Columns
Ministry



(Unsplash/Hello I'm Nik)



by Sue Paweski

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When I moved to Oak Park, Illinois, I became a member of St. Giles Parish. I was immediately drawn to that vibrant and engaging parish community. The bulletin and website were full of options for participation. Since my ministry as co-director of our Providence associate relationship allows me to work primarily from home, I had the time to be active at the parish.

The only drawback to my committing to a parish ministry was the requirement that I would be at our motherhouse for associate events and meetings. My free time was not consistent. Then I spied an invitation to knit and crochet for the Prayer Shawl Ministry. I like to do both especially, during the cold winter months. So I investigated to see just how I might be a member.

The approximately 30 members do exactly what you would think: They knit and crochet shawls for those who are in need of comfort and healing. There are no limits to the requests for the loving warmth of a shawl.



Some of the knitters in the Prayer Shawl Ministry of St. Giles Parish in Oak Park, Illinois, pose for a photo wearing T-shirts sent to them by a yarn donor. (Courtesy of

Susan Paweski)

And there are no limits as to what is created. Besides shawls and lap blankets, small pocket-size crosses, scarves and hats are made with the sole intention of bringing healing and prayers to the recipients.

The items themselves are lovely and varied in styles and colors; however, the most important gift to the receiver is the prayers that are offered for each and every person who receives the items. When we gather as a group once a month, we pray together that our hands will create a comforting sacramental for the wearer. We bless our creations before they are individually packaged.

Each has a card attached that includes the name of the knitter/crocheter and information about the Prayer Shawl Ministry. The card says:

> Our Prayer Shawl Minsters lovingly donate their time and talents by creating hand knitted and crocheted shawls and lap blankets for those suffering and those celebrating life's most joyous events. They provide warmth and embrace the recipient through the prayers and presence of a loving St. Giles parish and the presence of a loving God.



Knitted items from the St. Giles Prayer Shawl Ministry are ready to mail. (Courtesy of Susan Paweski)

I joined the group before the pandemic and thus had the opportunity to get acquainted with many of the members up front and personal. We are a model of diversity of ages, ethnicities, genders and degrees of skill. Everyone is warmly greeted and encouraged to get cookies and juice.

We open with a prayer and then a check-in. Margie, our convener and manager of distribution, brings us back to the business part of the meeting. Given our ages with various levels of hearing, and just enjoying our presence with each other, this can be a challenge. It is always a joyous meeting!

Then it's "show and tell" time. Each of us shows a completed item and/or a project we are working on. There are bins of donated yarn, books of patterns, and experienced crafters to assist with questions. Names of recipients are collected so that we may keep them intentionally in prayer.

Good conversation is sprinkled with laughs. We share our sorrows, too. We conclude with blessing the handmade work and offer all our joys and concerns in prayer to our loving God.

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No one was more surprised than I when I asked about who receives the shawls. The Prayer Shawl Ministry began as a parish outreach; now the handcrafted items have been sent to most of the states in the U.S., and countries in South America, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa. Members have delivered warm hats and scarves to the Chicago Greyhound bus station; to soup kitchens in the area and to Providence Pantry in West Terre Haute, Indiana, an outreach ministry of my congregation. Yes, it is amazing.

The blessings of this ministry have also included requests for information about beginning Prayer Shawl Ministries in parishes. Especially in navigating the restrictions of COVID-19, our meetings have taken on flexible scheduling. We have met outside and met virtually on Zoom. Meeting attendance is fluid, yet those handcrafted items continue to flow into the parish center. No matter the weather, COVID-19, members passing to God, the shawls and blankets keep coming.

I am especially grateful to have the privilege of working with my companions on the journey. During COVID-19, so much was curtailed and I didn't have the sense that I was contributing in any way. The Prayer Shawl Ministry gave me a sense of contributing to others in time of need. It is a gift to me.