

Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



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Women's Missionary Society

A precursor of Women of the ELCA (WELCA) is Women's Missionary Society. Established near the end of the nineteenth century, the organization had its start thanks to the work of one woman, Emmy Carlsson Evald, who recognized that a great deal of potential was going untapped because women's roles in society were so limited. She felt called to do something to change that.

Born in 1857 in Illinois, the daughter of Swedish immigrants, Evald drew inspiration from her parents. Her father, a Lutheran pastor, advocated for education and was a founder of Augustana College in Rock Island, still a thriving post-secondary educational institution of the ELCA. Her mother, in addition to running a household with eight children, took an active role in caring for other immigrants and members of the community. Even as a child Evald recognized that women could get things done outside of the role of wife and mother.

After graduating from a girls' school in Sweden, her parent's home country, Evald enrolled at Rockford College where she befriended activist and future Nobel Prize winner, Jane Addams. Then she went on to earn a master's degree from Augustana. In 1884 she married Carl Evald, a Lutheran pastor; the couple raised two daughters. However, as a minister's wife, Evald recognized that she was in a position to make a greater impact on the world than most women could in those days. She frequently accompanied her husband to conferences, and while the men met, the pastors' wives would drink coffee and visit with each other, discussing various topics, many outside the realm of home and family. And, according to her biographer, she decided, "We can do more than this. There is work to be done, and we can accomplish it!"

Through these conversations the foundation of Women's Missionary Society was laid. She argued for forming an organization where, although women could do individual things within their own parishes, joining forces would manifest broader work. Her motto, as has been the motto of many: Stronger Together. She felt there was an untapped repository of power that wasn't being utilized. Being a charismatic and determined personality, she moved to harness that power. In time a national organization was formed; Evald was president for 43 years. In her role with Women's Missionary Society, Evald supervised the construction of 74 buildings around the world, a number of them homes for women. Among other things, she visited mission stations in India, Palestine and China.

Having had success with the women's organization, Evald also engaged in the women's suffrage movement in the early 20th century. She joined Susan B. Anthony and Catherine McCullough (the latter a friend from Rockford College) as a charter member of the First International Women's Suffrage Conference, working with many others to help give women the vote and, ultimately, bring about freedoms for women that were unheard of a mere century ago.

Emmy Carlsson Evald was one woman, but she recognized that women joined in concerted effort could be a force for good in the world. According to her granddaughter, she felt that every action was extending God's love to meet needs and to make changes. She considered herself in her master's service.

Adapted from "Guided by God" by Jennifer Bringle in *Living Lutheran* (April 2022)