

Knitting with Intention: A Ministry with Crafts

by Rev. Gwynn Fuqua



The Crafts & Music fellowship at Alameda First Christian began in early 2016 when Rev. Gloria Wilson, Nancy Tajima and I began meeting on Tuesday afternoons to work on our personal projects and invited others to join us. Some brought knitting, some brought crochet, some painted pictures, some sewed wall hangings for the narthex, and some brought musical instruments. The prayer squares ministry grew out of that fellowship.

I come across a lot of craft-related information online. I started seeing patterns for projects that would be good for crafters of various levels of ability. I created the Crafty Friends United group on Facebook (which is open to everyone and has members from all over the U. S.) as a way to disseminate that information. One day I found an article about knitting/crocheting for charity. In that article there was mention of pocket prayer shawls, also known as prayer squares. I followed the link to the website of Holston Annual Conference (United Methodist Church) where I found a pdf containing several patterns for prayer squares. I posted the patterns to Crafty Friends United, in case someone in the group was interested in forming a ministry around prayer squares in their own faith community. One person, Nancy Tajima, expressed interest and followed through. The two of us have made all of the prayer squares that have been distributed from the Alameda church.

Prayer squares bless the crafter. Sitting down and focusing on a project is a centering action that calms the crafter in a way that may not be noticed immediately. I find myself working on prayer squares whenever I have a few spare moments, while I'm sitting in a waiting room, or while I'm watching TV. Some say that you should be praying formal prayers the entire time you work on them, but I say that the making of a prayer square *with intention* is in itself a prayer.

A less obvious benefit to the crafter is the growing desire to offer up the work of your hands to lift up whomever God chooses to receive it. You are making a gift for someone you will probably never meet, even though it's possible that you may disagree with their politics or theology completely. The prayer square you're making may be destined for someone you might be afraid to come face-to-face with, and they might likewise be just as afraid of you. Yet the two of you are connected by thirteen yards of string which you knitted/prayed into 600 stitches, with the intention of encouraging that person. Letting go of the finished product is an exercise in generosity and hospitality, because there are probably some people who would not receive a prayer square, if we were doing the choosing. Placing the finished product in the narthex for persons unknown to pick up means letting go of our delusions of control and letting God do the choosing.

Prayer squares bless the giver. Even if you are not a crafter, the act of giving a prayer square to someone and seeing their reaction is uplifting. I also look at the prayer squares as an easy, non-threatening form of evangelism. All you have to say is,

“Here, I’d like to give you something that we make at my church. It’s a piece of knitting with a message of friendship. Put it in a pocket of your tote bag or backpack or purse, or in your glove compartment, and pull it out when you’re having a rough time and you need to know someone cares.”

Prayer squares bless the church that forms a prayer squares ministry. A special community is formed by those who band together for the purpose of making prayer squares, even before anyone thinks to call it a ministry. We have no idea how far the prayer squares travel, once they leave our hands. I took a batch of prayer squares to give away at my family reunion in Detroit in the summer of 2016. Most of the family is local to Detroit, but some came from other parts of the U. S.: Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Alexandria, Virginia; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Bethesda, Maryland. Others at the Alameda church have taken prayer squares on trips inside and outside the U. S. as well.

My friend M A Sempari ministers to people who live on the street, all over the East Bay. She told me that the people she meets like it when she leaves them with something tangible, so she will pick up rocks and write “love” or “hope” or “faith” on them with a Sharpie, just to have something to give them. When she saw the prayer squares, she was excited because she knew that the people she ministers to would love a handmade token. Whenever she visits a memorial site or shrine where someone has died on the street, she leaves prayer squares among the flowers and other items placed by those who have paid their respects. This week she left prayer squares at an encampment in Antioch and the Oakland Ghost Ship Fire site, in remembrance of those who died in those locations. Sometimes, by the time she returns to a shrine, a prayer square she left there is gone. Apparently it had not yet reached its final destination. It may pass through several hands before coming to rest with one person. We can safely trust that each person who possessed the prayer square, even if only for a short time, was blessed by the message and the intention that accompanied it.

I think it’s important for people to understand that prayer doesn’t have to be a big intimidating task, full of big words and always done in a precise way. It can be a simple affirmation that God is present and all is well. It can be a physical token that demonstrates that someone sat down and took the time to make 600 stitches out of string, with the intention that an unknown person somewhere on earth could hold the finished product and be encouraged.

