



MichiganWomenForward



Marjorie Swank Matthews

(1916 - 1986)

Inducted: **1986** *Locale:* **Grand Rapids** *Era:* **Contemporary**
Area(s) of Achievement: **Religion**

In 1980 Marjorie Swank Matthews became the first woman in the more than 200-year history of the Methodist Church to be elected bishop. She served the 131,000 United Methodists in Wisconsin until her retirement in 1984. She had previously paved the way for women in high church office by her designation as Superintendent of the West Michigan Conference, United Methodist Church.

Born in Onaway, Michigan, she wanted to be a missionary but was discouraged by her minister who instead encouraged her to become a lay preacher. She was divorced shortly after World War II, worked as a secretary, and raised her son alone. At the age of 47, she entered Central Michigan University while simultaneously serving several small congregations as a lay preacher. Graduating summa cum laude, she entered Colgate-Rochester Divinity school and went on to earn a doctorate in theology from Florida University. Colleagues noted her as an Old Testament scholar.

As a pastor and preacher, Bishop Matthews found that most opposition to female clergy came from other clergy rather than from her congregations. Largely because of her example, Michigan is distinguished by having been served women District Superintendents and bishops. Bishop Matthews died on June 30, 1986, following her formal nomination to the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame. In addition to her pioneering achievements in religious leadership, she is remembered by her many friends as an able scholar, good preacher, and fine administrator.

Photo Courtesy of United Methodist Church, Sun Prairie, WI