

Shaping Post-Christendom Spiritual Practice in the United Church of Canada

One Prayer Shawl at a Time

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Introduction

...[S]ymbolic of an inclusive, unconditionally loving, God.
They wrap, enfold, comfort, cover, give solace,
mother, hug, shelter and beautify.
Those who have received these shawls have been
uplifted and affirmed, as if given wings to
fly above their troubles...¹

Although shawls have been fashioned in one way or another for hundreds of years, this research is focused around the special shawl-making of the relatively new Christian prayer shawl ministry that has developed in North America over the last twenty-one years and, specifically, in the United Church of Canada. This thesis is a qualitative research study of six such prayer shawl ministries within southern Ontario. My interviews with prayer shawl groups for this research has led me to conclude that this ministry is significant in three vital ways: (1) personally, this ministry often mediates a life transition of the crafter and the recipient, (2) theologically, prayer shawls are tacitly understood to be blessing, sacramental, and a spiritual practice, and (3) culturally, this ministry provides a flexible and non-threatening form of outreach in a post-Christian setting.

The Original Story

The opening quote was written by Janet Severi Bristow, who together with Victoria Cole-Galo, founded this ministry in 1998, and its imagery describes the unique connectedness of yarn and crafting and God's love that this ministry brings together in the spiritual practice of knitting and crocheting.

¹ Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo, "Prayer Shawl Ministry Home Page" *Shawlministry*. Accessed Feb. 1, 2019.

This connectedness of yarn, prayer and the divine grew out of an experience Bristow and Cole-Galo had in 1997 just as they were graduating from the nine-month certificate program in women's spirituality from the Women's Leadership Institute (WLI) at the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut.² One of their graduating class members had a husband who was terminally ill and asked her classmates to pray for him. That day, she happened to have a brightly coloured shawl wrapped around her as the class gathered around to lay their hands on her and join in prayer. Bristow and Cole-Galo write that they realized it was a special moment and that the shawl would help remind their classmate of their love and support, but it was not until a few months later when they saw the shawl being used as the altar cloth at her husband's funeral, that they realized how deeply meaningful this shawl had become in reminding their classmate of their prayers and support.³

As the two friends considered the depth of their experience of a garment reminding the wearer that they were loved and prayed for, they pondered how they could share this in their own lives going forward. Cole-Galo happened to be knitting at the time and, in contemplative prayer, she came up with the original knit three, purl three prayer shawl pattern. As the two women began to knit with prayerful intention and gift shawls to their family and friends, interest grew and they found themselves traveling to give presentations and lead workshops. Gradually the shawl ministry became formalized with first a website and then a series of four books.

Today's Context

This connectedness, of crafting (knitting and crocheting) from the past, with new meaning and ways of conveying God's love today, has added significance as we become a Post-

² Janet Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo, *The Crocheted Prayer Shawl Companion: 37 Patterns To Embrace Inspire & Celebrate Life* (Newton, CT: Taunton, 2010), 3.

³ Bristow and Cole-Galo, *The Crocheted Prayer Shawl Companion: 37 Patterns To Embrace Inspire & Celebrate Life*, 3-4.

Christendom society⁴ in Canada, in other words a society where Christianity is no longer the dominant force shaping our societies.⁵ In this new reality, old ways of being the United Church of Canada are not always relevant or meaningful. Rules and norms might be in a state of transition but the church's core message of God's love and our relationships in and with this love, is more important than ever.

While there has been much descriptive writing about both the patterns and the experiences of prayer shawl making, the main body of scholarly work in this area has been done by Dr. Donna Bowman in the United States.⁶ Bowman uses the method of qualitative research⁷ to provide an in-depth look at how prayer shawl ministry is a “bottom up”⁸ versus “top down”⁹ expression of theology, particularly, women's theology—that is theology that is written for and by women—today.

This Research

In this work, I shifted the location of my research to the Canadian context, specifically, the context of the United Church of Canada in the southern Ontario region where I live.¹⁰ I also

⁴ According to the Pew Research Center's demographic study of 'Canada's Changing Religious Landscape', published on June 27, 2013, the percentage of the population that identifies as religiously unaffiliated rose from 5% in 1970 24% in 2010. Accessed at <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/27/canadas-changing-religious-landscape>.

⁵ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances In Canada Since 1945* (Kingston, ON, McGill-Queens, 2017), 239. Here the authors summarize that their evidence suggests that changes in Canadian culture are so dramatic that churches must accept that Canada is a post-Christian society.

⁶ Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016).

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

⁸ *Ibid.*, x. “Bottom-up theology” is where personal experiences in this ministry shape their concept and understanding of God.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xi. “Top-down” theology is where understanding of God is largely directed by the doctrine of the church they are a part of.

¹⁰ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances In Canada Since 1945* (Kingston, ON, McGill-Queens, 2017), 212, 239. Here the authors record that as of 2011 those claiming no religious affiliation in Canada was at 23.8% of total population whereas in the United States it was just 16.4%. Thereby suggesting that Canada has a different religious landscape than the United States, and is worth exploring in its own context. They go on to further observe that Canadian churches have too often relied on American studies to their detriment.

shifted the focus of the research to look at the how and why prayer shawl ministries are developed and are sustained as a spiritual practice today. In other words, how does the traditional craft of knitting and crocheting find new meaning as the spiritual practice of prayer shawl ministry in the United Church of Canada communities of faith today, in the midst of the changing priorities of the society around us?

This focus was of particular interest to me as an early 60s, white, female, middle class, United Church minister caring deeply for the church communities with which I am involved. It was abundantly clear that some of the old ways of doing and being the United Church of Canada were not always relevant or meaningful today. But in my minister's heart I believed that, while society's rules and norms might be in a state of transition, the Church's core message of God's love and our relationships in and with this love are more important than ever. I felt that the unique circumstance of an old craft finding new meaning has much to tell us about the ways other ministries might change to serve a Post-Christendom society, too.

Review of Literature

For the stated purpose of this paper, which is to explore the spiritual practice of prayer shawl ministry in the United Church of Canada through the lens of 'qualitative research', this review of literature extended to four main areas: first, the circumstances that lead to the development of shawl ministry; second, the academic work to date about this ministry; third, the concept of spiritual practices in the Christian tradition, and fourth, the personal experiential writing about knitting, crocheting and the shawl ministry itself.

The foundational story of the beginnings of the knitted prayer shawl ministry with Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo in the United States in 1998, and its subsequent spread

into Canada and beyond,¹¹ is central to understanding the depth of religious meaning and spiritual intention that anchors prayer shawl ministry groups in their practice. Understanding this intention is important in undertaking any research in this area. The story is told in a number of different publications, but it is Severi Bristow and Cole Galo's own writing in their four published books and on the Shawl Ministry website that I am using in this work. I am also drawing on the writing of Donna Bowman in her book *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women's Theological Imagination*, when she interviews Bristow and Cole-Galo about their involvement, perception of and hopes for the ministry now.¹²

Turning to the academic work that has been done to date in this area, there is a limited amount to consider.¹³ The most directly related is Donna Bowman's work in the United States, as documented in her 2016 book, *Prayer Shawl Ministries and Women's Theological Imagination*. As was mentioned earlier, Bowman uses the method of qualitative research for the in-depth interviews she does, with both individuals and small groups.¹⁴ From this research she describes how she thinks the prayer shawl ministry is a bottom up versus top down theology. She

¹¹ As detailed in the following books and website, Janet Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo, *The Prayer Shawl Companion: 38 Knitted Designs To Embrace Inspire & Celebrate Life* (Newtown, CT: Taunton, 2008), 5-7; Janet Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo, *The Crocheted Prayer Shawl Companion: 37 Patterns To Embrace Inspire & Celebrate Life* (Newton, CT: Taunton, 2010), 3-7; Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo. "Prayer Shawl Ministry Home Page." *Shawlministry*. Accessed Feb. 1, 2019. <https://www.shawlministry.com>.; Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016), 2-3; Susan S. Jorgensen and Susan S. Izard, *Knitting Into the Mystery: A Guide To The Shawl-Knitting Ministry* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2003), 11-12.

¹² Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016), 11-22.

¹³ Including, Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries and Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016); Katherine Dugan. "Review of Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries and Women's Theological Imagination*." *Religion & Gender* v7, n 2 (2017): 265-267 <https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10225>; Anna Fisk. "Prayer Shawl Ministries and Women's Theological Imagination." *Theology and Sexuality* v23, n3 (2017): 265-267, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2017.1367126>.

¹⁴ Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries and Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), xxiii.

situates this as being partly facilitated by the shift in third-wave feminism toward a regained respect for women's work in the home and in crafts.¹⁵

In her review of Bowman's book, Anna Fisk comments that "Bowman's research involves a number of interesting boundary crossings, not least of which is her status as a systematic theologian doing ethnographic research."¹⁶ Bowman herself addresses this unusual boundary crossing when she notes that, unlike social scientists who have tended to focus on people's actual beliefs and practices versus institutional directives, theologians have stayed away from, in her words, "the messy, earthy business of actual data-gathering."¹⁷

The work of this thesis benefits from Bowman's work, particularly her effective argument for and use of qualitative research, that lets the authentic voice of the shawl ministry participants themselves inform the narrative and the conclusions at which she arrives. This thesis uses the method of qualitative research, especially as it is described in the classical textbook, *Qualitative Research Practice*,¹⁸ as a methodological resource.

The area of study for this thesis focuses on understanding the set of circumstances and characteristics of how and why individual prayer shawl ministry groups got started in United Church communities of faith and likewise, the how and why that they are able to be sustained as meaningful spiritual practice in today's world. In Bowman's May 23, 2013 interview with Bristow and Cole-Galo, Bristow and Cole-Galo were clear that the most important aspect of the

¹⁵ Ibid., xxiii. In the introduction to her book, she writes, "It took another wave of feminism – the third wave, starting in the 1990s to legitimize the study of domestic work and production, and especially to make possible the argument that these occupations might produce a particular consciousness: a way of perceiving and reflecting that is distinct from ways associated with other activities and therefore, distinct from ways associated with men's lives."

¹⁶ Anna Fisk, "Prayer Shawl Ministries and Women's Theological Imagination." *Theology and Sexuality* 23:3 (2017): 265-267, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13558358.2017.1367126>. 266.

¹⁷ Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries and Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), xv.

¹⁸ Giampietro Gobo, and Jaber F. Gubrium and Clive Seale and David Silverman, eds. *Qualitative Research Practice*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007)

prayer shawl ministry that they wanted to preserve was in Bristow's words, "That the work of your hands is a spiritual practice."¹⁹ In order to appreciate fully what is meant by the term spiritual practice, the third area of this literature review are some academic resources that define and elaborate on the concept of spiritual disciplines and spiritual practices in Christianity.²⁰

The terms "spiritual discipline" and "spiritual practice" are often used in interrelated ways. They both describe the action of deliberately creating space in the day to focus on God, both in personal relationship and in relationship with the broader aspects of life. In his work, *A Spirituality Of Living*, Henry Nouwen writes, "...in spiritual life, the word discipline means 'the effort to create some space in which God can act.'"²¹ He continues, "Discipline helps us to follow the voice of the Spirit, who wants to lead us to new places, new people, and new forms of "service."²²

"Following the voice of the Spirit who wants to lead us to new places, new people and new forms of service,"²³ is a good bridge to the fourth area of literature that is part of this review, the personal experience aspect of knitting, crocheting and shawl ministry.²⁴ There are many books on shawl ministry and the spirituality of crafting (knitting, crochet, quilting, weaving and

¹⁹ Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 13.

²⁰ Including, Renovaré. "Training Over Trying". Accessed Feb. 24, 2019. <https://renovare.org/>; Henri Nouwen. *A Spirituality Of Living: The Henri Nouwen Spirituality Series* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2011); Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life For A Searching People* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Richard J. Foster, *Celebration Of Discipline: The Path To Spiritual Growth* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1978); Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy And "Women's Work"* (Madeleva Lecture In Spirituality) (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998); Paula Gooder, *Everyday God: The Spirit Of The Ordinary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), Kindle Edition.

²¹ Henri Nouwen, *A Spirituality Of Living: The Henri Nouwen Spirituality Series* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books. 2011), 16.

²² *Ibid.*, 16.

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁴ Including, Lisa Myers, *The Joy Of Knitting* (Philadelphia, PN: Running, 2001). Peggy Rosenthal, *Knit One Purl A Prayer: A Spirituality Of Knitting* (Brewster, MS: Paraclete, 2011); Linda Skolnik and Janice MacDaniels, *The Knitting Way: A Guide To Spiritual Self-Discovery* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2005); Anna Fisk, "Researching Knitting & Religion: A Guest Post by Anna Fisk" Karie Westermann. Accessed Feb. 1, 2019. <https://www.kariebookish.net/blog/12881>.

others).²⁵ While not academically reviewed literature, they provide valuable input for the research process as they describe the depth of the crafters' experiences and the language in which these experiences are talked about. This is important to pay attention to in order for the interviews to foster a comfort level invites space to hear the unexpected and perhaps hidden insights that might emerge in the personal voices of the participants.

Methodology

The scope of the research for this thesis is in the Canadian context, specifically, the context of six communities of faith in the United Church of Canada in southern Ontario. This thesis sought to determine the circumstances and characteristics that facilitate the development of these prayer shawl ministries where the traditional craft of knitting and crocheting finds new meaning as a spiritual practice that engages with and shares God's love in the changing dynamics of the 21st Century. The hypothesis is that the unique circumstances and characteristics that facilitate this development and sustainability, have much to tell us about the ways other ministries can change to be better conduits of God's love too.

This thesis utilizes qualitative research because prayer shawl ministry is a relational experience, whether as a crafter alone with the craft, or as part of a group or as the recipient of a shawl. As Tim Rapley writes, "...we are currently part of an "interview society" in which interviews seem central to making sense of our lives."²⁶ The qualitative research method made room for the members of the prayer shawl ministry groups themselves to voice their own

²⁵ Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), xxxi.

²⁶ Tim Rapley, *Qualitative Research Practice: Concise Paperback Edition*, eds. Giampietro Gobo and Jaber F. Gubrium and Clive Seale and David Silverman (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 15.

experience of how this ministry has been and continues to be a meaningful spiritual practice in their lives.

Because prayer shawl ministry is a collective event, one in which community mediates the experience of the practice, I decided to engage focus groups rather than individual interviews. This enabled me to discover the systems of support, encouragement, and spirituality that were developed in these communities of faith. As I came to discover, the group experience was central to the experience of this particular ministry as participants felt a sense of belonging and mutual support.

Prayer shawl ministry groups were identified through personal contacts and on individual United Church websites. Six prayer shawl groups from six United Church communities of faith agreed to participate. The sample size was spread out enough to offer both town and rural locations while being reachable by car for the researcher. Six was a good number as it was manageable enough to allow the interview with each prayer shawl group to be more in-depth, thus enabling the less obvious insights and observations about the ministry to be heard, while at the same time being large enough to provide some clear indication of how they were formed and sustained as pertains to the research question. All of the groups were interviewed during a regular meeting and the interviews were each about two hours in length.

It is important to acknowledge at this point the natural limitations of the scope of this research. The shawl groups that were accessed were not in areas of high diversity in terms of ethnicity or age. The groups, while having some diversity of income level and life experience, were representative of a rather homogenous experience of the United Church. While it is hoped that this research might provide insight for a variety of church settings, it is important to state

from the outset that it is research that speaks most directly to the predominant culture of United Church adherents, which is middle age to elderly, white, and cis-gendered.

Prayer Shawl Groups Interviewed

Prayer Shawl groups, much like the church communities they are a part of, come in many different sizes and shapes.

Three of the groups that were interviewed for this research are part of mid-size United Churches in mid-size southern Ontario communities. It is interesting to note that in these large church and community settings, the prayer shawls groups were each started by a staff person responsible for spiritual education and care beyond what the demands of the ministry personnel's job could encompass. The ministries' dedication of paid staff time, meant that the early organization and participant commitment was consistent. People felt invited and welcomed in and there was follow up when they didn't appear as expected.

Of the other three groups, one is a mid-size church in a smaller community setting noted for its high retirement population. The other two groups are in more rural settings. In each of these cases, the groups were started by volunteers and are sustained by the relationships of members with each other.

Interview Questions

The interview questions used were consistent from interview to interview, both in wording and in the order asked. They were designed to draw attention to the fact that these were not just another crafting group. As the founders Bristow and Cole-Galo were clear about in their 2013 interview by Donna Bowman, "That the work of your hands [the crafter's hands] is a spiritual

practice.”²⁷ Although the questions needed to be clear, they also needed to provide space and encouragement for personal reflection and discussion. And in turn, for that personal reflection and discussion to develop, the questions needed to help foster a comfort level and openness in the group. These are the seven questions used:

1. How did this prayer shawl ministry group get started?
2. How did you personally hear about this ministry?
3. What got you out to your first meeting and why do you keep coming?
4. What does this ministry mean to you?
5. As you participate, does it make you feel closer to God? Why or why not?
6. Would you recommend it to someone else? Why or why not|?
7. Are there any other things you would like to say about prayer shawl ministry?

Despite their seeming simplicity, I found these seven questions worked quite well. By the time the group had shared the beginnings of their group as a whole and their own personal beginnings with the group, a level of comfort and rapport had been established and they were comfortable speaking more about matters of God and faith.

The meetings are recorded here in date order.

**The Aurora Crafter’s Circle,
Aurora United Church, Aurora, Ontario.**

Date: November 7, 2019 at the afternoon meeting.

Number of participants present: Nine crafters including the initial organizer, the parish nurse, who came back especially to attend.

²⁷ Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women’s Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 13.

The Aurora Crafter's Circle meets twice a month, one afternoon and one evening meeting, so that different time commitments can be accommodated. Aurora is one of the large urban communities that make up the greater Toronto area. The ministry, started in 2006 by the Parish Nurse on staff at the church at the time, simply started by her putting together kits of yarn to this basis for five years before monthly meetings started in 2012. All the way along records of the shawls made and gifted have been kept and notes of appreciation have been compiled to remind members of how much their ministry is appreciated.

Shawls are regularly blessed in the church service following the meetings and are available after church or upon request for anyone who has someone they wish to gift one to. There are always a few in the office that are available to the church staff and others who drop in.

**Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry,
St. John's United Church, Belwood, Ontario.**

Date: November 13, 2019 at the evening meeting.

Number of participants present: Nine crafters, including two visitors that a regular member invited to attend.

St. John's United Church in Belwood Ontario, along with Metz United Church, is a two-point pastoral charge located in the rich agricultural land of Central Wellington Township. The Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry was started by a church member a few years ago, when that member retired. The member's original idea was for a healing circle, but shawl ministry very quickly developed alongside and just seemed like a natural part of it. The group meets one evening a month at Belwood United and includes some participants from Metz as well. Some of the shawls are made by members of the group but anyone is welcome to contribute one. New shawls are blessed with special prayers by the group each month and then

they are tagged with a blessing tag and are hung on a special rack in the church foyer, for anyone to take and gift them as they see the need.

**Trinity Shawl Ministry,
Trinity United Church, Collingwood, Ontario.**

Date: December 6, 2019 in the afternoon.

Number of participants present: Three crafters, plus the minister (a fourth crafter submitted written responses to the questions as she was unable to attend).

Trinity United Church is located in Collingwood Ontario, a town in Simcoe Country at the southern point of Georgian Bay. Located about an hour and a half north of Toronto and flanked by Blue Mountains ski resort to the West and Wasaga Beach Provincial Park – the longest fresh water beach in Canada, to the East, it is a popular place to both visit and retire. Like all of the other churches in this study, Trinity as a Church has long-standing roots that go back to the mid 1800s, but its shawl ministry is the newest of the groups interviewed. Less than a year old, it got started when a pastoral situation prompted two women on the Spiritual Committee to suggest it might be helpful. This was a new experience for the minister but after the first few shawls had been gifted, the committee realized what a support this type of pastoral care could be and the ministry was organized. Supplies, instructions and crafters were gathered and although the group does not always meet regularly, there are regularly scheduled shawl blessings in the church services that have been part of introducing the concept to the broader congregation and shawls have continued to be gifted.

**Prayer Shawl Group,
Three Willows United Church, Guelph, Ontario.**

Date: January 4, 2020 at the morning meeting.

Number of participants present: Eight crafters, plus the original social convenor for the group,

who came back just for the interview. The initial organizing minister was unable to attend due to illness.

Three Willows United Church is located at the western edge of Guelph, Ontario, a city in Southwestern Ontario that is about an hour and a half west of downtown Toronto. The church was formed in 2005 as an amalgamation of three former United Churches. The Prayer Shawl Group was started in 2010 by a Church member as she was finishing her Diaconal Training Program. Refreshments and fellowship have always been an important part of its monthly meetings and in the beginning the organizer arranged for a specific congregational member to be the social convenor. A few years ago, the meetings moved to Saturday morning so they could follow the community breakfast that is offered once a month at the church. This has been a good fit for participants. When the shawls are finished, they are stored and are available, along with cards, tags and wrapping, if desired, for whoever feels that they would like to gift one. This ministry fits well with the long serving Food Pantry Program that Three Willows is part of from Chalmers Community Centre.

**Eat Pray Knit,
First United Church, Owen Sound, Ontario.**

Date: February 18, 2020 at the afternoon meeting

Number of participants present: Six crafters plus the initial organizing designated lay minister, who now retired, came back just for the interview.

Owen Sound is a city located at the mouths of the Pottawatomi and Sydenham Rivers on an inlet of Georgian Bay. The Eat Pray Knit shawl ministry grew out of a study prayer group led by the Designated Lay Minister on staff at the time. A simple soup lunch is shared and then the group meeting follows. Everyone is welcome and instruction and encouragement are always available. Prayer is an important part of each meeting. Both prayers for the people the shawls are

being knit for and for others that group members add to a list, before prayer is offered. The shawls that are finished, have prayer tags attached to them and then are available to be gifted.

**Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group,
Mount Carmel Zion United Church, Morriston, Ontario.**

Date: February 19, 2020 at the morning meeting.

Number of participants present: Eight crafters including the organizing member.

Morriston is one of the many small villages in Wellington County, that surround the southern edge of the city of Guelph. The idea for shawl ministry was brought back to the church in 2006 by a member who learned about it in a course she took at the Centre for Christian Studies. Now in its fourteenth year, it meets once a month at the church and is always followed by lunch out at one of the local restaurants. Shawls are blessed in prayer at the end of each meeting and then are ready to be gifted. Shawls are gifted for many occasions, and also shared at local nursing homes. As with many of the shawl ministries, there is a designated line for yarn in the church budget. This was important to the founder as it then takes away any financial barrier there might be in joining the group.

Analysis of Data

The data collected in this research was about twelve hours of taped conversation time, two hours for each of the six shawl groups interviewed. In each interview, the same set of questions was asked in the same order and the same process for allowing each individual participant to answer was followed. The question would be asked and then each participant would be given space to answer (if they wished) in their turn around the circle. The collected data was then transcribed and examined to discern whether key and prominent themes were being identified. It was helpful that the questions were asked in the same order each time as this allowed an easier

summarizing between groups but it soon became apparent that each group had a unique voice and had more to say in some areas than others. The unique voice of each group in their own recording was also very helpful to return to more than once. Beyond just the words spoken, there was, how they were spoken and the emotional weight that they carried..

The picture that emerged had three distinct aspects for how this ministry is significant. The first aspect had to do with personal benefit that the crafters accrued in shawl groups. This ministry often mediates a life transition of the crafter and the recipient. Then there was the theological understanding and faith experiences in the shawl groups themselves that kept their members involved. Theologically, prayer shawls are tacitly understood to be blessing, sacramental and a spiritual practice. Finally, there were intimations of societal circumstances around the shawl groups, both inside and outside the United Church in this moment in time, that influence how the shawl groups are formed and continued. Culturally, this ministry provides a flexible and non-threatening form of outreach in a post-Christian setting. These three distinct aspects form the three chapters of the main body of work of this thesis.

The first chapter is called “Life Transitions” because it became clear that the how and why crafters become involved in shawl groups and the how and why of the gifting of shawls revolved largely around various life transitions both for the crafters and for the shawl recipients. In my research I noted that crafters often participated in this ministry during key moments of transition in their lives, including widowhood or moving to a new locale. Similarly, these shawls were most often gifted to people during dramatic and often difficult life transitions, including bereavement, illness, and dying.

The second chapter, “The Theology of Blessing and Sacrament” examines the ways in which crafters and recipients spoke theologically about this ministry and its gifts, although

generally not in overt ways. The unique circumstance of a tactile craft with yarn connected to the theological concept of blessing and sacrament, particularly in the United Church of Canada framework of understanding. In this chapter, as well as blessing and sacrament themselves, the spiritual practice of intention and letting go is explored and the distinction of this ministry from the Jewish use of the *Tallit* is explored.

In the third chapter, “Crafting the Future,” the changing dynamics of the church, particularly the United Church, in society through the last fifty years is examined with particular attention given to how prayer shawl ministry fits with these dramatic changes. In the growing secularization of Canada shawl ministry’s unusual combination of flexible time needs and its fluid religious orientation is considered.

Finally, in the last chapter, “Conclusions,” these three distinct aspects of shawl ministry are brought together to consider the original question of how shawl ministry has become established and is thriving in the circumstances of this post-Christendom 21st century. And then to further consider what overall insight this research might offer to help support further support the work of the United Church going into the future. The rules and norms of society around us might be in a state of transition but the Church’s core message of God’s love and our relationships in and with this love is more relevant than ever. The goal of this research is to help in our understanding of how we can go forward effectively with this message in today’s circumstances.

Chapter One

Life Transitions

*Shawls can be used for: undergoing medical procedures; as a comfort after a loss or in times of stress; during bereavement; prayer or meditation; commitment or marriage ceremonies; birthing, nursing a baby; bridal shower or wedding gift; leading ritual; first menses or crowning rites of passage; during an illness and recovery; ministering to others; graduation, birthday, anniversary, ordination, holiday gifts; or just socializing...there are endless possibilities!*²⁸

As this quote from the home page for the shawl ministry website, <https://www.shawlministry.com> indicates, prayer shawls are a meaningful part of many of life's transitions. This chapter, "Life Transitions," describes the findings in this research that led me to conclude the first vital way this ministry is significant: personally, this ministry often mediates a life transition of the crafter and the recipient.

The founding story itself—that of Janet Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo—evolved out of the difficult life transition of the illness and death of their classmate's husband. As the ministry grew, it became clear that prayer shawls occupy liminal moments in the life of both the crafters and the recipients, often times of tremendous life change. Shawls accompany all kinds of transition moments, both joyful and painful.

The above quotation speaks about life transitions where a prayer shawl might be gifted, but it can also be a life transition for the shawl maker that encourages them to become a participant in a shawl making group in the first place, or which gives them a new insight into what the ministry means. In the process of doing this research, I found that the prayer shawl marked

²⁸ Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo, "Prayer Shawl Ministry Home Page," Prayer Shawl Ministry, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.shawlministry.com/>.

significant moments of transition for the recipient, while the maker of the shawls often came to the work of shawl making during a period of transition in their own lives.

Life Transitions for the Crafter

One of the important aspects of doing qualitative research involving in-depth group interviews is to be open-minded and to listen for the unexpected. I had expected to hear lots of stories about life transitions where shawls were gifted in a meaningful way, but I did not anticipate hearing how life transitions could impact the involvement of the shawl makers themselves in the ministry. Elisabeth J. Geertsma and Anne L. Cummings write of this sense of life transitions and women's involvement in spiritual groups: "very little research is available about their [women's spirituality groups] function and helpfulness in women's lives."²⁹ They go on to state that the study summarized in their article, "was designed to investigate spirituality for women who were in midlife transition."³⁰ Although their research does not specifically include prayer shawl ministry, their general observations help explain why in my research I heard that life transitions were part of what motivated shawl ministry participants to become involved in prayer shawl groups.

In what follows, I will trace the life transitions that occasioned both the gifting of the shawl and the engagement of the shawl maker in this ministry.

Bereavement

One big life transition that sometimes influenced a participant first considering being involved in the prayer shawl ministry group at their church was the difficult time of the death of

²⁹ Elisabeth J. Geertsma and Anne L. Cummings, "Midlife Transition and Women's Spirituality Groups: A Preliminary Investigation," *Counseling and Values* 49, no.1 (October 2004): 27, <http://search.ebscohost.com.uwinnipeg.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=CPLI0000402584>.

³⁰ Ibid.

their spouse. This was certainly the case for one participant at the Aurora Crafter's Circle at Aurora United Church. And for her, the transition was not only the death of her husband but a cross-Canada move as well.

[M]y husband, got, very ill, and I wanted to be closer to my son, so I moved here from the West Coast, and I had no friends... [I] didn't know anybody, didn't know the area, so the church was the first place that I turned to. And, like (another participant) said, she heard by word of mouth and from the bulletin. So, I came and there was a lovely woman by the name of Joan, who was very Irish and very funny. And that was it. I was going to be attending on a regular basis on the off chance that Joan would be there because, I'd gone from a stand-alone home to living in an apartment by myself. And laughter is in short supply and the camaraderie and the opportunity to make a warm hug for someone that needed it. That was it. It's very important to me.³¹

Although this participant is clear that it was the laughter and good-natured feeling about the group that got her out to her first few meetings, her involvement with the group had grown to be much more. As another participant who spoke just after her pointed out, the group and the ministry had become so important to her that she had volunteered to help co-chair the group when the need arose.³²

Losing a spouse was part of the life transition that drew other participants to this ministry in other groups as well. A member of the Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church, remembers, "*After my husband died, she (the shawl group organizer) got me coming. I couldn't do much, all I could do was granny squares... .*"³³ Later in the interview several other women in the group spoke about how much they appreciated the group now they too were widowed.

³¹ Participant from the Aurora Crafters' Circle, Aurora United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Aurora, Ontario, November 7, 2020.

³² Ibid.

³³ Participant from Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Morriston, Ontario, February, 19, 2020.

*A lot of us are widows and we're looking for something to do. And this is the perfect solution... it fills up a morning. And socializing is really a big part. You need that. You need to keep in with those people skills. That's right and we're productive as well.*³⁴

As the interview continued, the group joked about how much they enjoyed the socializing, but they also spoke about the recipients and circumstances which inspired the shawls. It became apparent that their gathering was about much more than just socialization, and indeed that this ministry was helping them through their mourning and giving them a feeling of accomplishment. One participant shared, *"I think of the people we're giving the shawls to in sympathy for them in losing a loved one or they are sick themselves. It is a good feeling,*³⁵ It was important to them that I realize that their shawl giving was not limited in any way to their own group or church community. *"It can be a friend, like if one of us had a friend who was going through (an illness) and she needed it to be anonymous or whatever, we would give a shawl as well. (It) does not have to be somebody within group, it is extended as well."*³⁶ As they spoke about the people and circumstances that they had contributed shawls to through the years and how much they had been appreciated, the participants expressed a sense of purpose and usefulness for the contribution they were able to make.³⁷

Community

Mount Carmel Zion United Church is a small rural church and the shawl group meetings once a month are part of how pastoral care concerns are shared, prayed for, and responded to. Often the group continues their time together by going out for lunch to one of the small

³⁴ Participant from Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Morriston, Ontario, February, 19, 2020.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

independent restaurants in the area. This was the case when I visited them and the pastoral care needs of the community continued into our lunch time conversation.

Several respondents reflected back on their receipt of prayer shawls that accompanied previous life transitions. In doing so they realized how meaningful this gift was for them. When they recovered, they wanted to help pass the ministry on. One of those stories comes from a participant in the Eat Pray Knit shawl group at First United Church in Owen Sound:

I first learned about it, when [the designated lay minister] brought me a lovely prayer shawl, so I then started to get involved making prayer shawls. I just know it gives you a good feeling. I know how much I appreciated it and I'm sure other people do too.³⁸

Sometimes the prayer shawl group is part of a more subtle transition in a participant's life. This was the case for one participant in the Aurora Crafter's Circle who found the shawl group gave her a new sense of community when she returned to church after being away for a while.

... I belonged to Aurora United twenty years ago and left for ten years and when I came back, I saw the announcement in the bulletin and was curious and... I like to knit so I came out and it was so much fun laughing constantly and talking. And it was great... I come out because it's a great social time and I like it. I always feel like its food for my soul. I always feel better after I'm out with the group...³⁹

Deepened Meaning

We have been speaking about life transitions as being a way people sometimes are encouraged to come out to a prayer shawl group for the first time. I also found that sometimes life transitions help give the ministry a deepened meaning for those who have been involved in it for a while. This was true for another participant from the Aurora Crafter's Circle when her mother died. As she explains,

³⁸ Participant from Eat Pray Love, First United Church Owen Sound, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 19, 2020.

³⁹ Participant from the Aurora Crafters Circle, Aurora United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Aurora, Ontario, November 7, 2019.

But that's the thing. I started because it was a way from me to knit, and the supplies were given to me. I think that's wonderful, you just give time. But what has happened over the years, because I've talked to so many people who have told me about receiving a shawl, that I'm understanding much more deeply just how vital and how important this ministry is to other people. And then that just is just sort of a double bonus, you know, fullness on both sides. But when I began to learn firsthand what it was like, was four years ago, when my mom was dying and I made her a shawl, and as she died, she was resting under her shawl. After she died, I thought, I will take her shawl and keep it for myself. But then I realized that maybe I should take it home and launder it because it was very easy to launder it. And so I wrapped her in it in her coffin. And now I really do understand what this ministry is all about. But that took me nine years to figure that out. I'm a slow study, I guess. Now I do understand much better. And I will probably learn more still.⁴⁰

So far, we have focused on the life transitions that help get the participant out to a meeting and involved in the shawl ministry. Turning to a different aspect, but also focused on life transitions, it is often a life transition that motivates the shawl being made and gifted in the first place. This is the area to which we now turn.

Life Transitions for the Shawl Recipient

As the original prayer shawl ministry story demonstrated, the compelling moment where Janet Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo's realized that a shawl was seen to symbolize supportive prayer and the presence and comfort of God's love was their involvement in the circumstances around the illness and death of their classmate's husband. Experiences of illness and death were circumstances of a life transition that all the shawl groups spoke about as they discussed who and when they were gifted. The founding coordinator at the Eat Pray Knit shawl group at First United Church in Owen Sound spoke about how helpful the shawls were in her role of providing spiritual care in these circumstances.

For me it's my role of providing spiritual care. It was so meaningful to have this tangible item to go to people with. Sometimes, you know, it's not easy going to meet these circumstances, but I would go with a shawl, that somebody from this group had created

⁴⁰ Participant from the Aurora Crafters Circle, Aurora United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Aurora, Ontario, November 7, 2019.

and I could say this is a tangible expression of the love of First United, you know, our prayers are in this shawl for you, and that was very meaningful for me to have that to take to people on your behalf. And that's why I really appreciate these cards so that you get the message coming back to you, too, because I would be the recipient of so much. Oh, you know, this was how meaningful this was. And, so, the cards are a way for you to get the same message.⁴¹

Donna Bowman comments on this strong connection of prayer shawl ministry to the life transitions of death and illness. She writes, “One of the most basic and pervasive reasons that prayer shawl makers gave for their involvement in the ministry was the idea of connection... When we are seriously ill, we are quarantined away from the normal flow of civilized activity.⁴² She goes on to observe, “In my conversations with shawl makers, the wrapping action of the prayer shawl, as a garment, often suggested an embrace – an especially enveloping form of physical connection... A hug communicates that you are accepted and cherished.”⁴³

This kind of connecting in an unexpected and difficult moment, was experienced by a participant from the Prayer Shawl Group at Three Willows United Church in Guelph who spoke of her experience of taking a shawl to their minister when she was in the hospital, and of how meaningful that turned out to be.

I brought one to (our minister) when she was in the hospital, and she'd never had one, which I was surprised [about]. It was a crocheted one I picked out and it spoke to me that it was 'her.' I considered her as a mentor. And it was the day she found out [that her cancer was terminal]. And it was just a shock as well. So later at the funeral, they had it, draped along the ashes and so on, and her daughter said how much it meant to her.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Participant from Eat, Pray, Knit, First United Church Owen Sound, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 19, 2020.

⁴² Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women's Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁴ Participant from Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

Shawl groups usually have an inventory of finished shawls that are available as needed, and at First United in Owen Sound, a participant in the Eat Pray Knit shawl group spoke about a recent bereavement situation where the minister was able to reach out to the whole family and offered them each a shawl.

We have had, I think, cases of bereavement where each family member actually [received a shawl]. Fairly recently, I remember meeting in this room with a family and the minister and I gave each member of the family a prayer shawl, or had them choose something that attracted them.⁴⁵

Ministry Beyond the Church

Like the example above, gifting shawls around illness and death can mean that even if the shawl recipient is associated with a church, their family might not be. Participants from Eat, Pray, Knit, at First United had some insights into that experience.

I think that [the gifting of a prayer shawl] reflects on the family as well. Not just the person that receives it, but the family sees that kind of connection. And it's a comfort to the family to know that their loved one is not forgotten and there is ongoing contact.⁴⁶

The group went on to reflect on how the prayer shawl can reach out much farther than the simple gift might suggest.

[The gift of the prayer shawl is] bigger than person-to-person. It's truly outreach. Yes, huge. So indirectly. I mean, the family didn't receive that prayer shawl. You know, the caring son or daughter didn't receive it their parent did. But in a way it's a comfort to that family member like they don't feel as alone either. They didn't receive the prayer shawl, but they know that they're not alone in this in this caring for their elderly parent. Yeah, right now we're in this together.⁴⁷

The Prayer Shawl Group at Three Willows United in Guelph has experienced their shawls reaching out beyond their congregation in a unique way. They host an outreach food shelf

⁴⁵ Participant from Eat, Pray, Love, First United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 18, 2020.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

program in a portable in their parking lot and have found that sometimes shawls are appreciated in this setting too.

*It's reached beyond our doors too because with the food shelf, we get to know our guests and there have been situations where we know something really difficult someone's experienced. So they have been given to guests as well when we feel it's going to be received. Our congregation got just an incredible note from a non-Christian family that stated it didn't matter what you know, the religion, love was love. Very, very touching.*⁴⁸

Pocket Shawls

As the shawl ministry has continued to develop, a number of groups have found that they appreciate being able to have something smaller than a traditional prayer shawl that could still be gifted with a blessing in a meaningful way. A variation on the traditional prayer shawl is to make a pocket-sized version. It is interesting to note that Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo include patterns for pocket shawls, for the first time, in their latest book, *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration plus Knit and Crochet Basics*, published in 2013. They write, “Small Rectangles with a tassel at one end – can be carried in pockets or used in situations in which a large shawl is not appropriate or allowed, such as intensive care units of hospitals.”⁴⁹ Later they comment that, “Smaller prayer cloths can be tucked into purses and even helmets.”⁵⁰ These are knitted or crocheted squares about 15cm x 15cm, often with a pattern of praying hands or a cross incorporated into them.

The Prayer Shawl Group at Three Willows United Church in Guelph was introduced to making pocket shawls by a dearly beloved member who has since died. She felt they would be helpful for people to take places they wouldn't take a full size shawl, like cancer treatments.

⁴⁸ Participant from Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

⁴⁹ Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo, *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration Plus Knit And Crochet Basics* (Newtown: CT: Taunton, 2013), 89.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

I don't know whether she read or heard about them, but anyway, she got us started because she said, when you go for treatments or an appointment, you might not need your prayer shawl because it is too cumbersome, so this can go in your pocket, or what have you.⁵¹

A current participant gave a recent example of where this was really appreciated.

Her brother-in-law had a brain tumour earlier this year, and I gave him one in a prayer square, and he sent me a lovely text message saying he couldn't believe that he received something like this from strangers. They did go to a United Church, so it was more touching that it was somebody who he'd never met. And our group that sent that. So it means a lot to whoever receives them.⁵²

Pocket Shawls can also easily travel long distances as a response to a concern.

This was the case for another participant at The Prayer Shawl Group, who spoke about this when she recounted mailing a pocket shawl to her daughter in Vancouver so she could give it to a friend who had cancer. Again, the pocket shawl was able to go with her daughter's friend to her treatments.

...[A] colleague of hers all of sudden got diagnosed; a young woman with stage four breast cancer and so on. ...And so I said to [my daughter] Ok I'll do a prayer shawl for [her friend] and she said, 'oh no that's way over the top right?' And I've never met this young woman, so I sent a prayer square. Anyway, she'd gone through treatment, and everything and was together with her mom and friends and shared such incredible news that she'd gone into remission and she turned [to her daughter] and she pointed [at her], it's because of you and the prayer square and your church family back home. It was pinned to her when she was going through treatment.⁵³

Another shawl that travelled a long way was for a much happier reason. This was the pocket shawl gifted to the minister at Three Willows United by the Prayer Shawl Group. It received a special blessing in the church service and was gifted to him just before his pilgrimage hiking the Camino de Santiago through France and Spain.

⁵¹ Participant from Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

⁵² Participant from Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

⁵³ Ibid.

*We sent a prayer square with John, when he went on a pilgrimage. And he really appreciated that. And he says that was amazing to have that he was very touched. And felt that the whole congregation was with him on that.*⁵⁴

Celebrations

Although illness and dying were the life events that all the groups spoke about gifting prayer shawls for in the beginning, they all went on to speak about other prominent life events where shawls have been gifted. For The Prayer Shawl and Card Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church in Morriston these included “*weddings, graduations, death, hospital, hospice...graduations, when your kids go to college, seniors homes, women in crisis, to the minister when she was covenanted*”.⁵⁵ One of the participants commented, “*I do the ministry back in the nursing home. And so I said at one point, they need to have a prayer shawl. So last year I’ve been taking three or four back so they all have one.*”⁵⁶ She continued, “*and then we sent some to the women in crisis.*”⁵⁷ Another participant in this group mentioned that she sometimes makes pink shawls for breast cancer survivor. In her words, “*I have knit pink for breast cancer survivors and that goes over really good.*”⁵⁸

The Aurora Crafter’s Circle at Aurora United spoke about the special tradition they have of gifting a prayer shawl or blanket to each member of the confirmation class. Confirmation, in the United Church of Canada, is a ceremony whereby a person publicly confirms the vows of faith that were made for them (by parents for a baby) at baptism. Confirmation participants are usually in their early teens and after a series of confirmation classes, this ceremony marks their officially joining the Church. It is a significant moment for both the confirmand and the congregation, and

⁵⁴ Participant from Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

⁵⁵ Participant from Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Morriston, Ontario, February, 19, 2020.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

the gift of a prayer shawl or blanket is part of how Aurora United marks this special occasion. In the participants' own words,

Since April of 2012...each confirmand has received a blanket or a shawl. And when the confirmands are presented with their shawls that happens during their confirmation service. And I found a beautiful blessing, again in one of the prayer shawl ministry books ...and it is given to each of the confirmands in their bag. And this year, for the first year, it was read as the blessing at the Confirmation service. The confirmands also let us know what colour (they would like their blanket or shawl... And it is draped over their shoulders (during the ceremony).⁵⁹

Life Transitions: Where Shawls Travel

Another surprise in the stories about prayer shawl gifting was how many of these shawls traveled. I spoke earlier about the observation from Eat Pray Knit at First United in Owen Sound that shawls gifted locally can often impact family beyond just the person who received the shawl. I also spoke about how pocket shawls were easy to send long distances. But there were also stories about full size shawls that traveled much further and the impact they had.

A participant in the Prayer Shawl Group at Three Willows United Church spoke about her experience of making a shawl to send to her friend in Charlottetown when she was dying. It was a special one that she made specifically with her friend in mind and it was a bit different from the other shawls she had made as she incorporated some healing crystals into it. Even so, she was really touched when her friend wanted to be buried in it.

My friend was in Charlottetown. She had ovarian cancer and I made her one. And I incorporated crystals in it, healing crystals. And she told her husband that she wanted to be buried in hers.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Participant from the Aurora Crafters Circle, Aurora United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Aurora, Ontario, November 7, 2019.

⁶⁰ Participant from the Three Willows Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, Guelph, Ontario, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

Sometimes sending a shawl is a response to a tragic event and the sender has no idea how the shawl will be received, but it is sent with prayer and hope that it will be helpful. This was the case for a participant at Eat Pray Knit at First United in Owen Sound, when her daughter's roommate had a close friend commit suicide.

You never know what really touched people, you know, you never really know. I'll tell you a story. Two years ago, a dear friend of my daughter in Ottawa died by suicide, and it was a terrible, terrible thing that this young man died. And my daughter being so far away, I thought, what can I do? You know? One of the things I did was I sent her and her two roommates a prayer shawl. I asked Lilly, what everybody's favourite color was so that there was something. I sent them these three prayer shawls and I didn't get any response really back from them. [However] in the last couple of months, Lilly said to me, 'You know, Mom, me and... (two of the three of them) we still use your prayer shawls, we wear them all the time in the house, and we really love them.' And I thought, oh, good.⁶¹

This story speaks to Bowman's observation about the challenge that shawl makers have of sending shawls as a response to a tragedy when the tragedy is at a distance. She writes,

In the case of disaster or tragedy, prayer shawl makers often face the logistical challenge of distance. They can't respond by delivering shawls personally. Yet the craving to contribute something material, despite the difficulties involved, speaks to the desire to forge connections, even with unknown, distant recipients.⁶²

The above story from the participant from the Eat Pray Knit prayer shawl group at First United in Owen Sound speaks to the ways in which shawl ministry reaches out beyond the immediate community. In this case, her daughter was in Ottawa and this participant wanted to reach out with shawls in support of not just her daughter, but her daughter's roommates, whom she didn't know very well. In sending them, even though she asked her daughter for advice about the colour choice, the participant didn't know how they would be received.

⁶¹ Participant from the Aurora Crafters Circle, Aurora United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Aurora, Ontario, November 7, 2019.

⁶² Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women's Theological Imagination*, 9.

Although the response was not direct and did not come until two years later, the shawls were received positively and, for at least two of the women, were still meaningful. But the story points to another challenge that sending prayer shawls out into the world, either short or long distances, can present. That is, will they be welcomed by the person to whom they are sent? Does the person on the receiving end want this moment of life transition marked in this way? Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo touch on this in their latest book, *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration plus Knit and Crochet Basics*. As they explain, “Most often, we know who the shawl is for by the time we’re finished. If not, don’t worry. When the time comes, it’ll go to the person meant to receive it.”⁶³ For Severi Bristow and Cole-Galo, the crafting of the shawl is a spiritual experience that benefits both the shawl maker and the shawl receiver, and there is trust that both will happen. Donna Bowman, interviewing Bristow and Cole-Galo in 2013 describes Cole-Galo’s further thoughts on this, “In her mind [Cole-Galo], one of the barriers we need to overcome in our practice of compassion is the attempt to direct that empathy to specific individuals. That is a ‘condition’ placed around our concern.”⁶⁴ Bowman continues to explain, “Opened wide enough, Cole-Galo implies, we will be able to trust that God will direct our love where it will meet another’s need, allowing it to fall ‘into that unconditional flow, river, stream.’”⁶⁵ Bowman speaks about the gratuity of the intersection between shawl and intended recipient in more secular language when she comments “We might call it serendipity: the intersections that lead to the shawl finding its destination.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo, *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration Plus Knit And Crochet Basics* (Newtown, CT: Taunton, 2013), 29.

⁶⁴ Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women’s Theological Imagination*, 7.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Freelance writer, Margo Patterson, heard much the same experience talked about when she interviewed the caregiving staff responsible for the shawl ministry at Our Lady of Bellefonte Hospital in Ashland, Kentucky. In her article titled ‘Prayer Shawls: A Blessing In Every Stitch’ she writes,

The caregivers at the bedside are the ones who decide which patients should get a shawl, Daniel [Sandra Daniel, director of clinical nursing education at Our Lady of Bellefonte Hospital] said. ‘It’s one of those things that you just know,’ she said, telling of a woman grieving over the death of a grandson, who had received a shawl just that day. ‘She was very appreciative and she stopped crying, and it did seem to bring some comfort to her.’⁶⁷

This chapter is called ‘Life Transitions’ because so much of the personal experience of both making and gifting prayer shawls is centred around a life transition. This can be in either the life of the crafter or the recipient. The two founding visionaries of this ministry, Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo have co-authored three books of inspiration and shawl patterns for both knit and crocheted prayer shawls, and in each book, many of the names for the patterns reflect a life transition. For instance, in their first book, *The Prayer Shawl Companion: 38 Knitted Designs to Embrace Inspire & Celebrate Life*, there are patterns for a “Sabbath Shawl, Calming Shawl, Baptism Shawl, Nursing Shawl and Traveling Shawl.”⁶⁸

It is interesting to note that the latest book Severi Bristow and Cole-Galo have written is an inspirational journaling book where the shawl maker is encouraged to record the special shawls that they make and the circumstances around gifting them. As noted earlier, it is titled, *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration plus Knit and Crochet*. Again in this book, the

⁶⁷ Margot Patterson, “Prayer Shawls: A Blessing In Every Stitch,” *Health Progress* 91, (3) (May 2010):51, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://uwinnipeg.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://ww-proquest-com.uwinnipeg.idm.oclc.org/docview/365449646?accountid=15067>.

⁶⁸ Janet Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo, *The Crocheted Prayer Shawl Companion* (Newtown, CT: Taunton, 2010), Table of Contents.

shawl patterns included have titles like “Caregiver’s Prayer Shawl” and “Triangle Baptism Shawl.”⁶⁹

Often, a life transition is the result of a difficult situation. In my research, illness and death were two of the most common reasons that prayer shawl makers and groups had for making and gifting a prayer shawl. Bowman speaks directly to this in her opening chapter when she writes, “In the midst of disaster, language often seems inadequate...Having some other way to communicate caring—like sending something handmade – gives people who are desperate to respond an avenue to do so.”⁷⁰

In the interviews I conducted, I discovered that shawls could communicate compassion and love where language might not have managed. This was especially evident in cases such as the participant from the Prayer Shawl Group at Three Willows United Church in Guelph who took one to her minister in the hospital and it was unexpectedly the day the minister found out her cancer was terminal. Just how much the shawl meant was further deepened for the group at the funeral for this minister when it was draped by the urn that held her ashes and the minister’s daughter personally spoke to them about how much it meant to her mother.

The other aspect of life transitions that this chapter focused on was the life transition in the shawl makers own life which motivates them to start to be part of a shawl making group in the first place. The shawl makers from the Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church in Morriston were particularly articulate about this when they shared how many of them were widows and what a help it was to have a place to go to socialize and do something worthwhile. Bowman too observed this in her research. She writes, “...with only a

⁶⁹ Serveri Bristow and Cole-Galo, *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration*, 1. *Plus Knit And Crochet Basics*, .

⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

little effort one can imagine the depths of disconnection experienced by many women whose children are on their own, whose husbands perhaps have died, whose wage-earning days are over. To have a purpose to which to put their skills and occupy their time truly counts as a benefit to such shawl-makers.”⁷¹

It is clear that life transitions are a big part of what motivates and gives purpose to the shawl ministry, but for Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo, the important aspect of shawl ministry that they really focus on is how it is a spiritual practice for the people engaged in the making. When Donna Bowman interviewed them in 2013, she wrote, “When I asked these women what principle of the prayer shawl movement that they felt most strongly about preserving, Bristow’s answer was immediate: ‘The work of your hands is a spiritual practice.’”⁷²

At this point it is helpful to discuss briefly the fact that there are many good charitable causes that a group or individual handcrafting can be centred around. Hats and mittens are welcomed by outreach programs over the winter, lap blankets are helpful in senior’s facilities and quilts are welcomed in hospice settings, to name just a few. Bowman notes that, “The simple idea of ‘knitting for others’...allows for a broad range of products and causes.”⁷³ But for Bristow and Cole-Galo the importance of the shawl ministry moves beyond just the “good thing to do” aspect and becomes a spiritual practice which connects the participant to God’s presence and love, in their lives and in the world.

It is this spiritual, or more broadly, theological aspect of the prayer shawl ministry that we turn to now in the second chapter.

⁷¹ Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women’s Theological Imagination*, 104.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Chapter Two

The Theology of Blessing and Sacrament

It [the prayer shawl] seems to have a special energy. Like people will say, you know when I put that on I just feel, I feel different. I feel good. I feel like it's significant.⁷⁴

This quote by a participant from the Eat Pray Knit group at First United Church in Owen Sound speaks to a theme I heard many times, and that is the ability of the prayer shawl to confer significance in an unexpected way. This chapter, “The Theology of Blessing and Sacrament,” describes the findings in this research that led me to conclude the second vital way this ministry is significant: theologically, prayer shawls are tacitly understood to be blessing, sacramental and a spiritual practice.

As another participant in the Eat Pray Knit group observed, she did not really appreciate the impact a shawl could have on the person who received it until she received one herself from her minister:

I know Krystle gave me one and I thought, well, that's really nice of you, you know, just kind of blasé about it. And it's, I have it. And I use it often; not all the time. But there's times when I feel like I want it, and it's, that so I think, I'm sure other people have that same kind of reaction. Like well, thank you. That's a nice gift, you know? And then you realize what it really means and how it really affects your life.⁷⁵

This impact, a sense of something beyond the tactile yarn itself, is at the heart of what the shawl ministry is about—both for the person crafting the shawl and the person receiving it. It is a heart

⁷⁴ Participant from Eat, Pray, Love, First United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 18, 2020.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

matter; it is not rational, or provable. In the 2006 Song of Faith from the United Church of Canada, God is referred to as “Holy Mystery who is Wholly Love.”⁷⁶

In the United Church tradition, the sense of God as mystery has not always been a comfortable thought. Our church ethos has been formed in the age of rational scientific evidence. What has bridged the gap for us between our seen and known world and our unseen and less known concept of God, has been our theology around the meaning and reality of the word “sacrament” and the corresponding element of “blessing.” In this chapter, I will argue that both these concepts are operative in prayer shawl ministry. As we move from personal conceptions of prayer shawls as gifts that accompany life changes, we begin to see that such conceptions also can be interpreted within a wider theological framework in which ancient concepts of blessing (from both Jewish and Christian traditions) and sacrament (from Christian theology) are central in interpreting the meaning that Christians accord these shawls and their gifting. It is also within this framework of blessing and sacrament that we see how the concrete action of hand crafting a shawl can be considered a spiritual practice, as Bristow and Cole-Galo assert that it is.⁷⁷

Blessing

In *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Theme*, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann defines “blessing” as, “... an act—by speech or gesture—whereby one party transmits power for life to another party.”⁷⁸ He continues with a more detailed description of blessing: “This act of transmission, which occurs in a world of intense

⁷⁶ “Faith Statements,” The United Church Of Canada, last modified 2021, <https://united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements>.

⁷⁷ Donna Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women’s Theological Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 13.

⁷⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations Of Faith: A Theological Handbook Of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 18.

interpersonal relationships, is not explainable in any positivistic terms.”⁷⁹ Here, Brueggemann points to the relational quality of the conferral of blessing. God acts in the blessing to bestow upon his covenant partner, Israel, his love and desire to send them forth. In turn, Israel is equipped to act with like grace in the blessing of others.

The conferral of God’s blessing is the fundamental element that sets shawl ministry apart from other crafting. The crafter receives God’s grace and transmits it in the tangible craft that is the shawl. And again, that sense of blessing can take many different forms and be present at many different times for both the crafter, the group, and the recipient. Although not fully articulated, prayer shawl ministry participants often spoke of the sense of blessing that accompanied their crafting. A participant at the Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry of the Belwood-Metz Pastoral Charge, spoke about her threefold sense of blessing in her shawl making, which for her involved the craft itself, the community of craftmakers, and the opportunity to give the completed shawl to others.

And because Karen started the healing circle and we included prayer shawls, I thought, ‘yes,’ because I’ve been wanting to make them for a long time. Initially, because I had a lot of leftover yarn and I wanted, well, I wanted to do something with it rather than just throwing it out. Something useful. And so, I have found doing making the shawls, and I knit. So, whether it’s using up or using new yarn, I get the blessing of when I’m making it. We get the blessing of when we’re here. And then we also get the blessing when we give it to people, to use. So, it’s kind of a threefold thing for me anyway.⁸⁰

It is interesting to think about this participant’s description of feeling blessed through the lens of Brueggemann’s concept of the inexplicable quality of blessing. There is a sense of more happening than can be explained. In the case of this participant, as she sits with the tangible yarn and needles, she feels something beyond just the everyday act of knitting. Brueggemann offers a

⁷⁹ Brueggemann, *Reverberations Of Faith: A Theological Handbook Of Old Testament Themes*, 19.

⁸⁰ Participant from Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry, Belwood-Metz Pastoral Charge, Belwood, Ontario, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, November 13, 2019.

more in-depth theory around blessing in his book *Embracing Transformation* that is deeply rooted in ancient Judaism. He suggests that blessing theology is rooted in creation theology. By this he means, "... the creation texts of the Old Testament affirm that God has blessed, ordained fruitfulness and well-being...The 'force for life' has been implanted by the creator into all of creation. It is this 'force for life' that constitutes the substance of blessing."⁸¹ In this perception of blessing, the crafter is connecting to this force for life in the act of creation. I would say, the force for life is God's love in and through the crafter and onto the materials of yarn and needles that will be further created into a shawl to carry that blessing onto whomever it is gifted.

This sense of "force for life"—God's love in and through tangible creative acts—is lived out in a concrete way in the description of the blessing process by a participant from the Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church in Morriston. In answer to my question, "Does it make you feel closer to God, and if so where do you feel closest to God?" she answered:

*Yes, especially when we bless the prayer shawl. We all stand around. We all have one hand on that prayer shawl, and then either I or the minister will do a prayer on that. To me, that seems like a spiritual moment. And then when we give it to the person. To me, that's another spiritual moment. And people, they hug you four or five times and thank you, thank you. But to me, that's where I see God at work and spiritual.*⁸²

Brueggemann speaks about this sense of carrying forward blessing when he writes, "...while blessing as life-force that produces generative productive, material prosperity is intrinsic to life-processes themselves, blessing can be bestowed, transferred from one party to another in an almost palpable way."⁸³

⁸¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Ministry Among: The Power of Blessing," *Embracing the Transformation* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 59.

⁸² Participants from Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Morriston, Ontario, February 19, 2020.

⁸³ Brueggemann, "Ministry Among: The Power of Blessing," 64.

Often when a shawl group is just starting, one of the difficult things to explain to its church community is this sense of God's blessing being bestowed on the hands of the crafter and the yarn and needles of what makes up the shawl and of that blessing being conferred upon another. Although, in the United Church, we ask for God's blessing in the concrete elements of bread, juice, and water in communion and baptism, we are most used to blessings referring to people in our church tradition, not things. One of the ways to help a congregation understand the concept of blessing being shared in prayer shawl ministry, is by having a shawl blessing liturgy that the congregation participates in. At Trinity United, the Shawl Ministry asks for the congregation's participation in the following liturgy.

Trinity Shawl Blessing Liturgy

Trusting in God's love beyond all love and God's grace beyond all grace, we gather together in community to give thanks that this love can speak in so many ways including through these simple shawls.

Just as their yarn was stitched together by caring hands in prayer, we too add our prayers and seek God's blessing on their journey.

*Loving God, we ask that you bless these shawls
and the people who will receive them.*

***In the warmth of the shawl yarn,
we pray that the warmth of your love will enfold them.***

*In the many stitches of the shawl fabric,
we pray that they may know they are held in many prayers.*

***In the blessing of the quiet words within the shawl folds,
we pray that each person may know
the blessing of your comfort.***

*And in all things, we pray that they may know
they are not alone.*

***Your healing strength surrounds them,
and our community of care upholds them.
In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.***

After the first Sunday of shawl blessings and the sharing of this liturgy that congregants from Trinity started to express increased interest in this ministry. After each experience of this blessing, the shawl ministry has had a resurgence of interest in and understanding of what the ministry is about and who the shawls could be gifted to in a meaningful way.

The participants at Prayer Shawl Group at Three Willows United Church in Guelph spoke about their congregation understanding this blessing aspect of the shawl ministry when they talked about the special way that the congregation had blessed a prayer shawl for a student minister who had finished her placement with them and was leaving.

So we passed a shawl around, I think it was for...the student minister here. When it was presented in the congregation we passed it around and everyone got to hold it and so she left with everyone's blessings.⁸⁴

Another aspect of the blessing of God's love being shared beyond a church community was outlined by participants from the Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry at St. John's United Church in Belwood when they observed that sometimes they have found a prayer shawl can be the conduit to sharing God's love in a way the recipient might not be open to if it were offered as prayer. One participant observed,

We talked before about the prayerful blessing in making them, but, and that it's tactile. But you can give it to someone like my niece who I wouldn't think to say, 'Can I pray for you?' I might not get a very good reaction, and I asked my sister and she said she was delighted to have it. She holds it. She uses it. So, it's a tactile prayer and a reminder that people are thinking of you.⁸⁵

Another participant offered a similar observation:

And my aunt is exactly the same way....we don't necessarily talk about prayer, but she has the shawl on the back of her chair, and she always puts it around her.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Participant from Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

⁸⁵ Participant from Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry, Belwood-Metz Pastoral Charge, Belwood, Ontario, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, November 13, 2019.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

Further insight was shared by another participant:

*We've had a few of the people that we have gifted them to that have written to us or told us they're taking their shawls to bed with them because of the comfort, especially those that have had cancer. They just seem to take it to bed with them and they feel it's helping them. And I know one woman in particular, she said, 'I forgot to take my shawl with me wherever I went,' and they were staying overnight, and she said 'It just wasn't the same I just didn't feel those arms wrapped around me.'*⁸⁷

In each of these examples, the shawls communicate a blessing that was unanticipated. They also manage to break down the barriers between explicit expressions of faith and gifts that can be understood and received even by those who are not religiously observant.

Jewish Prayer Shawl (*Tallit*)

This sense of a garment made with yarn, pointing beyond itself to the presence of God is an element that both the Jewish Prayer Shawl (*Tallit*) and the crafted shawls of the prayer shawl ministry share. However, the *Tallit* is a sacred garment that is worn by the worshiper (historically only men, but now including some women) in the worship and prayer traditions of the Jewish faith. The journalist, Debra Nussbaum Cohen, in her book, *Celebrating Your New Jewish Daughter: Creating Jewish Ways to Welcome Baby Girls Into The Covenant* describes the *Tallit* as, "... the large, fringed shawl that Jewish men and a growing number of women wear in prayer..."⁸⁸ She continues her description stating, "It is, at its simplest level, a traditional prayer shawl whose fringe, called *tzitzit*, are reminders of God's commanded *Mitzvoth*, or obligations."⁸⁹ The *Tallitot's* inception is based in Moses' teachings from God to the Jewish people in Numbers 15: 37-40.

37 The Lord said to Moses: 38 Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe

⁸⁷ Belwood Participant from Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry, Belwood-Metz Pastoral Charge, Belwood, Ontario, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, November 13, 2019.

⁸⁸ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, *Celebrating Your New Jewish Daughter: Creating Jewish Ways to Welcome Baby Girls Into The Covenant* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2021), 133.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

at each corner. 39 You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. 40 So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God.

From this first directive, the rich tradition and sacred place of the *tallitot* have developed in the life and worship of the Jewish faith. Nussbaum Cohen writes that, “It [*the tallit*] is a special article of religious expression for Jews, passed down lovingly from one generation to the next.”⁹⁰ She continues, “A growing number of liberal Jewish women have begun wearing *tallitot* and exploring the emotional resonance that it can add to their prayer experience as it brings with it associations of comfort, covering, protection, warmth, and shelter.”⁹¹

Crafted shawls in the prayer shawl ministry, on the other hand, have developed very recently. In Bowman’s interview with Bristow and Cole-Galo in 2013 the authors talked about how they sometimes encounter confusion about whether the prayer shawl ministry shawls are another form of Jewish prayer shawls or are related in any way. Quoting from Bowman’s interview, Bristow explains, “Our prayer shawls are also called prayer shawls because the prayer shawl maker is the pray-er...Once the receiver has it, it’s up to that person to use it as they see fit, whereas a *tallis* is used *for* prayer, and I think that’s the difference.”⁹² Bowman goes on to explain further, “For the *tallis*, it is a prayer shawl because of how it is used. For the prayer shawl ministry, it is a prayer shawl because of how it is made—shot through with contemplative prayer.”⁹³ In my own words, I would suggest that the *tallit* is a garment, steeped in the rich history of Jewish tradition, that helps direct the wearer’s attention to the tasks of worship, prayer, and keeping the commandments of God. Similarly, speaking of God’s presence,

⁹⁰ Nussbaum Cohen, *Celebrating Your New Jewish Daughter: Creating Jewish Ways to Welcome Baby Girls Into The Covenant*, 134.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁹² Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women’s Theological Imagination*, 13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

but in a different way, the much more recent crafted prayer shawl brings comfort for the recipient of knowing they are not alone in what they are going through. They are surrounded by the prayers of others and the blessing of God’s love to support them in whatever circumstances they are in.

From Blessing to Sacrament

While prayer shawls speak clearly to ancient themes of the transmission of God’s blessing through the gifting of the shawl, the shawl itself is often viewed as being conferred with divine meaning and purpose. This notion is more akin to Christian notions of sacrament.

On its national website, the United Church of Canada defines a sacrament in these words,

A sacrament is a symbolic action, or ritual, by which people of faith encounter the presence and goodness of God. In a sacrament, ordinary things like water, bread, and wine are used to point us to God and God’s love, reminding us of the sacred in life.⁹⁴

Here, the United Church acknowledges that God’s blessing is tied especially to concrete things: water, bread, wine, which each reminds us of the sacred narrative and point us beyond it to enact sacramental action in the present.

Although the United Church affirms the two key sacraments—baptism and communion—it also expands beyond these in considering those ordinary objects which may be considered *sacramental*—those ordinary things which point to God’s love that are not necessarily the sacraments recognized by the churches—in the Protestant traditions, baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

In the chapter titled, “Sacraments and Sacramentality in The United Church of Canada,” William Kerwin describes the tension between seen and unseen—between the concrete narrative

⁹⁴ “Communion and Baptism,” Community and Faith, What We Believe, The United Church of Canada, accessed Sept 17, 2020, <https://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/baptism-and-communion>,

of Jesus Christ and the myriad of experiences that encounter with him engenders: “Sacramental theology continues to wrestle with age-old questions. How is the visible related to the invisible, a living body related to the Risen Body, the earth related to its Maker?”⁹⁵ Kervin points out that in the most recent Statement of Faith, this wrestling takes a more poetic description. He writes, “It would seem that in UCC theological methodology, there is as much value placed on multivocal [many] description[s] as on univocal [one] definition. *Song* [as in the 2006 Statement of Faith, A Song of Faith] implies not so much a systematic definition of sacraments as a poetic description of the phenomenon of sacramentality,”⁹⁶ that is, as ordinary things having sacramental qualities beyond those things that are officially recognized by the church.

Crafting as a Spiritual Practice

Understanding the broader aspect of sacramentality as being that of an ordinary material or action that points us beyond ourselves to the presence of God, helps explain how this hand crafting of prayer shawls with yarn can be considered a spiritual practice. As was mentioned earlier in Bowman’s interview with Bristow and Cole-Galo, they were clear that the principle of the prayer shawl movement that they felt the most strongly about was that the crafting itself, the handwork of knitting and crocheting, was a spiritual practice or discipline. Bristow described it as “...the work of your hands is a spiritual practice.”⁹⁷ The Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer and theologian, Henri Nouwen, in his writing about spiritual practice (discipline) writes, “...in spiritual life, the word discipline means ‘the effort to create some space in which God can

⁹⁵ William S. Kerwin, “Sacraments and Sacramentality in The United Church of Canada,” in *The Theology of the United Church of Canada*, eds. Don Schweitzer, Robert C. Fennell and Michael Bourgeois (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019), 241.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁹⁷ Bowman, *Prayer Shawl Ministries And Women’s Theological Imagination*, 13.

act’.”⁹⁸ He continues: “Discipline helps us to follow the voice of the Spirit, who wants to lead us to new places, new people, and new forms of service.”⁹⁹ In *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook*, Bristow and Cole-Galo offer an inspirational quote to start the journal entries for each month. For the month of August they include a quote from the late Susan Gordon Lydon’s book *The Knitting Sutra: Craft As A Spiritual Practice*, and it reads, “The humble knitter sits in the center between heaven and earth. As she spins the yarn to make her sacred cloth, invisible threads connect her to both God and Mother Earth.”¹⁰⁰ Invisible threads connecting the yarn and the crafter with God’s love that interwoven among each is a good image for shawl crafting as a spiritual practice.

In considering shawl crafting as a spiritual practice, there are two elements that help move it out of the everydayness of regular crafting and into the actions of a spiritual practice. These are the element of intention and the element of letting go. In both of these elements, intention and then letting go, there is a deliberate turning toward, making space for, and connecting with God’s grace. There is a deliberate turn to connection in the invisible threads of God’s love.

Spiritual Practice of Intention

Intention, the intention of specifically crafting a prayer shawl, rather than a shawl for another purpose, is an important part of what makes prayer shawl crafting different from other crafting work. Intention is a basic principle that helps make many of our actions successful. A stated intention gives us the framework and the orientation for the outcome we are hoping for. A simple illustration of this sense of intention was demonstrated in my early instruction on how to

⁹⁸ Henri Nouwen, *A Spirituality Of Living: The Henri Nouwen Spirituality Series*. (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books. 2011), 16.

⁹⁹ Nouwen, *A Spirituality Of Living: The Henri Nouwen Spirituality Series*, 16.

¹⁰⁰ Janet Severi Bristow and Victoria A. Cole-Galo. *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration Plus Knit And Crochet Basics* (Newtown: CT: Taunton, 2013), 60.

sink a putt in the game of golf. The line along the toes of my shoes needed to be the line I wanted the ball to follow to reach of putting green's hole. In a very simplistic way, if the line-up of my toes did not lead to the hole, the golf ball was not likely to get there either. In Severi Bristow and Cole-Galo's latest book, *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration Plus Knit And Crochet Basics*, they speak about the same sense of intention in the opening title in the chapter on "Starting a Prayer Shawl Journal: 'Setting the Intention.'" They write,

Most often, we knit or crochet on the run, grabbing bits of time during our busy schedules. It's important to create a space for yourself especially when beginning a new shawl. When you do, it sets your intention of beginning the spiritual practice of shawl making.¹⁰¹

In my ministry world, I would describe this sense of intention as turning toward God's presence. When I am preaching, I will sometimes physically turn in the pulpit to describe the sense of change of orientation within us that I am speaking about. This sense of intention, or orientation toward beginning the spiritual practice of shawl making can happen both at the individual shawl maker's level and at the prayer shawl group meeting level. It is interesting to note that each of the six shawl groups that I visited were held in the church they were a part of. For a participant at the Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church, being in the church for this purpose was part of how she re-oriented, or turned toward, the special spiritual practice of this work. When I asked her where she felt closest to God in doing this work, she commented, "*Don't you feel closer to God when you're in church?*"¹⁰² A little further on in the interview she observed that, "*It would be a different situation if we gathered at somebody's*

¹⁰¹ Severi Bristow and Cole-Galo. *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration Plus Knit And Crochet Basics*, 29.

¹⁰² Participant from Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry, Belwood-Metz Pastoral Charge, Belwood, Ontario, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, November 13, 2019.

house.”¹⁰³ When I commented that all the shawl groups that I had visited had been held in a church, as I mentioned above, she continued, “*Makes sense, makes sense to me. I don’t think I would bother going if it was in different people’s houses.*”¹⁰⁴

A further way that each of the shawl groups stated their intention of engaging in prayer shawl ministry was in their opening prayer. Every group had their own agenda for their meeting time together, and they were all a little different, but they shared the common practice of starting their meeting with a prayer that stated their intentions around prayer shawl ministry. Of course, the reason that each participant had come to the meeting in the first place was with the intention to be focused on their shawl ministry, and although the connection and support they gave each other was important, this intention, to focus on shawl ministry, was reinforced by stating it explicitly in their opening prayer.

At the Eat Pray Knit shawl group at First United Church in Owen Sound, lighting a candle and an opening prayer went together. The morning I was there, as the candle was lit, the prayer that was offered was a new prayer for the group. The group’s coordinator explained that in going through some of the correspondence the group had received through the years, she had found this prayer in an e-mail. The sender thought the shawl group might be interested in it and so sent it. It is interesting to note that the intention of the group is communicated well enough beyond just their membership to be recognized by others in their community. The group coordinator shared these words:

Creator, I ask a blessing from all who have come before me, whose hands have been instruments of creation and beauty. Provide cover and warmth for themselves and those they loved, who felt as I will feel the yarn in their fingers, who have seen as I will see the

¹⁰³ Participant from Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry, Belwood-Metz Pastoral Charge, Belwood, Ontario, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, November 13, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

*growth of the fabric, who have heard as I will hear the click of the needles Bless this yarn and these needles. May this shawl be a sign of your healing presence. May it warm those who are weary, surround those who suffer and light this day.*¹⁰⁵

At the Prayer Shawl Group at Three Willows United Church in Guelph, various members would take turns offering the opening prayer. On the morning I was there, this was the prayer that was shared:

*So, this is a gathering prayer and blessing. As we gather in community to share our prayer, our stories, the work of our hearts and hands, we pray for God's blessing on our endeavors. A blessing to my mind to be free to enter this time of contemplation activity. A blessing to my hands to be a source of creating something of beauty and love. A blessing to my soul to be open to the prompting of loving and caring. A blessing to my arm to shape into patterns of loving and care. A blessing to my needles to be the holders of the stitches as they become a whole garment. A blessing to my knitting to be a work of art and hands, body and spirit and a blessing on the one who will receive the fruits of my prayer and knitting. May this shawl be welcoming in the spirit in which it was knitted. May we become one with the one who knits each of us in our mother's womb. I join my breath, blessing my prayer and knitting, with women all over the earth in this common effort to bring healing and wholeness, comfort and celebration. Amen.*¹⁰⁶

Each of these prayers are quite different, but the element of intention, the turning of the group's thoughts toward God and God's love in the spiritual practice of the crafting is the shared focus. And in this spiritual practice God's love is woven into their work to then be shared through their shawls wherever they travel.

This element of intention, turning toward God and the intention to be about the work of shawl ministry, happens at the personal level as well. A participant from the Trinity Shawl Ministry at Trinity United Church in Collingwood spoke with deep feeling about the difference that this intention, this focus and direction toward God makes for her:

I never heard of prayer shawls prior to you bringing them up in the summer. And I knew immediately. I think that same day, when you were looking through pattern books. I didn't

¹⁰⁵ Participant from Eat Pray Love, First United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 18, 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Participant from the Prayer Shawl Group Participant from the Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

*realize you'd already in the behind the scenes been doing this for I don't know how long before I joined. But yeah, I knew immediately there was something that I wanted to do.*¹⁰⁷

Later in the interview, she explained more fully about what she meant by the phrase, “*I knew immediately...*”¹⁰⁸ when she spoke about what the prayer shawl ministry means to her. She said,

*What does this [prayer shawl ministry] mean to me? I was sitting here just thinking while everyone was having their go thinking that was a good thing that I was last—could have a little think about it. I do believe its an extension of who I am. It's having been a nurse for 40 years, 41, wow, where did that go? That caring, sharing, enabling side of me feels terrifically at home doing this, it is. I think that's why when you first brought it to my attention in the summer that it was, it was just such an easy fit for me. It is on my path. There's not even any grabbing from any other side of me; it is who I am.*¹⁰⁹

She then went on to explain how she makes time for it in her daily life, despite full-time work which meant that the interview meeting was the first meeting she had been able to make it to.

*So, what got you out to your first meeting and why do you keep coming? I can't say very much because this is my first meeting, because of work... I knit always first thing in the morning. Even before work I'll do a couple of rows. Just a couple of things to hmm.. Because it's my time, that time, just before [her grandson] gets up and comes down the stairs and 'Nana, I'm hungry.' So, it's my time, because well, I'm busy, so I don't. By the time I finish of an evening, it's either time to collapse on the couch or go to bed, one of the other. So it's my time, 5: 30 'til 6: 30. It is about the time I sit and I have a coffee and that's my time. That's when I do my, prayer chain. I've said this before. My prayer chain, people's names sit beside my knitting.*¹¹⁰

At this point another participant commented, “*so[you] really integrate those two ministries into your morning time together. That's interesting,*” to which the first participant replied, “*Well, if I didn't I am doing it in the car on the way to work, which is not a bad thing either. But it is more contemplative if I can do it first thing in the morning, for me anyway, for me.*”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Participant from Trinity Shawl Ministry, Trinity United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Collingwood, Ontario, December 6, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

Severi Bristow and Cole-Galo speak about this sense of intention—turning toward God and the intention to be about the work of shawl ministry—when they write at the beginning of the journaling instructions in *The Prayer Shawl Journal and Guidebook*, “It is an opportunity to take time out of your busy day or week, to sit and create something beautiful that will bring comfort or happiness to another person.”¹¹² The experience of the participant from the Trinity Shawl Ministry brings their statement to life.

Spiritual Practice of Letting Go

Letting go of something in our society is often a hard action. Letting go means we lose control over whatever it is that we have, and this often is not a good feeling. Letting go of something when we have put time and effort into it, in other words invested some of ourselves in it, makes it even more difficult. In shawl ministry, letting go is hard both because the shawl is an item we have put time and effort into and because letting go means trusting in God’s love that the shawl will go where it needs to go. But it is just this element of trust in the work of the Holy Spirit in the letting go that helps the shawl ministry be a spiritual practice. The act of letting go encourages the crafter once more to look beyond the yarn of the shawl itself, and their own work of crafting it, toward God’s love that has been prayed into the fabric of the shawl and goes with the shawl into the world. It is God’s love that is the energy that is being sent through the shawl out into the world. Much like in the sending out at the end of our church services, where the recognition is that it is God’s love that goes out through us into the world in all we say and do, so too does the element of the letting go of the shawls recognize that it is God’s love that enables them to be sent out with a prayer and a blessing to find their way in the world. In my ministry, I call this “letting go and letting God.”

¹¹² Severi Bristow and Cole-Galo, *The Prayer Shawl Journal & Guidebook: Inspiration Plus Knit And Crochet Basics*, 28.

Nouwen, in his book, *Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit* speaks about how the spiritual practice of letting go has been important for him. He writes, “I have found it very important in my own life to try to let go of my wishes and instead to live in hope.”¹¹³ He continues more directly, “It is giving up control over our future and letting God define our life.”¹¹⁴ For the crafter of prayer shawls, it is giving up control over the future of where the shawl will go and letting God define its path. A participant in the Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry at St. John’s United Church in Belwood made an interesting observation connected to this sense of God’s agency in the shawl when she commented that the energy of the blessing of a prayer shawl doesn’t seem to wear out over time. She said,

*And the interesting part is, it doesn’t seem to matter how long ago it was that the shawl was blessed. It’s the energy. The power is still there.*¹¹⁵

In my research, it is uncanny how often one shawl group will describe the experience another shawl group had. In my interview with the Aurora Shawl Group, I heard this observation from a ministry participant, described in a very unexpected way. The Aurora Shawl Group shared with me their experience of receiving a letter from a person who had picked up one of their shawls from a second-hand clothing outlet. As they explained, the original label with the Aurora Shawl Groups name on it was still attached, and although the shawl was far removed from where it was originally gifted, this new recipient had written a letter expressing thanks and appreciation for the unexpected appearance of the shawl in their lives. As the group continued to reflect on an unusual set of circumstances, one of the participants commented,

¹¹³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Finding My Way Home: Pathways to Life and the Spirit* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 101, accessed April 29, 2021, <https://archive.org/details/findingmywayhome00henr/mode/2up>.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹¹⁵ Participant from Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry, Belwood-Metz Pastoral Charge, Belwood, Ontario, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, November 13, 2019.

*Who knows where our reach is going to extend?*¹¹⁶

In each of the shawl groups I visited, notes and cards of thanks that had been received were shared with the participants at some point in the meeting. In the Aurora interview a participant articulated very clearly how important that kind of feedback is for the crafters. She commented,

*Well, an important part of what you [the coordinator] have set up in receiving thank you notes and in reading them to us, you realize what it has meant to somebody. It wasn't just you making stitches and handing something in. You realize from the comments in the letters exactly how this has affected someone, and that keeps you going. And I would follow with what Mary said, a feeling of mine is that we are doing God's work physically somehow in the world, and we're sharing his love through what we, we make.*¹¹⁷

Further, another participant shared what she finds meaningful about her involvement,

*One thing I like about it is that it's the church going out into the world, and I think we tend to be too insular. We don't think about, we think we think about other people. But really, how much do we get out into the world and do things in the name of Christ, or in the name of the church? And so, you're, you're accessing people who would never darken the doors of this place probably, or not know too much about Christianity, so I really think that that's important.*¹¹⁸

Going out into the world. Taking the ageless experience of blessing and sacrament and sharing them in the tangible folds of the crafted prayer shawl where they seem oddly out of place in a world that is becoming less and less religious. But that is what these prayer shawl groups are actively engaged in. Which brings us to the question upon which this thesis is focussed: How does the traditional craft of knitting and crocheting find new meaning as the spiritual practice of prayer shawl ministry in the United Church of Canada's communities of faith today, in the midst of the changing priority and time demands of the society around us? It is to this question that the next chapter turns.

¹¹⁶ Participant from the Aurora Crafters' Circle, Aurora United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Aurora, Ontario, November 7, 2020.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Chapter Three

Crafting the Future

Although prayer shawl ministry addresses a number of personal and spiritual needs, it also arises in a specific moment in the history of the Canadian church. This chapter, “Crafting the Future,” explores the theological and social context behind the findings in this research that led me to conclude the third vital way this ministry is significant: culturally, this ministry provides a flexible and non-threatening form of outreach in a post-Christian setting.

In this chapter I will examine how prayer shawl ministry attends to the dramatic changes that have taken place in the United Church of Canada over the past fifty years. I will argue that this form of ministry is a response to the growing numbers within our society that are only partially involved in the church—those whom Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby identifies as “low religious,” a group which contains what many call “spiritual, but not religious.”

Today’s Context

In his 2017 book, *Resilient Gods: Being Pro-Religious, Low Religious, Or No Religious In Canada*, Bibby observes, “Viewing religion across Canada these days is like viewing devastation after some tragedy has hit. It’s as if a fire of secularization has devastated much of what, through the early 1960s, was a flourishing religious forest.”¹¹⁹ In spite of this, Bibby also speaks of religion in Canada as a resilient force: one that adapts and changes to meet new challenges in a secular world. Bibby’s and others’ analysis is helpful in situating prayer shawl ministry as a

¹¹⁹ Reginald Bibby, *Resilient Gods: Being Pro-Religious, Low Religious Or No Religious In Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), 7.

response to some of the dramatic changes that have taken place in the past fifty years within the Canadian religious landscape and that seeks to adapt to them.

Reginald Bibby has worked and written extensively in the field of sociology of religion in Canada. *Resilient Gods* is based on his own national survey of religious trends carried out in 2015 in partnership with the Angus Reid Institute.¹²⁰ This book is his attempt to provide a framework for understanding the religious shifts of the past decades in relation to the changing dynamics of the society. Bibby delineates three types of religiosity that are expressed in Canadian society at this time: “Pro-Religious, the Low Religious or the No Religious.”¹²¹ It is in considering the nuances and ongoing changing dynamics of these categories since the 1960s that we may gain insight into the place of shawl ministries within the complexity of modern religious life.

“No Religious”

Bibby defines “No Religious” as the “proportion of Canadians who say that they are not ‘into religion.’”¹²² Speaking about the data from his 2015 survey, he observes, “The level [26% who say they are not ‘into religion’] is consistent with current census data for people indicating that they have no religion (24%).”¹²³

In a similar vein, Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald write about the origin of the No Religion category on the 1971 census form (Statistics Canada, National Household Survey) in their 2017 book *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances In Canada Since 1945*.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, Introduction 4-5.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 76-81.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 79.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹²⁴ Brian Clarke and Stuart Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity: Changing Allegiances In Canada Since 1945*, (Kingston, ON, McGill-Queens, 2017).

When in 1971 No Religion became one of thirteen choices that respondents could check off, No Religion was listed alongside being Roman Catholic or an affiliate of the United Church. The message was clear: No Religion became not only an option that one could choose, it also became – and this is even more telling – an openly accepted option.”¹²⁵

They continue to document that, “From well under 1% of the total population in 1961, No Religion went up to...12% of the population in 1991, 16% in 2001, and stood at 23.6% in 2011.”¹²⁶

In my lived experience as a lifelong member of the United Church of Canada, this shift from identifying oneself as part of society’s religious centre to recognizing the apparent increasing irrelevance of the United Church (and traditional religious life as a whole) within modern Canada has preoccupied a lot of our time and energy. We have been both mourning what we have perceived to have lost and trying to find new meaning for our existence in the midst of this dramatic change. As Clarke and Macdonald write, “Canadians have chosen to leave Christianity in increasing numbers, either in opposition to organized expressions of Christianity or in the belief that life outside the church is equally valid and meaningful.”¹²⁷ They note, “The growth in No Religious Affiliation marks a generational shift in religious identity.”¹²⁸ They go on to describe this shift: “...today there are many Canadians...for whom organized religion and its beliefs, values and culture, have no meaning. ...Now, for the first time in Canada, we have the non-churched.”¹²⁹

Although there is a growing number of non-religious persons within Canada, there exists still a majority of Canadians who identify as having a religious affiliation. Among these, two groups can be identified—the Pro-Religious, which includes a growing group of persons

¹²⁵ Clarke and Macdonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 227.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

belonging to religions other than Christianity, and the Low Religious, whose affiliation to religious groups is more tenuous.

“Pro-Religious”

On the opposite end of the religious spectrum from the No Religious are the portion of the population that Bibby refers to as the “Pro-Religious.”¹³⁰ He writes, “About 30% of Canadians tell us they embrace religion.” He states, “More than half the people in this category report that they attend services at least once a month.” Further he says, “Close to 9 in 10 indicate that they pray privately on a regular basis....”¹³¹ Clarke and MacDonald give an idea of the changes in the religious make-up of this category in their discussion of Canada’s transition into a multifaith society. According to Clarke and MacDonald, “Canada was clearly not a multifaith society in 1961”, at which time they note “world religions other than Christianity accounted for less than 2% of the Canadian population.” But they continue, “changes in immigration policy in the 1960s” led to Canada becoming increasingly pluralistic. So much so they write that, “By 2011, 8.2% of Canadians belonged to a world religion other than Christianity.” They conclude that “Canada’s transformation into a multifaith society is for many scholars the religious story of the last decades.”¹³²

Bibby’s research provides further detail about this 30% of the population that are Pro-Religious. He observes that, “8 in 10...say that they feel strengthened by their faith, 93% believes that God cares about them personally, and – beyond mere belief – close to 70% claim that they routinely feel God’s presence.”¹³³ Bibby’s data would suggest that for many who have continued to identify as Pro-Religious across all religious categories, they do so now as a matter

¹³⁰ Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 76.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹³² Clarke and MacDonald, *Leaving Christianity*, 200.

¹³³ Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 77.

of personal choice and with conviction. It is no longer a choice dictated by what would make them acceptable in society. Phyllis Airhart, Professor of Church History at Emmanuel College, traces these changes for the United Church of Canada in her 2014 book, *A Church With The Soul Of A Nation Making and Remaking the United Church of Canada*. She speaks to this specific issue as it is referred to in the final report of the Committee on Membership, presented to the Annual General Council in 1962. She writes, “The report [of the national Committee on Membership] predicted that the United Church was about to enter a new and different age...church membership would no longer be considered ‘the religious aspect of citizenship’”¹³⁴ Airhart clarifies the idea of “religious citizenship” when she explains, “Living in a religiously plural society, where one no longer needed to be a church member in order to be a good citizen, would soon mean making a clear distinction between *church membership* and *citizenship*.”¹³⁵

For the United Church of Canada, this was a major realignment of purpose. As Airhart notes, “The uncoupling of Christianity and culture was a giant step toward a more complete (though still formally undeclared) separation of church and state in Canada.” She comments that, “Few religious institutions were as profoundly altered as the United Church by this de-Christianizing of Canadian society. Its leaders had taken for granted the effectiveness of religion in promoting social responsibility and national solidarity.”¹³⁶

At the same time as the United Church was experiencing the outside changes of society’s growing multiculturalism and the separation of church and state, it was undergoing some dramatic changes internally as well. Of particular note is the changing role of women in church

¹³⁴ Phyllis D. Airhart, *A Church With The Soul Of A Nation: Making And Remaking The United Church Of Canada* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2014), 202.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 223.

life through this time. Not only did more women enter into ordered ministry during this time, women's involvement within voluntary societies within the churches also shifted dramatically.

Independent scholar, Marilyn Fäilyn Whiteley, writes about this changing dynamic. She notes, "For decades, both women and men understood this [women's work] as work done by individuals, or more often by groups of women, that were in some sense outside the institutional structures of the church."¹³⁷ For the first thirty years after Church Union, there were two women's groups that carried out this work. The first one was The Women's Missionary Society with its extensive grassroots organization of local study and fundraising groups to support specific overseas mission projects and the missionaries involved in them. The other group was the Women's Associations, also local and well-organized groups, that helped run church bazaars and dinners and any other needed fundraising efforts to keep the local church going. As Whiteley notes, "Innumerable congregations owe their very survival to these dedicated groups of women."¹³⁸ For each of these groups, beyond the organization at the local level, there was a regional level and a national level as well. Although each organization was appreciated and valued, Whiteley notes, "The 1956 General Council adopted the recommendation of the Committee [the 1953, Committee to Study Women's Work] to 'approve in principle the formation of one organization for the women of the United Church of Canada...'"¹³⁹ By January 1962, the amalgamation was finalized and the United Church Women (UCW) came into being. Whiteley records that the goal of this amalgamation, as stated in the 1956 General Council

¹³⁷ Marilyn Färdig Whiteley, "'Women's Work' in the United Church of Canada," *Touchstone* 20, no. 2 (May 2002): 6, <http://search.ebscohost.com.uwinnipeg.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=ATLA0001478097>.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

recommendation was to “...enlist all the women of the United Church for the total Mission of the Church and to conserve all of value in our present women’s organizations.”¹⁴⁰

Whiteley further notes that “The highest membership figure for the UCW occurred in its very first year [1962], and three years later, in 1965, the membership of the new group was lower than that of the WA alone at its highest, six years earlier.”¹⁴¹ Whiteley goes on to provide a summary of the reasons for this decline as she quotes from the 1982 report by Katharine Best from Erindale United Church to the Committee on Women, Work and Worship. Whiteley quotes Best as writing, “[W]omen now participate in many more aspects of the church’s organized life – for example, the proportion of women on session [part of governance structure of an individual congregation] has increased greatly.”¹⁴² Whiteley continues to quote that Best also notes, “the large increase in the number of women working outside the home.” But beyond just the church itself, Whiteley comments that Best argues that other changes in the society around the Church at that time played a role in this decline, including “an increase of groups with the purpose of encouraging individual spiritual growth,” as well as “a gradual increase in the number of social services provided in the community at large. Hence, there was no need for churches to organize and provide these services.”¹⁴³

Airhart provides a global context for Best’s comments on this issue when she writes,

In Britain, the expansion of government into education and social services during the interwar years was, as historian Frank Prochaska sees it, ‘both the cause and effect of Christian decline. The situation of the United Church was strikingly similar, and the impact on its social services (and the volunteerism of the Christian citizens who support them) was likewise profound.’¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Whiteley, “Women’s Work in the United Church of Canada”, 15.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴² Ibid., 21.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴⁴ Airhart, *A Church With The Soul Of A Nation*, 205.

Airhart notes that in the early years, “The United Church sought to balance the care of souls with care of society.” It “took as a given that its members belonged not only to congregations but also to families and communities. Its piety was thus civic-oriented, formed in the web of associations both in and beyond the congregation.”¹⁴⁵ However she notes that, “Even in the 1950s, women were finding it more difficult to find time to volunteer at church or community events.”¹⁴⁶ She continues, “After the war women had been bombarded by messages discouraging them from working in paid employment and advising them to put their energies into motherhood and homemaking.” But as she points out “Those admonitions went unheeded.”¹⁴⁷

Even as the debate about women’s work outside the home continued, the economy made women’s work outside the home an increasing necessity. “What both secular and religious critics of women who worked outside the home often overlooked were economic shifts that made homemaking less economically viable.” She goes on to point out that “The United Church’s own studies identified a trend toward a new economy where the basic necessities of life, once produced in the home or acquired by bartering services, were now purchased with cash.” As she concludes, “It [the modern family] was enmeshed in a money economy, and faced disaster unless it had cash to purchase almost everything it needed.”¹⁴⁸ These societal shifts had a profound impact upon the extent and nature of women’s involvement within the churches. They could no longer afford to spend significant amounts of time in voluntary church-based activities, while the structure and the ethos of the UCW failed to keep pace with women’s changing values and roles within post-War society.

¹⁴⁵ Airhart, *A Church With The Soul Of A Nation*, 105.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁴⁷ Airhart, *A Church With The Soul Of A Nation*, 183.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

While the Pro-Religious population saw significant decline, the group also underwent significant change internally. Forms of participation in church community radically for all its members, but especially for women who were now caught up in what feminist sociologists called the “second shift.” (“The second shift is a term coined and popularized by sociologist Arlie Hochschild. It refers to the household and childcare duties that follow the day’s work for pay outside the home.”¹⁴⁹) If women were to be involved in voluntary ministry within the church, it would need to be less consuming in terms of time, and more loosely organized. Local churches adapted to these changes in a variety of ways: by promoting less time-consuming commitments such as single event organizing committees, short-term study groups and single evening events. As for individual Pro-Religious women, they would have to find a way to translate their desire for involvement within a faith community and calling to serve the church into a new setting. By default, given the demands on their time, and the growing secularization of Canada, many such women tacitly became what Bibby defines as Low Religious.

“Low Religious”

Bibby writes, “The largest of the three segments of Canadians – 45% of the population – neither embrace nor reject religion.”¹⁵⁰ He states, “They see themselves as ‘somewhere in between the two extremes.’”¹⁵¹ These he calls the “Low Religious.” Some of the characteristics that he observes in the low religious include identification with a religious tradition (87%)¹⁵² attendance at religious services “once in a while” (74%),¹⁵³ and private prayer. According to

¹⁴⁹ Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. Exploring the Second Shift: A Data-Driven Learning Guide. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2009-04-16, accessed April 29, 2021, Doi: <https://doi.org/10.3886/secondshift>.

¹⁵⁰ Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 81.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*.

¹⁵² Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 81.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 82.

Bibby, “About 42% say they are open to greater involvement with religious groups if they can find it worthwhile.”¹⁵⁴

“Worthwhile” stands out as a word to pay attention to. The challenge is that “worthwhile” is a subjective term. However, as Bibby points out, when you step back and look at the overall data “Across the country, 67% of adults acknowledge that they have spiritual needs.”¹⁵⁵ At first glance, it would seem that faith organizations like the United Church are well positioned to offer to meet those spiritual needs, but Bibby argues that there is often a disconnect between individual and institutional needs “...individualistic and subjective expressions of what Canadians mean by spirituality, what large numbers have in mind when they think of spirituality is not necessarily what the religious groups have in mind to offer.”¹⁵⁶ There is a perceived difference between what religion is and what spirituality is, and a large number of individuals identify themselves as “spiritual, but not religious” (SBNR). SBNR is a term that offers further insight into the spiritual aspirations of contemporary people, while it also connotes their alienation from traditional religious formations.

Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR)

In his most recent book, *The Millennial Mosaic*, Bibby along with fellow authors, Joel Thiessen and Monetta Bailey, describe the challenge of working with this term when they write, “Previous research suggests that what people have in mind when they use the word ‘spiritual’ is extremely subjective and varied.”¹⁵⁷ However, they conclude, “...the general consensus is that the term does point to traits that transcend everyday life including such diverse characteristics as

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 81.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 148.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Reginal W. Bibby, Joel Thiessen and Monetta Bailey, *The Millennial Mosaic: How Pluralism And Choice Are Shaping Canadian Youth And The Future Of Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2019), 187.

‘needing God’s spirit’ and ‘nurturing our souls’...”¹⁵⁸ John Stackhouse¹⁵⁹ seems to concur when he writes, “The now-common term ‘SBNR’ (‘spiritual but not religious’) seems to mean professing spiritual beliefs but manifesting little or no religiously distinctive behaviour.”¹⁶⁰

While this may suggest the deinstitutionalization of spirituality, and its divestment from religious communities, Nancy Allermann argues that, “[r]ather than assuming that ‘religion’ is best measured by organizational belonging and traditional belief while spirituality is best seen as an individual experiential creation, we would do well to recognize that both have institutional producers.”¹⁶¹ She goes on to say, “A fuller understanding of religion requires the incorporation of attention to...the ways both traditional religious organizations and non-traditional cultural sites play roles in producing each of these ways of expressing human connections to transcendence.”¹⁶²

According to Bibby, “When we have asked Canadians ‘what do you mean by spirituality?’ about the best that our coders have been able to do is classify the responses into ‘conventional’ and ‘less conventional’ categories...”¹⁶³ He goes on to define “conventional” as “...expressions of spirituality that have fairly traditional religious connotations.” He reports that 52% of those surveyed fell into this category which includes aspects like “Believing that God is there for us, hears our prayers, and answers them” and “[n]eeding God’s spirit to guide, protect, and support us in good times and bad.” Of the 48% that fall into the ‘less conventional’ category, he reports

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., is Samuel J. Mikolaski Professor of Religious Studies, Crandall University, Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada.

¹⁶⁰ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "What Has Happened to Post-Christian Canada?" *Church History* 87, no. 4 (2018): 1156, doi:10.1017/S000964071800241X.

¹⁶¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, Nancy T. "Spiritual But Not Religious?: Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion.", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52, no. 2 (June 2013): 276, accessed March 19, 2021.276, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24644008>. Ammerman,

articlelogin.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001944415.

¹⁶² Ibid., 276.

¹⁶³ Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 145.

this includes aspects like, “A matter of relating to our inner selves or souls” and a “feeling of oneness with the Earth and everything within us.”¹⁶⁴

Situating Shawl Ministry

This sketch of the religious landscape of Canada helps to situate those involved in prayer shawl ministry whom I have interviewed. They are the inheritors of a church that is in decline; nevertheless they seek active participation within it. Some of those interviewed are regular church attenders and would fall into the Pro-Religious category, but others would identify more closely with being spiritual. Some participants are more comfortable with conventional expressions of faith and some are more comfortable with less conventional expressions. But they are all brought together by a love of craft and how it can be used as a conduit for care and service to others. Most participants I interviewed also noted that it fulfilled a spiritual need in themselves. A participant at the Aurora Crafters Circle described this well when she explained,

... I think it's a bit divinely woven because I love knitting; there's all this yarn, and you get to come in here, see all these colors and choose something and knit it and it goes for a very wonderful purpose...so it really answers a need that I have to be doing that kind of craft, and that it goes on from me to someplace which is really special.¹⁶⁵

It is interesting to note that this quote speaks to the shawl crafting itself as being spiritual in a tactile but not necessarily in such a way that can be articulated in terms of conventional Christian doctrine.

As a spiritual exercise, the crafting itself seems to offer a vehicle for contemplation and prayer. Once again, this is not framed in traditional theological language, but it does indeed seem

¹⁶⁴ Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 145.

¹⁶⁵ Participant from the Aurora Crafters Circle, Aurora United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Aurora, Ontario, November 7, 2020.

to attend to a need in the crafters. A participant from the Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry put it this way, “*It is probably the only prayer that we do that is tactile.*”¹⁶⁶

This participant makes a good point. For most of us in the United Church, a conventional experience of prayer does not often involve the body. And although knitting and crocheting are ordinary practices performed by people from a variety of communities, they become transformed into spiritual practices through the intention and the rituals that accompanies this practice.

A participant from the Eat Pray Knit group in Owen Sound offers a unique insight into this unconventional combination when she speaks about the prayer experience that the founding organizer would lead at each meeting,

*She'd [founding organizer] have a prayer, we'd speak about the people who we wanted to pray for and then she would say 'And we will knit our prayers.' That always stuck with me, when she would acknowledge that we were knitting our prayers for these people that we had mentioned, and that helped me get closer to God.*¹⁶⁷

How meaningful this unconventional pairing is, and the surprise that it was so meaningful, was expressed in a number of different ways. The founding organizer from Eat Pray Knit offered a unique perspective from an organizer's point of view when she commented,

... we created kind of a safe place, a sacred place, and people could share in a way that they didn't share any other place in the church so it felt pretty unique and pretty special to me.

In her organizing role, she paid attention to how the group was coming and being together and unexpectedly noticed this sense of a deepened spirituality. Somehow the crafting in the purpose of prayer shawl making encouraged the group in a less conventional direction—one that was this organizer experiences as especially “safe” and “sacred.”

¹⁶⁶ Participant from the Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry, St. John's United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Bellwood Ontario, November 13, 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Participant from Eat Pray Love, First United Church Owen Sound, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 19, 2020.

At the same time, many participants found the practice of crafting prayer shawls drew them into more conventional Christian understandings particularly around the Trinitarian symbolism in the patterns. So while it was not overt or obvious, prayer shawls became a vehicle for understanding and communicating Christian doctrine, albeit in a highly unconventional manner. Another participant from Eat Pray Knit describes this experience.

*So I think even the meaning behind some of the shawls that we do ... this particular one that I do and I seem to find a lot like this: there are three double chains in it, so I always do: 'Father, Son and Holy Ghost.' And I find there's a lot of that in crocheting...*¹⁶⁸

Relating to our Inner Selves

This sense of fellowship was expressed by a number of different groups. Again, there exists an interesting combination of a sense that attending is both a break, a nurturing experience for the crafter themselves, and an opportunity to engage in something productive or worthwhile.

A participant from Eat Pray Knit explains,

*Yeah, but it's also like [another participant] said, you know, it's a pause, right? We're women and we're busy and we don't pause, and some of us don't pause that often, and this gives us a legitimate reason to pause and to nurture ourselves. I've always liked it when we draped the prayer shawl around our shoulders like we're praying for ourselves too in this, right?. Its not just for others, it's for ourselves too to be well.*¹⁶⁹

Another participant around the circle put it this way,

*I think it's one of those things like crocheting too that has for me anyway the ability to quiet the mind. Yeah, free up the mind so that there isn't that chatter that sometimes goes on. And yet your hands are busy and your mind is calm. It's a lonely thing you know. And it's nice to have a time set aside every month.*¹⁷⁰

Flexibility

This blend of conventional and unconventional can also be seen in the flexibility in attendance

¹⁶⁸ Participant from Eat Pray Love, First United Church Owen Sound, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 19, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Participant from Eat Pray Love, First United Church Owen Sound, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 19, 2020.

and time that involvement in shawl ministry offers to the participants. Shawl ministry is welcoming and accepting of whatever amount of time and attendance the shawl maker finds they can offer. A participant from this group describes this unique combination of factors that attracted her to the shawl ministry. She comments,

*Well, it's a peaceful time when there's a lot of other things going on in my world. It's a productive time because I'm making something for someone else and enjoying it in the process. I can't always come, but I come when I can.*¹⁷¹

This sense of flexibility was expanded on by another participant when they noted, “*And you can still do it at home. Even when you can't come out right? Which is really nice... Yeah, I think that's important too.*”¹⁷².

Low Religious and Flexibility

As noted earlier from Bibby's research into the Low Religious segment of our population, people in this category still regard themselves as having an association with a religious tradition (87%) and say that they attend religious services occasionally (74%). They also state that they would be open to greater involvement with religious groups if they can find it worthwhile.¹⁷³

Prayer shawl ministry is a ministry that participants feel is worthwhile. As noted, worthwhile is a very subjective category. Potential participants need to feel as though their time and energies are being put to good use, are not too demanding, and have something of a reward for them as individuals—that they were being appreciated and rewarded for their efforts. As well as allowing flexibility around time and attendance, the groups offered flexibility in their acceptance of the gifts and skills each person offered. A participant from Eat Pray Knit put it this way,

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Participant from Eat Pray Knit, First United Church Owen Sound, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 19, 2020.

¹⁷³ Bibby, *Resilient Gods*, 81-82.

*I mean, it's sort of what we mentioned that it's friendly. You don't have to have any skills, you know, you can learn, and if you want to learn, if you just want to sit, you can sit. I mean, it's a choice of what you want to do. But it's a very rich, rich gathering.*¹⁷⁴

Another participant pointed out,

*There is quite a bit of flexibility too, like you know you can knit what you want. Whatever colour you want. Whatever size you want. You know its not like everyone is going to knit a blue shawl this month. So you know, there's your own creativity and what speaks to you. There's no pressure. You don't have to do something fancy.*¹⁷⁵

A participant from the Prayer Shawl Group at Three Willows shared her experience of getting involved upon realizing she could sew special cloth bags to gift the shawls in and that this would be welcomed in the ministry.

*And then I just got in because I thought a cloth bag would be nicer, and I sew, so I just got involved by making the bags until this year [when she taught herself to crochet]. So it worked out really nice like you still contribute... you know.*¹⁷⁶

She went on to add that sometimes she gets special requests. She recounts that “*with the sewing, [a participant] has asked me to make custom bags to match the shawl*”¹⁷⁷

“Crossing Over”

Crossing Over – Conventional and Unconventional Forms of Ministry

Sometimes in the church community, the shawl ministry touches other healing ministries that are being offered. This was the case at First United in Owen Sound where a prayer shawl was used in the Healing Pathways ministry. As this participant explains,

*... the other place we have the shawls is in our Healing Pathways. And people come to participate in that and there's always a shawl there if they feel they want to, you know, whatever...it's available, and it's appreciated there. It's quite often used.*¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ Participant from Eat Pray Love, First United Church Owen Sound, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 19, 2020.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Participant from the Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

The crossover went the other way as well when the original organizer of the Eat Pray Knit group offered the experience of “soaking prayer,” originally from the Healing Pathways ministry, to the participants at the shawl group meeting. As she explains,

[I]t’s [Healing Pathways] energetic prayer, and one of the main parts of it is called soaking prayer. So the person comes with their intention of what they’re praying for themselves for that day and my intention is to be a channel of God’s healing love. And it’s just by soaking basically soaking the person by putting my hands on their shoulders, or just off the shoulder. And it’s a silent prayer until the end, and then I offer a blessing. So Healing Pathway. I was involved with Healing Pathway with [the minister] and there was some, I don’t know if I’d say reluctance, or the Healing Pathway touched a certain group of people, a fairly small group of people and I think people didn’t really know what it was all about or were afraid of it and suspicious. And I thought, I’m just, I’m normalizing this. So I offered it to the group, I said if any of you would like an individual soaking prayer, then come to my office and one by one by one, I think, all around circle they all came out to receive an individual soaking prayer, so it was a nice marrying of the two.

It is interesting to note in this case that the more conventional shawl ministry seemed to be a good introduction to other less conventional religious expressions like Healing Pathways.

Another association with a different healing ministry was that of therapeutic touch with the shawl ministry. A participant at The Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry at St. John’s spoke about this when she commented, *“Even this afternoon, I was finishing one off, and your thoughts are, you know where its going, so I’m putting love and therapeutic touch and all of that into it.”*¹⁷⁹

Crossing Over – Churched to “Unchurched”

Shawl ministry is unique in another way in its ability to bridge the divide between church and unchurched and religious and secular. This can be the case for both the crafter and the recipient of the shawl.

¹⁷⁸ Participant from Eat Pray Love, First United Church Owen Sound, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Owen Sound, Ontario, February 19, 2020.

¹⁷⁹ Participant from the Community Healing Circle and Prayer Shawl Ministry, St. John’s United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Belwood Ontario, November 13, 2019.

For the crafter, working with needles and yarn to make a shawl does not seem as threatening as other traditional church activities, like a Bible study or prayer group can be. There is no sense of trying to persuade the crafter to attend a service or believe a specific creed or specific interpretation of a passage of scripture. Each person is accepted at whatever their faith comfort level is.

This ability of the shawls to bridge the divide between church and unchurched and religious and secular is also the case in the gifting and the recipient who they are gifted to. Even though the notes that often accompany the shawls speak of God's blessing being shared with the recipient, they are short, thoughtful messages and associated with the softness of the shawl and thoughtfulness of the gesture, which speak in a more universal language of care. Recipients outside the church community often express surprise that someone who did not know them, would care enough to put the time and effort into the shawl they received. This was the case as quoted in chapter one, of a participant from the Prayer Shawl Group at Three Willows United in Guelph who spoke about gifting one to the relative of a church member who wasn't part of their church.

Her brother-in-law had a brain tumour earlier this year, and I gave him one [prayer shawl] and a prayer square, and he sent me a lovely text message saying he couldn't believe that he received something like this from strangers.¹⁸⁰

It was also in this Prayer Shawl Group, as quoted in chapter one, that they had the experience of gifting one to a family attending their outreach food shelf program.

It's reached beyond our doors too because with the food shelf, we get to know our guests and there have been situations where we know something really difficult someone's experienced. So they have been given to guests as well when we feel it's going to be

¹⁸⁰Participant from Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

*received. Our congregation got just an incredible note from a non-Christian family that stated it didn't matter what you know, the religion, love was love. Very, very touching.*¹⁸¹

It seems that the yarn and prayers in the softness of the folds of the shawl have a special quality that builds these bridges more than special care or card could.

Crossing Over – Accessibility

Accessibility is a prevalent concept currently in both our church and our secular communities. Shawl ministry opens itself to greater participation and reach with diverse populations through its largely accessible format. Shawl ministry is economically accessible. Most shawl groups have a stash (supply) of suitable yarn that is available to participants to use in crafting the shawls. The Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church shared how they acquire the yarn they use:

*Sometimes somebody's cleaning out their house and they will give us a bag of yarn, so sometimes we go downstairs and go through it and say I'm going to take that home and knit up*¹⁸².

The group also spoke about receiving money donations for yarn as well as having a small budget from the Church. The organizer of the group spoke specifically about how important this became for her when they had a participant join the group and ask where she could get the yarn to start. Until that point, participants had been buying their own yarn but following this conversation the organizer realized she did not want cost to be a barrier to participation, so, as she states

*...[W]e have some funds as well that I kind of fought for in the church, budget to put in because everybody's been paying out of their own pocket...if they want to buy their own yarn that's fine, but they shouldn't be obligated, right?' And so I went to the council...and I had this conversation...it's a Church ministry, it needs to be funded.*¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Participant from Prayer Shawl Group, Three Willows United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Guelph, Ontario, January 4, 2020.

¹⁸² Participants from Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Morriston, Ontario, February, 19, 2020.

¹⁸³ Participant from Prayer Shawl and Card Ministry Group at Mount Carmel Zion United Church, interviewed by Mary Elizabeth Piercy, Morriston, Ontario, February, 19, 2020.

This practice of procuring yarn was common in the other shawl groups as well. At the Aurora Crafters Circle, the kits of yarn with the pattern were put together for each shawl and the participants could pick them up as needed. At the Trinity Shawl Ministry, a repurposed kitchen cart served to store the extra yarn and various knitting needles and crochet hooks for the participants to access.

Shawl ministry was also accessible for persons whose mobility may be limited. Shawl groups were always happy to drop off yarn to a participant and pick up a finished shawl to be blessed. Someone who found themselves in a less mobile situation either temporarily or permanently could still be a valued part of the ministry.

As is so often the case, the success of a concept has a lot to do with the social constructs of the time within which it arises. Shawl ministry, using the traditional medium of crafting with yarn, might be assumed to be too old fashioned and out of date for today's moment in the 21st century. In the setting this paper is talking about, that is in United Church communities of faith and its linking with prayer, it would be fair to assume that it would be a concept that wouldn't catch on.

To the contrary, its flexibility in terms of time commitment and involvement, along with its acceptance of the individual gifts of each shawl maker and their faith expression, has meant that it has gained a strong following.

In the feedback that the shawl makers and the church community get about how appreciated the shawls are, even outside normal church circles, there is encouragement to continue to find ways for the ministry to fit with the shifting demands of time and circumstance that have become an everyday part of life in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

Conclusions

The question this thesis set out to explore was, as follows:

How does the traditional craft of knitting and crocheting find new meaning as the spiritual practice of prayer shawl ministry in the United Church of Canada communities of faith today, in the midst of the changing priority and time demands of the society around us?

At first glance, answering that question seemed straightforward. First, interview a small sample of members of active United Church shawl groups, using the same set of questions for each interview. Then take the results and see what the common factors were among the groups. But, as with most exploration of diverse groups, even with the same focus, each group contributed different elements and the picture they create together is much more complete and complex than that of any one group on their own. Taken as a whole, my interviews with the prayer shawl groups have led me to conclude that this ministry is significant in three vital ways: (1) personally, this ministry often mediates a life transition of the crafter and the recipient, (2) theologically, prayer shawls are tacitly understood to be blessing, sacramental and a spiritual practice, and (3) culturally, this ministry provides a flexible and non-threatening form of outreach in a post-Christian setting.

One of the first elements to stand out was how life transitions played a role in both the gifting of the shawls and the involvement of the crafters themselves. Illness, death, widowhood, retirement, etc., all created space and desire to both motivate crafters to get involved in making prayer shawls and to reach out and gift them.

When considering this element in terms of the research question, it is helpful to note that the aspect of life transitions, particularly difficult life transitions, is a perennial theme. In other words, each age including our own have to discern ways to meet and care for people's needs in

these transitions. Shawl ministry with its unique connection of the tactile yarn with a church communities care and support, seems to be a good fit for how to respond in our age.

Another element that stood out was the quiet presence of the theology of blessing and sacrament in the crafting and gifting of the shawls. It became apparent in the interviews that often the crafters were surprised by how meaningful both the crafting of the shawl itself and the gifting of the finished shawls were. Each group kept the thank you notes that they received from recipients and, along with the verbal thanks, they were a definite inspiration to keep going. Something good was happening that seemed to be beyond just the yarn and needles. Although not overtly named, the shawls were a conduit of a care and blessing beyond just their material presence for both the crafter and the recipient.

The third element that stood out was that the crafting itself was a fit for this time and place in the life of the church as the priorities and time demands of society around it are ever changing. Shawl ministry, with its flexibility around different time commitments and inputs being accepted and welcomed, is uniquely situated to be a good fit for our age. The crafting could fit into a busy schedule. It could be as much or as little as was a fit with the individual crafter's time availability. It could feel like a time out, but it was considered useful and so crafters could give themselves permission to engage in it. Crafters could feel like a contributing part of the group even if they could not make it to any meetings. And in the case when groups did not have regular meetings there was still a connectedness in a sense of purpose and worth.

But perhaps the most important element that stood out was how shawl ministry could speak to people with a range of spiritual or religious orientations. The crafting of yarn with needles was approachable both for people who were familiar with or not familiar with traditional Christian practice. It was less threatening for both the crafter and the recipient of the shawl. The

tactile presence of the shawl allowed both the crafter and the recipient to receive these gifts in an open-ended way. In this flexibility, there is an opening for both the crafter and recipient to be more open to the care and support the church is able to offer.

So how does the traditional craft of knitting and crocheting find new meaning as the spiritual practice of prayer shawl ministry in the United Church of Canada communities of faith today, in the midst of the changing priority and time demands of the society around us?

It finds new meaning in terms of time and talent, religious orientation, of acceptance and sense of belonging of a variety of persons with a varied skill set and religious background. This ministry often mediates a life transition of the crafter and the recipient.

It finds new meaning in that it offers a unique combination of tactile work and prayer that is inviting for a range of spiritual and religious orientations. It also is a form of service for those who are in need. Theologically, prayer shawls are tacitly understood to be blessing, sacramental and a spiritual practice.

It finds new meaning in that it offers both crafter and recipient a sense that they are uniquely cared for, by the crafter, by the community, and the church that supports this ministry. Culturally, this ministry provides a flexible and non-threatening form of outreach in a post-Christian setting.

While society's rules and norms might be in a state of transition, the Church's core message of God's love and our relationships in and with this love is more important than ever. Shawl ministry with its combination of being approachable, worthwhile and flexible helps re-think how the church can continue to reach out with this message in other ways to meet the needs of today.

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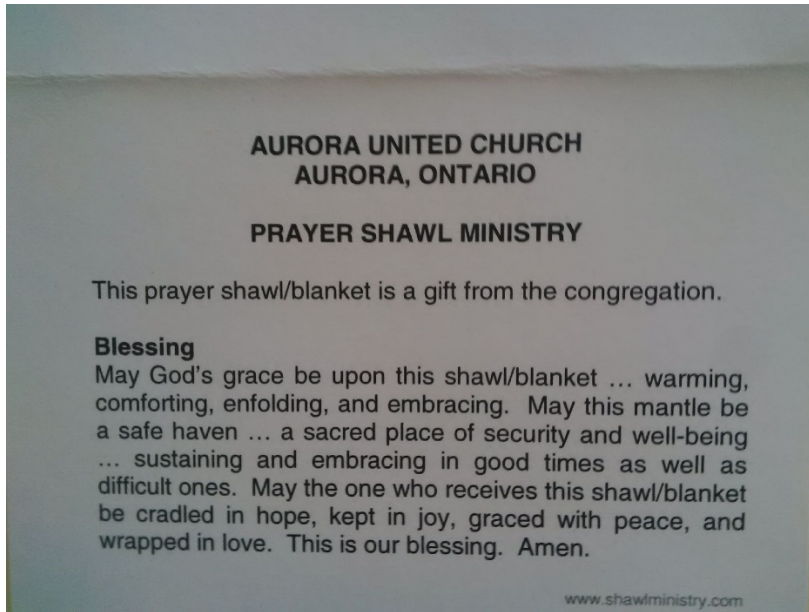
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Gallery of Pictures

Aurora Crafters Circle Aurora United Church, Aurora, Ontario



Shawls always ready to be gifted in the church office.



Shawl kits made up and ready for take and knit or crochet

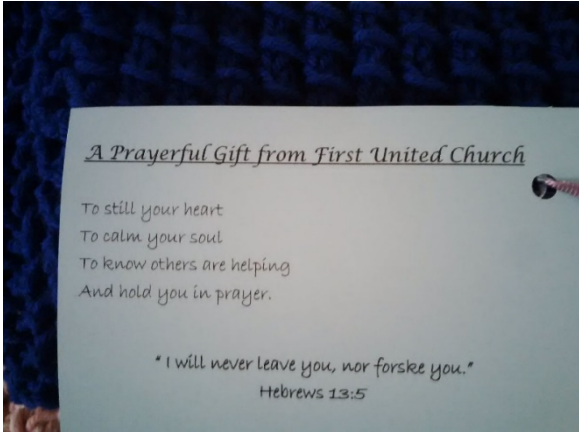


Finished Prayer Shawl – one bin for participants to blessed and one bin for to be blessed.

**Eat Pray Knit
First United Church, Owen Sound, Ontario.**



Prayer shawl tag



**Prayer Shawl Group
Three Willows United Church, Guelph, Ontario**



Yarn Stash and gifting tags



Shawl Bags ready for gifting



Shawls blessed and ready for gifting

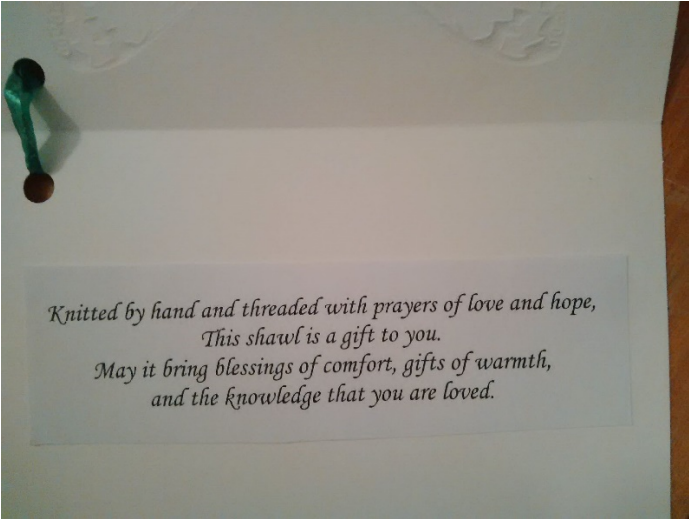


Pocket Shawls

**Trinity Shawl Ministry
Trinity United Church, Collingwood, Ontario.**



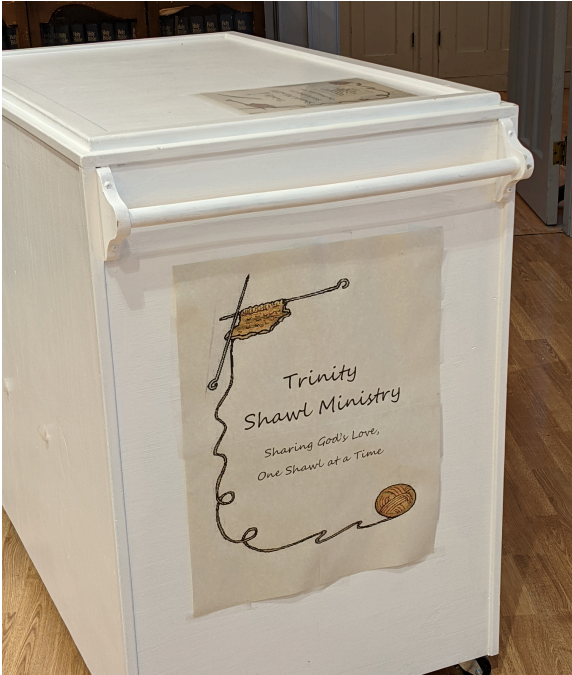
Prayer Shawl knitters at work



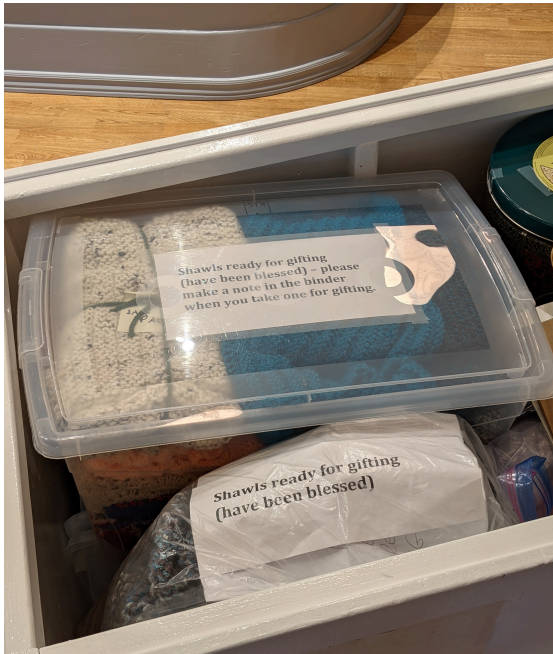
Prayer Shawl gifting cards



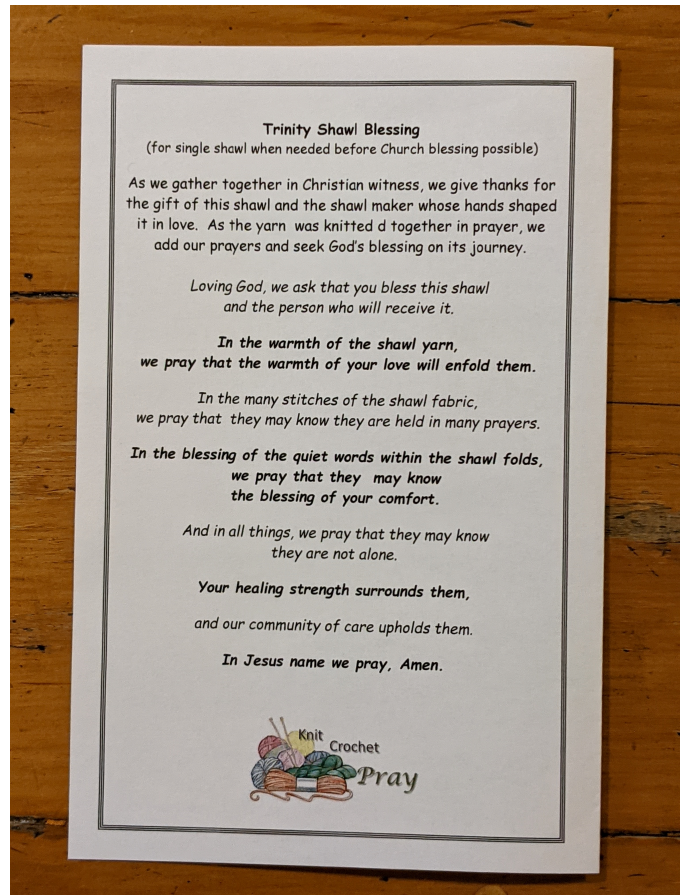
Special Prayer Shawls gifted to the author



Trinity Shawl Ministry Cart



Shawls Blessed in Church and ready for gifting



Shawl Blessing for a single shawl if needed