

Homeward Upward Forward: The Immigrant Saga of Otto and Alva Karlstrom and the Founding of the Lutheran Compass Missions in Seattle and Tacoma

Ninety years ago a remarkable couple, Rev. Otto and Mrs. Alva Karlstrom, originally from Sweden, started a mission in Seattle's skidroad which served mostly homeless sailors, loggers, and fishermen. The small mission was in part a chapel, reading room, language school, soup kitchen and a place for the men to crash. A second mission was established by Otto in 1922 in Tacoma with the local work done by key Lutheran ministers and friends. This downtown mission lasted for a decade, but more importantly, morphed into the Lutheran Welfare Society in the early '30s to establish Good Samaritan Hospital, the former Puyallup retirement home, and other services.

Since the death of Otto Karlstrom in 1948, the Compass Center in Seattle has continued to grow. The plight of homeless people has continued but in different ways, and the Center has adjusted and expanded to serve women and men, families and veterans. As of 2010 the Compass Housing Alliance, as it is now called, operates emergency shelter, day services, transitional and some permanent housing at over 30 different service sites in the Greater Seattle area. The current annual budget for this non-profit agency is nearly two million dollars.

The immigrant story of the Otto Karlstroms and the founding of the missions is told by their youngest son, Ernest Karlstrom, who with his wife, Marilyn, resides at Franke Tobey Jones Retirement Village in Tacoma. The talk starts with descriptions of Alva's and Otto's roots in Sweden, Otto as a young sailor and later to circumnavigate the globe in a square-rigged ship. Both of their families migrated to the American Midwest, and the two meet in college. Finally the couple moves to Seattle, where Rev. Karlstrom takes a parish, and the family continues to grow as Otto and Alva work as urban missionaries.

Support of the missions came mainly from individuals and churches in the Northwest but also across the country and even in Sweden. The mission trips by auto were family affairs, with father preaching, mother a harpist and singer, the kids playing other instruments, singing, reciting poetry. It is largely a story of family.