



Enfolded in one of the prayer shawls made by East Congregational Church, Violet Pinola brings the handmade work in for a blessing.

Wrapped in Love

Prayer shawl groups weave faith and hope together.

By Ellen Michaud

Pulling into a parking space in front of a rehabilitation home near Boston, the Reverend Sara Marean turned off the car and looked over at the bulky gift bag on the seat beside her.

The bag contained a prayer shawl that had been woven by women in her East Congregational Church in Milton. It was beautiful—a soft, navy blue wool that seemed to absorb the early morning sun. When it was finished, every one of the nine women in the group had laid her hands upon the shawl and offered a prayer asking God to help the person for whom it was intended.

Sara gently placed her hand on the bag and offered up her own prayers for the elderly man she was about to visit. Then she picked up the bag, stepped out of her car, and walked toward the facility.

Does Prayer Heal?

Studies show that when people are sick, hurting, or injured, the one thing both they and those who care about them do besides head for a doctor is pray.

“We find that whenever people are in any kind of distress, they cry out to God for hope and meaning,” says Harold Koenig, M.D., director of Duke University’s Center for Spirituality, Theology, and Health and bestselling author of numerous books, including *The Healing Power of Faith*. “It’s a natural response, particularly in the United States, which is a pretty religious country.”

But does it do any good?

Some studies say yes, others say no, and still others reveal a scientific community confused by the ethereal nature of what they were studying.

Dr. Koenig chuckles at the conundrum.

“The studies of intercessory prayer—where scientists were trying to prove that prayer works in some kind of supernatural way—are pretty much

For the members of the East Congregational community, making and blessing prayer shawls for those in need—church members or not—is a healing act of faith.

over,” he says. “We’ve learned that you cannot apply scientific method to document God.”

On the other hand, studies demonstrate that people who pray are healthier and cope better with health challenges. No one knows why, but in general, says Dr. Koenig, “we know that people who are compassionate, forgiving, and grateful do better, and that most of the world’s major religions—Christians, Buddhists, and Hindus alike—have powerful belief systems that foster those values.”

Prayer is a big part of those belief systems, says Dr. Koenig. “But when you talk with people who are



knowledgeable in faith traditions and ask, ‘What is prayer?’ what you hear is that it isn’t so much about getting miracles as it is about getting your attitude in line with your faith tradition.”

In fact, if you’re using prayer just to be healed from one condition or another, he adds, “it’s probable you’ll receive a little relief, but it’s probably not going to do as much as you’d like, and you’re going to get mad.

“But when you get your prayer in line with your faith tradition”—expressing gratitude for the many blessings in your life instead of asking for a big bank account, for example—“it’s likely you’ll start to function differently. And that’s what makes the difference to your health.

“The purpose of prayer is not to change the situation,” says Dr. Koenig. “It’s to change the person in the situation.”

From Buddhists to Baptists

There are many different ways to pray. But from Buddhists to Baptists, from Jews to the dancing dervishes of Islam, prayer shawls have been a part of tradition for centuries.

A particularly American approach, developed by Janet Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo, authors of *The Prayer Shawl Companion*, has drawn both believers and nonbelievers, crocheters and knitters, into hundreds of groups that meet regularly across the country. The groups, like the one at East Church near Boston, formed to make shawls created in prayer and presented with prayer to those who are hurt, ill, grief-stricken, or in pain.

For Jenna Hughes, an occupational therapist who started the Prayer Shawl Ministry group at East Congregational Church, the shawl is a way of connecting the knitter to the recipient. “I was working in a nursing home when I got this patient who had a prayer shawl,” Jenna recalls. “I asked about it, and she told me to check out a Web site about starting a shawl ministry.” Jenna did. Not long after, an aunt who lived on the other side of the country went into the hospital for a knee replacement and ended up on a ventilator. “What could I do from that distance?” Jenna asked. “So she got the first shawl. And she loved it.”

Next was a friend with cancer, then a cousin with cancer. Finally, Jenna, who was new to the church, asked if she could form a prayer group to make shawls. The church agreed. Since then, the Prayer Shawl Ministry has created 62 shawls—including one for Jenna herself. “I was sick all last summer and fall,” explains the therapist. But the shawl helped. “I was enfolded in love.”

Sacred Moment

Ignoring the bulky bag knocking into her thigh as she made her way to the elevator, Reverend Sara—as her parishioners affectionately call her—kept her mind focused on the elderly man, Sam, she was about to visit.

“I was trying to think about how I would feel if I were in his situation,” she says now from her office at the church. “I



Reverend Sara Marean’s Prayer Shawl Ministry group—one of hundreds across the country—has made more than 60 shawls, all by hand.

wanted to be empathetic and supportive, so I wanted to try and feel what he would. Sometimes an emotional response is different than what you might expect, so before I go in to visit, I try to think about the range of emotions I might encounter. That helps me meet him where he is.”

Unfortunately, meeting Sam where he is can be difficult. “With most members of our congregation, I can go in and talk about how their lives are going, how church is going, and pray with them,” says Sara. “But Sam’s in a place of dementia. Some days he’s incredibly lucid, and we can have a conversation. Other days he’s in another world.”

When Sara pushed open the door to Sam’s room on the day of her visit, though, Sam was having a good day.

“It was a beautiful time,” Sara says. “Sam took the shawl in his hands, wrapped it around his shoulders, sat up straight, and looked absolutely regal.”

For one small moment, in the midst of a disease that was robbing him of his very identity, he knew who he was.

As the prayer shawl group had prayed, he was “cradled in hope, kept in joy, graced with peace, and wrapped in love.”

Sara’s joy is evident. “For me, it was a sacred moment. I hope it was for Sam, too.”



For more information about prayer shawl groups, visit saturdayeveningpost.com/prayer-shawls.