Island. She died in 1933. The house was renamed the Alma Matthews House and was a vital part of United Methodist Women's ministry, until it was sold in 2016.

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