

Shawls warm givers, recipients

Group makes wraps for those in need

Jennifer Burke/Catholic Courier

On a cold, rainy evening in late September, eight women gathered around a wooden table in the Father Hart Resource Center at Henrietta's Guardian Angels Parish. The table was piled high with multicolored yarn, knitting and crocheting supplies, partially completed projects, and a candle which the women lit before praying.

"Thank you for bringing us together. Bless the work of our hands, bless our conversation, bless our fellowship," Mary Ellen Arden said as she led the women in prayer.

Arden's supplication opened a meeting of the parish's newly formed prayer shawl ministry. Participants knit, crochet, sew or quilt prayer coverings, such as shawls, robes, blankets and mantles, for people who are hurting, celebrating a life passage or who, as Arden says, could just use some extra "God love" in their lives.

Arden said she read an article a year ago about a similar ministry and was intrigued by it.

"My only daughter is in college, so I'm an empty nester," she said. "The time was right to take on a new ministry. It's a great way to pray outside

yourself and to make prayer more personal and public at the same time."

The process of praying for the recipients while working blesses both the makers and the recipients, Arden noted. Completed shawls are sent to recipients along with a prayer card and sometimes an individualized blessing or greeting. Shawls can be made specifically for friends, family members or coworkers going through difficult times, or they can be donated to the church staff to be given to others in need.

"Sometimes you know where it goes and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you hear back and sometimes you don't, and that's OK. It's a random act of kindness," Arden said.

One of the shawls Arden made with someone special in mind went to Domenica Gustke of Rochester's Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish. Arden had invited Gustke to join the group because she knew Gustke had a lot of experience with crocheting. She also knew that Gustke's husband, Donald, had died a few months earlier and that they had been hard months for her. As Gustke was busily crocheting a prayer shawl during the September meeting, Arden walked up behind her, wrapping a shawl around her with a hug. The gesture brought tears to Gustke's eyes, and she kept



Leila Navid/Catholic Courier

Participants in the new prayer shawl ministry at Henrietta's Guardian Angels Parish create wraps for people who are hurting or who are celebrating a life passage. Founder Mary Ellen Arden (left) presents a shawl Sept. 29 to group member Domenica Gustke, who recently lost her husband.

the shawl wrapped around her for the rest of the meeting.

"Considering she knew I had just lost my husband, it was just very refreshing, knowing that someone was praying for me. It was wonderful," Gustke said later.

Gustke said the shawl is very warm and comfortable, and she wears it often and shows it to everyone she sees.

Arden, a Guardian Angels parishioner, approached the parish's staff in April with the idea of starting a prayer shawl ministry. The first meeting was held in June, and Arden said the meetings draw different people each month.

"It spreads by ripple, by word of mouth, and that's what we want to happen. We want the Holy Spirit to kind of take it where it will," she said.

People interested in joining the prayer shawl ministry need not worry about their skill level, Arden said, since members teach and learn from each other.

For example, Betty Comstock, a Guardian Angels parishioner, has more experience with knitting but decided to crochet the shawl she was working on because it seemed to go faster. Gustke has been crocheting all of her life and helped Comstock get the hang of it.

"We have a lot of people here that I know are talented," Arden said. "It combines your love of creating something pretty and of contemplative prayer. I may never walk a



As she crochets, Arden prays for the person who will receive the shawl.

labyrinth and I may never get to a retreat, but I can pray while I'm doing something creatively. The work that keeps me warm while I'm doing it is the work that's going to keep somebody warm eventually."

EDITOR'S NOTE: The prayer shawl ministry meets at 7 p.m. the last Monday of each month in the Father Hart Resource Center of Henrietta's Guardian Angels Church, 2061 E. Henrietta Road. For more information, contact Mary Ellen Arden at mearden@hotmail.com.

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