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St. Christopher Church group in Nashua creates prayer shawls for those with challenges or celebrations

By TERESA SANTOSKI Staff Writer

Thanks to the members of the prayer shawl group at St. Christopher Church, there is one Bible verse that's becoming more familiar to Christians and non-Christians alike.

It's the first half of Psalm 121:2, "My help comes from the LORD," which is printed on the small wooden cross that's tied to each prayer shawl the group makes.

"LORD" is all in capitals in this verse because it refers to Yahweh, one of the Hebrew names for God. In contrast, "Lord," when used in the Old Testament, usually refers to Adonai, a different Hebrew name for God.

Since the group's formation in 2007, members of the parish have given away more than 275 shawls to comfort those who are dealing with illness and other challenging life situations, as well as to help celebrate births, baptisms and other joyful events.

Andrea Richards started the group, officially known as Creating for Our Community, at the suggestion of her older sister, Lisa. Richards' sister also bought her a book by Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo, who introduced the concept of prayer shawl groups in 1998.

"I knew that there were other women in the parish besides myself who liked to knit and crochet," Richards said, "and it seemed to be the right type of vehicle to use a talent that we had for our little parish community."

The group meets monthly, alternating between daytime and evening meetings to accommodate members' schedules. Much of the work is done outside the meetings, which are more of an opportunity to enjoy the company of fellow knitters and crocheters, share ideas, and ask for help with stitches and patterns.

"We have all different levels, people from beginners all the way through advanced," Richards said. "You always have someone at the meeting who can help you if you're stuck."

Meetings are also the time when finished shawls are brought in to be packaged. Along with the wooden cross, each shawl is bundled with a card explaining that the shawl is from the parish and intended as a visible prayer for the recipient.

The members typically offer a silent prayer over the finished shawls, Richards said, so

that the recipients are not only wrapped in a tangible prayer, but have been prayed for, as well.

The power of these prayers even comforts those who don't necessarily believe in God. Member Connie McNulty recalled giving a prayer shawl to a patient at Massachusetts General Hospital. Because his family members were all people of faith, she didn't realize he was an atheist.

McNulty remembered the tense expression of the man's sister, unsure how her brother would react, when McNulty presented him with the shawl and explained what it was.

His response was surprising, to say the least.

"He would not let the nurses take that off his bed, and when he was in ICU, he insisted that it go with him," McNulty said of the prayer shawl. "It obviously brought him some peace."

The man's sister was so impressed that she asked McNulty for more details about the prayer shawl group and has since started one of her own in her home state of California.

McNulty acknowledged that when people fall ill and normal life is disrupted, they become more receptive to God and to matters of faith.

"It's almost like they're searching, reaching for something," she said. "It made all of us realize how important what we're doing is. You never know how it's going to affect people."

Member Valerie Lewis also witnessed the impact of the prayer shawls firsthand when her parents received a care package from the parish during her father's illness. The package included two prayer shawls, one for her father and one for her mother.

"My dad couldn't sleep unless he had the shawl with him," Lewis said. "He was at peace. Instantly just so much more calm."

Although her father has since died, Lewis' mother still has the prayer shawls. The shawl selected for her mother was one Lewis herself had made.

"It opened my eyes to how much more meaningful it is," Lewis said. "It's not just a nice thing to do, it's a heartfelt, spiritual blessing. It carries more weight than just the yarn."

Richards agreed, noting that in times when verbal expressions of comfort just aren't enough, the prayer shawls speak volumes.

"To know that it was knit or crocheted with the intention of a prayer is very meaningful," she said. "Sometimes the words aren't there, but the visible presence of Christ is there."

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