

## **Prayer Shawls—and Emanuel AME**

Eight years ago, my friend Betsy Hunter sent an email asking me to join a prayer shawl ministry at Pilgrim Church. Betsy often has good ideas, so without too much deliberation, I showed up to the first meeting and knit with Maddie Merrifield, who was running the group, and several other wonderful women from Pilgrim. I didn't know it at the time, but God had spoken. And, I am deeply grateful that I listened.

Since that first soft ball of Lion's brand homespun wool, I have knit 25 prayer shawls. Each and every time, I feel blessed, I feel grateful, and I experience God in some part of the process. In no other area of my life, do I hear God so clearly and feel His presence so deeply.

Most of the shawls have been for friends and family whom I know—someone suffering from grief, facing a disease, or enduring what seems like an unbearable challenge. It is a personal and private knitting, blessing, and delivery, yet a very powerful and tangible sign of God's love and comfort. Inevitably, I am grateful to be a part of the healing.

Three years ago, we all learned of the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary school in nearby CT. I knew that I would knit a prayer shawl, but I also knew that just one was not enough for the enormity of the tragedy. Maybe other women would want to knit one also? So, I asked. I was amazed by the generous outpouring of support by so many knitters willing to join me in sending a message of hope and healing to Newtown. Selflessly, over forty knitters from Pilgrim and the community worked on fifty gorgeous shawls

with love and commitment. The day I delivered these prayer shawls to Newtown was what every day of our lives should be—a simple yet purposeful day spent allowing ourselves to follow God’s lead. It was about the prayer shawls and the part they needed to play in the lives of the knitters before they could attend to the healing of the recipients. A circle of faith and compassion that yearned to be completed. My day as a conduit was a blessing. The whole experience was, and is, after all, God's story played out through us.

More recently, our nation experienced another act of violence at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. Nine valuable and vibrant, completely innocent and deeply treasured lives had been taken—leaving behind a church, a community, and a city to somehow cope with the loss. Again, I was blessed to be a part of a prayer shawl mission. My gratitude to these knitters far outweighs my participation, so I want to share with you the letter I sent to them:

*Dear wonderful, loving, caring women who cast on with me,*

*I don't know how to properly thank you for your incredible generosity, compassion, and willingness to help me with this mission, but I want to try. God was calling me to knit a prayer shawl for Charleston, but He didn't want me to knit alone. He answered with you—more than a dozen incredible and talented knitters—and two devoted leaders of neighboring prayer shawl ministries who offered their groups' bountiful work. Together, we crafted 33 beautiful prayer shawls, knit with love, solidarity, empathy, and God's blessing for peace and comfort.*

*The prayer shawls made their way to Emanuel AME Church in two trips—one in mid July and another in late August. During my first visit, I was greeted by Rosetta Singleton, who was incredibly genuine, warm, and welcoming. Together, she and I piled 26 shawls on a round table downstairs in the church, and within minutes they were all taken—and immediately blanketing grieving shoulders and resurrecting long-lost smiles. Each and every shawl found just the wounded frame it was meant to cover, and each and every heart was gently lifted by your tender care and kindness. Because of you, hope seemed to resurface—an important triumph of love over hate.*

*I also met with the interim minister, Dr. Rev. Norvell Goff. He oversees 31 churches but is with Emanuel until they have found a new pastor. He is an eloquent, compelling, and solid leader well suited for the overwhelming challenge of rebuilding. But, Emanuel is up to the task as well. It is a vibrant and devoted church community with an unwavering faith and an unquestioning acceptance of blessings—even in the face of such grave tragedy. The grace pulsating within the church walls is palpable. Dr. Rev. Goff and his parishioners know intrinsically that God is at work in their church and is leading their community...and that He has never left them. It was truly an honor to be in their midst.*

*On my second visit, I met again with Rosetta and Dr. Rev. Goff and also his wife. My husband and daughter came along with me. We all joined hands, and Dr. Rev. Goff lead us in an inspirational blessing of the 7 additional shawls as well as the knitters whose hands expertly crafted them. Incredibly touched by your thoughtfulness, he said he would talk about the prayer shawls during church on Sunday, "because, well, as you know, some of the parishioners' hearts are a bit dry, you see. And, your*

*kindness will water all those dry hearts. And with that water, something new and beautiful will grow."*

*Each time we knit a prayer shawl, we sit with the story that necessitated it, we listen to what's needed, we accept what's being asked of us, and we knit with purpose. Our solitary connection to God through the softness and warmth of the wool, the rhythmic clicking of the needles, the transcendental repetitiveness of creating each stitch brings an inner peace that is transferred to the shawl. When we knit together, when we join our individual shawls as one offering, we make whole our single intentions. And, when we provide a united blessing of these shawls we insure that God's powerful message of hope, grace, and healing will be felt with each wrapping, wearing, and tight embrace of the shawls.*

*To each of you, I am as deeply appreciative and thankful as the folks at Emanuel AME. Thank you for allowing me to make this connection of hope, support, and love with a community in need.*

*With deepest peace, love, and gratitude,*

*Amy*

As God continues to shape the Prayer Shawl Ministry here at Pilgrim Church, I invite you, just as Betsy once invited me, to buy 3 skeins of wool, cast on that first stitch and find out where God is leading you. And, if you do hear His call—now or in the future—please reach out to me ([amyholbrook@verizon.net](mailto:amyholbrook@verizon.net)), and we'll cast on together. If you're someone who needs a project to inspire you, I am working with Rev. Emily Kellar to put together a "Knit for NOLA" prayer shawl mission to support the elderly community serviced through Camp Restore in New Orleans—the city to

which our Youth Mission Trip has been faithful. I pray that you will feel blessed. That you will feel grateful. And, that you will feel God's presence.

*Amy Holbrook*  
*October 2015*



Prayer Shawls delivered to Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. July 2015