

Prayer Shawl Ministry at St. George's Memorial Anglican Church, Oshawa, Ontario

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16. 17. 18. 27. 9. 18. 3. 6. 8. 14. 18. What do those numbers mean? A total of 154 prayer shawls and lap blankets made and blessed in the first year of our ministry! Wow! God has been very good!

To date, more than 100 beautiful shawls have been presented to special people we know at significant times in their lives!

May my words bring glory to our God, who continues to do for us “more than we can ask or imagine”. May my words about St. George's Prayer Shawl Ministry bring you hope and encouragement as we work together to serve God joyfully.

Who could have imagined what has developed and continues to enrich our common life here? Starting this ministry was a question of trusting God to lead, and saying, “yes, I will follow”—not knowing how things would develop.

The death of a friend at the beginning of 2017 really hurt me. Her cancer had spread very quickly, and I wanted to do something meaningful for her during her last few weeks on earth. She was not a member of any organized church, but I sensed a deep spirituality in her. I thought maybe I could give her a prayer shawl... But it took too long to navigate through the channels of another local church, and too soon, my friend had passed on without a shawl. I felt terrible, but it came to me that I **could** help others—**we** could help others. **If** we had a prayer shawl ministry at St. George's, **we** could help many people.

I remember waking up in the night repeatedly with a continual, metaphorical, but very real, nudging. God was asking, “Whom shall I send”? I was hearing the next part: “Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord? / I have heard You calling in the night. / I will go, Lord, if You lead me. / I will hold Your people in my heart.” When God makes one uncomfortable, something **has to be done**.

So, I met with Pastor Judy early in 2017. She was most enthusiastic when I broached the idea of a prayer shawl ministry here and believed “the time was right”. The time was and is definitely right! God’s timing!

The Biblical verse we chose as our credo comes from *Galatians* (chapter 6, verse 10): “Therefore, as we have **opportunity**, let us do good to **all** people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (NIV) We begin by supporting our fellow believers, and God’s love radiates outwards from St. George’s. We begin **now**, while we **can**. Earthly time is always limited.

What is a prayer shawl? In Old Testament times, God commanded Jewish men to wear a “tallit” or little tent, with tassels on the corners and a blue cord on each tassel; thus, they would be prompted to remember and obey the Lord’s commands. The Jewish man would wrap himself in his tallit and recite a specified psalm, literally placing himself under God’s sheltering love. While wearing his shawl, he would feel securely wrapped in God’s love and protection, at the same time being reminded that he owed his life to God and was bound to worship and serve.

Old Testament stories often tell of God sheltering His people and offering them comfort. On one occasion, when fleeing from Saul, David prayed, “Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in You my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of Your wings...” (*Psalms 57: 1*). Isaiah reminds us that God “gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (*Isaiah 40:29*) (NIV). God promises to heal...guide and restore

comfort..." (*Isaiah 57: 18-19*) The psalmist knows that God "heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds" (*Psalms 147: 3*). Jeremiah affirms that God's people will be restored to health, their wounds healed (*Jeremiah 30: 17*). God promises Jeremiah, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." (*Jeremiah 31: 33*) Isaiah reminds us that God clothes us "with the garments of salvation" (*Isaiah 61: 10*).

Old Testament verses stress God's covenant with his people: God acts; God asks His people turn to Him. Thus, we pray with the psalmist, "Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in Your truth; knit my heart to You that I may fear Your name" (*Psalms 86: 11*).

Note that word, "**knit**". When stitches are knit together, they become strong and create a new entity—a shawl, a lap blanket, or a piece of clothing. The knitting process takes time, effort, patience, and perseverance—especially when stitches need to be reworked. God is constantly **that** patient and gentle with us, knitting us metaphorically to Him. That is real comfort!

One of the most beautiful garments mentioned in the Old Testament is Joseph's coat of many colours (see *Genesis 37: 3*), a "richly decorated robe" made especially for him. Theologians tell us that Joseph prefigures Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Surely, the most outstanding piece of clothing mentioned in the New Testament has to be Jesus' seamless garment (see *John 19: 23-24*), which was unique and made specially for Him—it was the object his murderers coveted and cast lots for, after His wrongful conviction.

Clearly, given the Bible's many references to clothing, God values covering and protecting us throughout our lives. A few examples: He gave Adam and Eve coats made of animal hide when they were banished from the Garden of Eden (*Genesis 3: 21*); God ensured that priests such as Aaron always had holy garments to wear to serve Him and to remind people of God's authority over them (*Exodus 28: 2*); God had Elijah pass on his mantle that parted the Red Sea to Elisha (*2 Kings 2: 9-15*); the persecuted men in the fiery furnace emerged with their

coats unburned (*Daniel 3*). Later, a woman who suffered for 12 years touched the fringe of Jesus' robe and was healed (*Matthew 9: 20* and *Luke 8:44*). Aquila and Priscilla were respected tentmakers, converted by Paul. According to *Revelation*, "...he who overcomes will...be clothed in white garments (*Revelation 3: 5*).

Certainly it is most appropriate that we offer handmade shawls and lap blankets as prayerfully made, special gifts to other people in our community, in their times of difficulty and on occasions of celebration. Shawls remind recipients that God is ever-near, and we owe all we have to Him. Shawls represent loving our neighbours as God has loved us.

Modern-day prayer shawl ministry began in 1998 in the United States, when Joy Bristow and Victoria Galo were inspired. With the Spirit's power, a small, local ministry became a world-wide movement. What we do in St. George's now follows their inspiration, is founded on Scripture, and reflects Anglican Church tradition.

St. George's is home to many crafters. Much of their work is done bit by bit, stitch by stitch, at home. Since shawls in progress are portable, you could find us crafting in countless different spaces and places. People who have not crafted in years have picked up needles and hooks to share in this ministry; shut-ins knit for their church; friends of friends knit for St. George's, too. In *Exodus* we read the words, "All who are skilled among you are to come and make everything the Lord has commanded..." (*Exodus 35: 10*) God is moving people to share.

Few crafters count the hours involved in completing their projects. 20 crafting hours per shawl? 30 or 40 hours? Judging by the beautiful patterns and exquisite work brought to each blessing service, considerable and persistent efforts have been offered as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Each shawl is unique.

We gratefully accept donated yarn, although many crafters provide their own materials. We accept partially finished projects people may have stashed away, and we turn them into worthy gifts. Ours is a self-sustaining, selfless ministry, costing St. George's no money.

Our ministry is a joint effort including **everyone at St. George's. We are all** coworkers with God, striving to further His kingdom. Every shawl we give comes from **all** members of St. George's. The prayer card attached to each beautifully gift-wrapped shawl package proclaims that the people of St. George's **all** offer love and prayers. We promised in baptism to "seek and serve Christ in all persons" (p. 159, Service of Holy Baptism), loving our neighbours as ourselves, as Jesus commanded. Prayer shawl ministry provides a way.

What sets apart a prayer shawl? Prayers, of course. Each maker prays silently throughout the construction process. Whether formal or improvised, these prayers of the heart are deep-felt intentions for the health and healing of another person, offered up to God like arrows of love. I often adapt the Prayer of St. Francis, "Lord, use my skill to make me a channel of Your healing as I stitch this shawl. May it be a comfort to the person who receives it. May he or she be warmed in wearing it, through the knowledge that You are always with us."

We have learned that God anticipates needs. Thus, with eyes wider open, we recognize more people around us who might benefit from a comforting shawl. God surprises us with abundant provision. In response, we reach out to the needy, lonely, ill, grieving, challenged people in our midst, or those celebrating a special occasion. We also provide a shawl or blanket for each baptismal candidate. The covenant again: God gives; we pass on tokens of His love.

**You** may share a shawl with a friend or relative anywhere. Anyone is eligible. Just ask—even for yourself. Shawls are always **given unconditionally**—one per person. They cannot be purchased, though grateful recipients may certainly donate to St. George's and receive an income tax receipt. Givers pray to choose the most appropriate shawl for each recipient. How

that person treasures said shawl is not for us to judge. We are to show “love because [God] first loved us” (1 John 4: 19). In *Proverbs*, we are reminded that “a friend loves at **all** times” (*Proverbs 17: 17*). So does God.

Prayer shawl ministry reminds us that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (*Ephesians 2: 10*). So we pray to be “transformed by the renewing of [our] minds” (*Romans 12: 2*), that we will continue to find joy in our work and **want** to give, remembering that Jesus Himself said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (*Acts 20: 35*). Making while praying is truly meditative and healing for the crafter. Even the secular world recognizes the peaceful benefits that come from the slow evolution of needlework projects. Charity crafting groups are springing up in many places around the world. But add prayers, and God is truly glorified: “The prayer of [the] righteous...[can be] powerful and effective” (*James 5: 16*).

Crafters bring their shawls and lap robes for Pastor Judy to bless at the Eucharist on the last Thursday of each month, excepting July. We pray corporately and thankfully as we offer our crafted gifts. We keep photo records and all the thank-you cards that come in, along with the names of each recipient. Thus, we can continue praying for these people specifically.

We cannot heal, nor can the shawls heal. Nevertheless, the soft, warm comfort of a shawl reminds its wearer over and over again that we care. Recipients are often overcome by tears of joy. Talk to each other, and share the wonderful stories. Prayer shawls remind recipients that we help carry their burdens, and that God will bring them **His** best form of healing. An amazing form of evangelism!

Our prayer shawl ministry honours the principles of good stewardship: everyone involved gives dedicated **time** to helping others, by crafting, wrapping, delivering, and praying; everyone shares his or her unique, God-given **talent**; everyone offers **treasure** in terms of best materials made into a special, well-crafted gift; everyone uses **tissue**, in terms of using the

body's coordination to make, wrap, and deliver shawls; and **territory**— well, today St. George's' shawls join us to people in Halifax, the Channel Islands, Fort Frances, Warkworth, across Durham Region, and beyond. Shawls also strengthen bonds between individuals within our parish. As the love of God spreads outward from St. George's, we are renewed inwardly as people working together to further God's kingdom.

Our ministry is expanding. God's networking constantly amazes! Recently a need for lap robes for seriously ill patients at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto came to our attention. One person knew another, a few chatted, and a parishioner found a group of eager knitters not directly connected to St. George's. *Voila!* As a result, Pastor Judy will bless these lovely gifts at our blessing services, alongside our own shawls, and forward them to the Anglican Chaplain at St. Michael's.

In response to your requests, we hope to offer learn-to-stitch classes starting this summer—because we want to share the meditative joy that crafting provides. Stitching and prayer...

Our prayer shawl ministry is intended to support **all** other ministries here at St. George's. Filling a gap for God, by sharing handiwork with people we know, is a privilege. Parish growth and renewal are God's work—the modern manifestation of those tongues of flame that descended on the first apostles at Pentecost.

May our common life as people of God in this place continue to flourish. May we never “become weary in doing good” (*Galatians 6:9*). May we do all we can to help others while we have opportunity. May we draw the circle “wider still” and “let our loving know no borders, [as we are] faithful to God's call” (Hymn 418). May we remember that it truly is more blessed to give than to receive. Personally, I pray for continuing energy and wisdom in coordinating prayer shawl ministry efforts on your behalf.

Let me close with a prayer from the fifth Sunday after Easter: “Blessed are you, O God, ruler of heaven and earth. Day by day You shower us with blessings. As You have raised us to new life in Christ, give us glad and generous hearts, ready to praise You and to respond to those in need, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.”