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common lot

Journal supporting and strengthening the mission of the Worship and Education Ministry Team, Local Church Ministries, and United Church of Christ Women in Mission.

Immerse Yourself in Prayer



Sharing Our Common Lot.....	3
Candle Cloth Project.....	4
A Museum fo Ministry!	6
A Ministry of Prayer Squares	8
From Basket Case to Basket Weaver	10
A Ministry that Makes a Difference.....	12
Immersed in Prayer.....	14
Justice for Women	16
Women in International Mission	17



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Sharing Our Common Lot

by Deborah Bailey



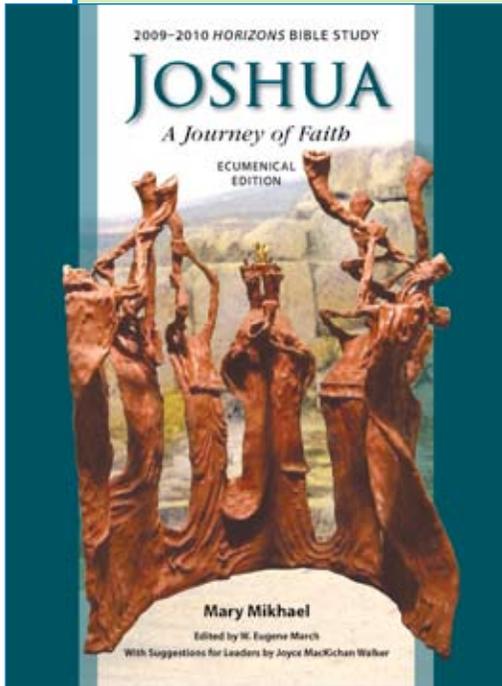
Last fall I was invited to lead a retreat on Spiritual Gifts. During our time together I noticed several women working with yarn, some knitting and some crocheting. It was clear there were a few in the group who were more experienced, sharing tips and words of encouragement with some "first timers". During a break I sat down with the group and found out they were from various churches who had either recently undertaken prayer shawl ministries or were hoping to start them

when they returned home. One of the knitters in the group announced to me early in the conversation that she didn't think she had any spiritual gifts to share but had come for the weekend, "just to knit with her friends"! By the end of that retreat it was certainly clear to me and I think others, that the Holy Spirit had been present and touched the hearts and souls of many within the group, especially those who were sure they had no gifts to share!

On the drive home after the event as I reflected on the weekend I thought not only of all the great women gathered in that sacred space, but also of the very tangible shawls that left that place destined to one day soon be dedicated and wrapped around someone hurting and in need of the prayers and support those shawls represented. I was reminded of eight years earlier when a beautiful prayer shawl arrived at my office from a dear friend who having heard that I had been diagnosed with bi-lateral breast cancer and was soon to begin chemotherapy had requested her prayer group knit me a shawl. Many were the days and treatments I sat wrapped in that shawl, a constant reminder for me of the prayers and loving comfort sent by others assuring me that despite the miles between us I was in their prayers.

When I traveled to Israel and Palestine this past fall on a Woman to Woman pilgrimage I took prayer shawls for the women we visited. To a person the response was the same, they could not believe women in the US were not only praying for them, but would send such beautiful, tangible symbols of love and support.

Throughout this issue you will read of various kinds of artistic, creative prayer projects that make a difference in the lives of both the one who gives and the one who receives. I pray these stories will touch your heart as they have mine.



United Church of Christ Women

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God is still speaking,
and so are we!
PROTECT WOMEN'S LIVES!

**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



Candle Cloth Project

Information has been distributed to local UCC churches about the General Synod Candle Cloth Project. All churches being represented by a delegate or visitor to the General Synod in Grand Rapids, MI, in June of 2009, have been invited to create a “candle cloth,” a mini-quilt that is used under a candle during prayer or meditation times.

To participate, the first step was to complete a Covenant of Prayer Partnership form. Then a prayer was to be written and a quilted candle cloth (approximately 14” square) created by the local church. Plans for GS include a display of the candle cloths in a meditation space and a printed booklet of the prayers from the various local churches. Before GS ends, congregations

that prepared a candle cloth will be able to receive a candle cloth from another local church, thus entering into a prayer-partnership with the other congregation. They will be encouraged to use a candle, the prayers and the candle cloth in their home church whenever groups meet for devotions—their Council, Board of Christian Education, Mission Council, etc.

The ritual for creating a Candle Cloth Prayer, on opposite page, could be adapted for use in various creative endeavors by local churches, women’s study groups or quilting groups. It was written by Rev. Susan Towner-Larsen, Cleveland.



Candle cloths for General Synod.

"Blessed Be the Tie that Binds"

Lighting A Candle

On a table before you, light a candle and say a prayer of your own or the following:

We light this candle, Holy God, to remind us of your presence.

In times of struggle and doubt, we turn toward your light, toward the sunlight, the moonlight, light found in the comfort of a friend's touch.

In times of joy and celebration, we remember your constant love, the unending warmth of your forgiveness, the radiance in a friend's face.

Thank you, God of Light, for all that reminds us of you and that gathers us

In to your spacious and grace-filled love. Amen.

Blessing the Cloth

Gather on a table before you the fabric and thread you will use for the candle cloth. Enjoy arranging it around the candle, appreciating the kaleidoscope of color and texture. Have all who are gathered around the table hold their hands over the cloth—or place a hand on the piece nearest them. Say a prayer of blessing of your own or the following:

It is just cloth, O God, inanimate and seemingly without life.

Infuse it, however, with your blessings, that those who stitch it together, and those who receive it as gift, will feel you draw near.

May the threads woven into fabulous colors and the threads used

to bring pieces and people together, be sacred ones indeed, full of prayer and promise.

May the hands that stitch this cloth be blessed, And the work of those hands be filled with prayers of hope and peace.

Creating a Prayer for the Candle Cloth

Take a few moments of silence. Imagine the candle cloth beautifully made and received by another congregation. On a 3x5 card or slip of paper, write a one or two sentence prayer of blessing or thanksgiving for that congregation. Place prayers on the table with the candle. Re-gather around the candle and the fabric and take turns praying the prayers aloud. Hold hands, if comfortable doing so, as prayers are read. End with The Lord's Prayer, a favorite hymn or the hymn, "Blessed Be the Tie that Binds" (TNCH 393).

Blessed be the threads that bind our hearts in sacred love,

The sharing of our gifts and prayers brings healing and new life...

LOOKING AHEAD

October 16-18, 2009
Southern Regional Women's Gathering
Brenham, Texas

March 12-14, 2010
New England Regional
Women's Gathering
Burlington, Vermont

June 23-27, 2010
Disciples of Christ QA
Greensboro, North Carolina

A Museum for Ministry!

We are a small congregation in Western Pennsylvania, and we are always looking for ways to serve our community, both as outreach and to let people know that we are still in business as a church. Because we meet in a national historic building, many people think that it is a museum!

In August 2007, I found out that a friend of mine was on the waiting list to receive a new heart. As she neared the top of the transplant list, I recalled a Rev. Ruth Shaver working on a “prayer shawl” at some meeting I had attended. At the time I thought that the prayer shawl ministry was a unique idea, but I had forgotten about it, until I wanted to do something tangible for my friend, to let her know that she would be in my thoughts and prayers as she underwent the biggest physical challenge of her life. The idea of a prayer shawl for her persisted. I ordered a Prayer Shawl book with patterns and purchased some Lion Brand Homespun yarn and created a prayer shawl. I prayed without ceasing for my friend while I created that first shawl. When I presented her with it, she was overwhelmed that someone would do that for her. The shawl accompanied her to the hospital and was the object of many conversations.

The response to that particular shawl made me wish that my church would pursue a Prayer Shawl Ministry; however, I was unsure about the response from the few women in our congregation. Then, at our 2008 Women’s Retreat, Rev. Ruth Shaver presented a “Prayer Shawl Ministry” program to our attendees. Our church had five women attend the Women’s Retreat. To my delight, they were all interested in this new ministry and three had brought needles and yarn to “try.”

One of the women was my daughter, Tammie Lasswell. I had tried various times to interest her in crocheting, but she had always been resistant. She did bring a crochet hook and yarn to the retreat, and she moaned and groaned through the whole first row. I assured her that the first row would be the hardest, and then it would be easier—but I didn’t think she really believed me. She worked doggedly on that first shawl, and was so excited when it was completed. She has become better at crocheting, and has produced several shawls, and now even helps to teach others! Christa Anthony is our prolific “European style” knitter. She has created many diverse and beautiful patterns. Antha Stickel is branching out into quilted shawls. Beverly Collins

A prayer tag that can be added to shawls:

Our prayer shawl ministry is a volunteer outreach to our community. The shawls are a concrete reminder of the prayers for you. Not only from our congregation, but from the crafter who created these, come prayers of strength, comfort, healing and love. When you wrap your shoulders, or cover your lap, these prayers also cover your body and spirit.



Christa Anthony, Diane Mundy, Molly Anthony, Marlene Jesse, Marcey Wolfgang, Tammie Lasswell (missing Antha Stickel and Beverly Collins).

“As part of our group of women at our church, I feel closer to God and have come to know the women. When my first prayer shawl was given to someone, my personal feeling was great. I like doing something for the good of others. This is a great effort for all of us who are participating. I am just so grateful to be a part of the Comforting Hands of Brush Creek.”

—MARLENE JESSE



Prayer Shawls on our altar to absorb the prayers of the congregation.

and Marlene Jesse have also created many beautiful shawls.

We decided to name our group the “Comforting Hands.” We chose a card and tag to add to our shawls when completed. We now meet twice a month – one daytime and one evening – so everyone interested can be a part of this ministry. We held a Pampered Chef party as a fundraiser so that we can purchase our cards, tags, and yarn. Our congregation has been generous with donations of money, yarn, gift bags for presenting the shawls, and coupons from their Sunday papers! Marcy Wolfgang and Diane Mundy (who do not knit or crochet, *yet*) have come to help cut and tie fringe and roll yarn into balls, and have volunteered to keep our Journal and treasury. The journal documents shawl recipients, date and reason given, and if it was given by someone special. It also includes beautiful thank-you cards telling us how much the shawl has meant during a time of need. Recipients tell us that it reminds them of God’s love, and that it provides peace and comfort. Although we would like to branch out into happy occasion shawls (births, weddings, etc.), we have been too busy filling orders for those in need of comfort. Our next goal is to make “Prayer Squares” for our soldiers overseas. We are full of ideas and plans!

Our Prayer Shawl Ministry has provided even more than we expected—it has ministered to our congregation. It has given us a community outreach and mission. Since the Women’s Retreat in September 2008, we have presented over 100 shawls

(and we only have a core group of six women who knit and crochet!). The ministry has stirred interest in our congregation and brought us closer together with a sense of unity and purpose. The women who meet have strengthened bonds of friendship and purpose beyond imagination. We have found a wonderful reason to fellowship and share things in our lives with each other.

As Marlene Jesse writes, “As part of our group of women at our church, I feel closer to God and have come to know the women. When my first prayer shawl was given to someone, my personal feeling was great. I like doing something for the good of others. This is a great effort for all of us who are participating. I am just so grateful to be a part of the Comforting Hands of Brush Creek.”

Molly Ann Anthony lives in Irwin, Pennsylvania and is a member of Brush Creek Salem United Church of Christ. P.S. My friend who had the transplant is doing marvelous!

Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever considered starting a group to provide some form of prayer ministry to the wider community?
2. If you don’t know how to knit, crochet or quilt are there others who could mentor and teach you?

A Ministry of Prayer Squares

It's Monday morning, and the Prayer Square Ministry of Faith United Church of Christ, Richmond Hts., Ohio, is meeting. The sounds you hear of are those of the clatter of scissors, patterns being discussed, colors coordinated and laughter. In the group there are sewers and there are tiers, and I am a tier.

The Prayer Square Quilt Ministry was formed in 1992, at the Hope United Methodist Church in Ranch Bernardo, California, by a group of women of the church who usually met for quilting. A grandchild of one of the ladies was in the hospital, very seriously ill, and it was suggested they make a quilt for him. There would not be time to quilt it, so it was put together with ties. Each tie represented a prayer for the child. When they gave it to him in the hospital, they saw how he noticed each tie and the comfort the quilt gave him. Other parents at the hospital saw this also, and wanted to know how they could have a prayer quilt for their child. From this beginning, the "Prayer Square Quilt Ministry" has grown to be interdenominational, and international, and is known as the "International Prayer Square Quilt Ministry". By the way, the child's name is Kody and you can read the whole story at www.prayersquare.org.

Since the Prayer Square Quilt Ministry was first suggested to our congregation, by Donna Nedrow, the ministry has developed into one of our most important outreach projects. For us, it all started with a group of women who were definitely interested

when they first heard about the work. When they learned the project was up and running at a church nearby, they arranged to meet with the quilters of that congregation to gather ideas about starting their own ministry. The ideas came together and now Faith UCC is a member of the International Prayer Square Quilt Ministry, chapter #678.

Membership Requirements:

- It's not about the quilt, it's to promote prayer.
- You must ask before you give a gift of a prayer quilt, if the person will accept the gift.
- No payment accepted, a gift of love and prayer cannot be sold, the work was about to start, and a list was made of things we needed.

It was amazing, Marilyn and Gail, who did a lot of sewing, donated material and brought their cutting boards. Roberta brought a sewing machine and Sheila learned to use it, and Liz brought in material. Thread for the ties and scissors came from Sue and others also donated some of the necessities. The project was funded in the beginning, by generosity. As the requests for prayer squares grew, there was help from the Finance Committee and a generous gift from a person whose life had been touched by a prayer square. There is never any charge to the recipient.

To create the actual square, some of the group sees that materials are available to work with, others

"I'm struggling for words to express my gratitude. I sleep under this prayer square quilt every night. I feel the knots and feel the prayers and feel embraced."

"The prayer square reminds us on a daily basis of God's Love and the caring community at Faith Church"

"Thank you for the prayer square. We displayed the quilt on the casket offering guests to say a prayer and tie knots."



design and sew the patterns to make the squares and lap robes and some of us put the ties in. The squares are various sizes, there is a top, a filler and a backing to the square or lap robe, and when these are assembled, the ties are added. The ties are left with long ends to be knotted later by those who wish to tie a knot while offering a prayer for the recipient. To finish the square, a special label is sewn onto the back showing the date, the recipient's name, and that of Faith UCC. We like to use all cotton material if possible. The person making the request can ask for either the prayer square or the lap robe. We have more requests for prayer squares than lap robes

When a square is requested and completed, it is given to the pastor during the Sunday service, and included in "Prayers of the People", after which, it is available for those who wish to tie a knot while offering a prayer. The squares are not just for our congregation, but have gone to Iraq, Belgium, and many places in the United States. They have been given to our young people who are off to college, to those at confirmation, and to people we, as a congregation, do not know, but need to be "covered in prayer". Most people when they first see someone's prayer square say "What's this" and when it is explained, they are grateful, as it offers them the opportunity to pray for the person without awkwardness.



Members of the Prayer Square Ministry with some of their current pieces.

When the idea of a Prayer Square Ministry was first offered to our congregation in September of 2007, it seemed confusing and mysterious, no one was at all sure as to how these could be helpful or would be received. However, we now know from the many notes and messages we have received, how meaningful and cherished they are to those dealing with a life crises or life change. The program has flourished, and we are excited to be part of this ministry. By the way, this is written by one who is not a sewer by any means, but tying knots, being a tier, is good. In other words, everyone can find something to do in the Prayer Square Ministry. The ministry has guideline information, patterns and suggestions for related projects.

To learn more about the ministry go to www.prayersquare.org.

Jean Sinzinger is a member of the prayer team at Faith United Church of Christ in Richmond Heights, Ohio and is active in the prayer square ministry project.

Reflection Questions

1. Would you value the prayers of people unknown to you.
2. Would you be uneasy raising the issue of the power of prayer and what it means to you.

From Basket Case to Basket Weaver

Five spokes cross five spokes. I am reminded of hand holding hand. It is good to walk this journey with someone, and my strength comes from walking with God.

It hasn't always been that way for me. For a long time, I didn't think I needed anyone, for I could handle everything. I was in control. At least that's what I thought. But to be honest, I was struggling. I was struggling with relationships, with alcohol, with making good decisions, struggling with fear and doubt. There were times that I would cry out, "God, why don't you help me?" It's not as though God wasn't there for me, but rather I didn't have room in my life for God. And then one day, another day that was filled with struggle, I stopped and listened. I heard the quiet voice of God. I felt God say to me, "Kaila, you are a precious child of mine, and I love you. I have hopes for your future, and this is not it. Let me be God." At that point, I realized that Kaila being God wasn't working out very well, so what did I have to lose? That's when I decided to let *God* be God in my life. It's not as though God then swooped down and fixed everything for me, and for that I

am most grateful, because I learned many lessons along the way. The biggest change was the amazing sense of peace and calm, that "peace that passes all understanding". I knew that I was not alone, for there was a higher power working in me and through me. I began to know joy and love and compassion. My life began to change. I was blessed abundantly. My strength came from walking with God.

That was about eighteen years ago, and although I still struggle from time to time, my life continues to be filled with abundant blessings. To honor these blessings, I spent time praying for a way to share my faith and my journey with others. I needed a way to talk about God's amazing love, grace, and mercy. I wanted to share the blessings I experienced, and hear how God was working in other people's lives. There is so much power and healing in sharing our stories.

One day I learned how to weave a basket. It didn't take me long to realize that weaving was a gift from God, an answer to my prayer. Words cannot express the feelings I had as I wove those first couple of baskets. It was a time of experiencing the sacred in an ordinary vessel. The parallels between our

faith journey and weaving a basket are astounding! If you have a basket, I encourage you to get it right now. Hold it and look at it as you read on.

One of the first things I thought about was **willingness**. Anyone can weave a basket; you just need willingness—willing hands and a willing heart. Think about the places in your life where willingness is essential. As with anything, when you begin to weave, the hardest part is getting started. How much do you want to do this?

The spokes of a basket are what you weave around. They are the skeleton, the pieces that give the basket shape. They are the part



A sample of some of Kaila's baskets.

Baskets can be sacred vessels, just like your life. What are you filling your basket with? Are there things you are carrying that shouldn't be there? Is your treasure buried under clutter? Are you missing out on some of God's blessings because you don't have room to carry them? *Remember, you can empty your basket at any time.*

of our lives that are important, that give us shape: family, friends, and community.

The weaver is the piece woven around the spokes to hold them together. To me this is symbolic of our faith, of God's love and grace. The weaver holds it all together. *What's holding your life together? Where do you get your strength?*

There are many expressive terms in basket weaving: randing, twining, slewing, waling. My favorite term is **kindness**. Kindness describes the willingness or the cooperation of the spokes or the weaver. The saying goes, "If there is kindness in the weaver, and the weaver is kind, your basket will prosper." Picture yourself as the spoke, and God as the weaver. *How much kindness are you showing?*

Wonderful images come as one weaves. One important reminder for me is if it feels wrong, it probably is, and it's best to go back and fix it. A mistake in a basket will keep being wrong unless it is fixed. It will be a weak point. So often in life we hope that things will just be okay. It might take too much time or energy to fix it, to make amends. But if we don't, we have to live with the mistakes.

Weaving is such great fun, and you can quickly develop a rhythm: over, under, over, under. One of the most difficult lessons is to **know when to stop**. The spokes you use to begin the basket are what you use to finish it. If your basket gets too big, or the spokes get too spread out, you won't have enough left to finish the top, and your basket may fall apart. I am reminded, "If you lose your focus, you lose your strength." *Have you ever experienced that in your life?*

When you finish weaving your basket, it may be a little wobbly. Just get it wet, turn it over, and you can mold it and shape it. What a wonderful reminder that it is never too late to be shaped.

Sixteen years ago, I began weaving baskets and sharing stories. I have woven baskets with women



The weaver and the spokes of the basket.

who are working through some tough life issues, women in recovery, women who want to pay attention to their journey and their relationship with God. Of course, there are also women who think they are just there to make a basket and end up surprised by all of the other gifts that come along with it. After all these years, I continue to be amazed at how spending time together, creating something, and sharing our stories can bring about a level of healing and understanding that clearly comes from God. *Is it time for you to learn to weave?*

Five spokes cross five spokes...hand holding hand. It is good to walk this journey with someone. *Where do you get your strength?*

Kaila Russell lives in Carnation, Washington, where she and her husband have raised two children. She is involved with the UCC Outdoor Ministries program in her area, teaches children's art programs, basket-weaving retreats, and works at a local organic CSA farm. Her greatest passion is helping all of God's children - men, women and youth - find ways to connect their creativity and spirituality.

A Ministry that Makes a Difference

Holy God, whose arms are wrapped around us every moment of our lives, we give these shawls and lap robes to you. May all who receive these tangible prayers know your everlasting comfort and love even in moments of sorrow and sickness, through joys and celebrations, and in all the moments in between. Bless the needles and hooks, the yarn, the hands, and most of all the hearts that have made this ministry possible in this place. We ask these things in Christ's name, amen.

—PRAYER OF DEDICATION FOR THE PRAYER
SHAWL MINISTRY OF THE UNITED CHURCH OF
SCHELLSBURG UCC, SEPTEMBER 24, 2006

On a Tuesday night in January, 2006, I was sitting on the couch at the home of Bill and Martha Benna in Schellsburg, Pennsylvania working my second knitted prayer shawl. As I explained what I was making and why, Martha flashed a big smile at me.

“When you come to be our pastor, you have to start a Prayer Shawl Ministry here,” she said.

“Don’t you mean if?” I asked.

“No. When,” she replied.

I had two great interviews with other churches as well, but God had indeed called me to Schellsburg. We didn’t quite set a date for our first prayer shawl meeting the day I was called, but I’d only been here three weeks when a group of 10 ladies came together for food, fellowship, fun, and prayer. Our second meeting included a shopping trip to nearby Altoona for supplies, a visit with the founder of our “mother” group, Roberta Ferguson from Second Congregational Church UCC in Attleboro, Massachusetts, and lunch at the Olive Garden with

drinking straw papers flying...proof that this group of prayer shawl ministers is young at heart even if some fingers are crippled with arthritis and some eyes are dimmed by cataracts.

When it came time to dedicate our efforts three months later, 24 women came forward to be blessed. We had 14 shawls on the communion railing that morning; two weeks later, all of the original shawls had been distributed and new ones were in place. In two and a half years, we have given out 257 full-sized prayer shawls, lap robes, and pocket-squares. We’ve even had some quilted lap robes from crafters who prefer fabric to yarn.

I’m convinced that each shawl, from the time the yarn or fabric is chosen, is designated for one particular person. Sometimes we know as we’re working, but other times we trust that God will get the shawl to the right person. One lap robe sat on the rail for six months; when it was presented to a retired colleague, I told him that he must need a lot of prayers in his retirement, much to the amusement of the gathering. And unbeknownst to us, the colors in that lap robe match perfectly the colors in the study where he does most of his reading – with the robe wrapped around him against drafts.

We know that this ministry makes a difference in our lives. One of my knitters says that working on a prayer shawl helps her stay calm in the middle of the storms that come her way in a tough family situation; many of her finished creations have, by the grace of God, gone to men and women who are coping with tough family situations. One woman who crochets says that it helps keep her arthritis at

“The prayer shawl lays on the chair by Jane’s bed. Not only does it comfort Jane but also ones sitting on the chair pull it around their shoulders during the night.”

“In March I had cause to be in the local safe house in the Bedford area. During my stay there, I was given a bear with a prayer shawl on the bear. Thank you all so much for the bear with the prayer shawl. My bear goes with me everywhere I go – and I feel safer, too.”



Prayer shawl dedication service.

bay – and many times her shawls go to those coping with pain or other chronic conditions.

Ah, yes. The Bear Prayer Shawl. Every year, we collect stuffed animals for Your Safe Haven, our local domestic abuse shelter. Linda Kline, a knitter who has quite a creative streak, delivered her bears at Christmas 2007 with little shawls and a sweet note. When we received that last note above in the spring of 2008, I knew at that point that every “critter” needed to leave here with a shawl or scarf. After our collection this past Christmas, 120 new or gently loved bears, birds, superheroes, dragons, frogs, pigs, cows, and even two fish each left the church with a handmade shawl or scarf made with love and prayers for the safety and health of the eventual recipient. We would love to hear, “Sorry, we still have plenty left from last year!” instead of, “Keep them coming!”; sadly, in this economy, we’re pretty sure all the animals will be given out during the year.

Our Prayer Shawl Ministry is a truly intergenerational project. We give shawls to older siblings of infants and children we baptize and we encourage our children to give shawls to friends and family members who are in need of prayer. One boy gave a bright red shawl to a friend who broke his leg playing Pee Wee Football. The shawl was the perfect weight and size to keep his friend’s toes warm at the end of his cast! Another boy sent a prayer shawl to his half-brother for comfort while the boy’s mother is deployed in Iraq for the third time (with the prayer shawl that kept her safe on her second deployment). The girls will comment that a “mark” is missing when they are practicing their sacred dance routines because a shawl has been moved or taken from the railing. If it’s a favorite, they will ask who the shawl went to. When I’ve been able to share that

information with them, they have promised to pray for the recipient.

Our shawls go out with a tag that reads, “Tender loving prayers from the United Church of Schellsburg, PA.” To us, there is no better way to spread God’s love than through the gift of this holy embrace.

Rev. Ruth Shaver is the Pastor and Teacher of the United Church of Schellsburg UCC in Schellsburg, Pennsylvania (www.SchellsburgChurch.org). Although her grandmothers tried valiantly for many years, it took the patience of Pat Richards from her previous congregation, Second Congregational Church UCC in Attleboro, Massachusetts, and that church’s new Prayer Shawl Ministry to finally make her a knitter. Pastor Ruth now knits and crochets when she isn’t reading, writing, or cooking; thankfully plastic knitting needles make it through TSA screening and crochet hooks aren’t flagged when she travels.

Reflection Questions

1. What talents are waiting to be used in your congregation as a witness and outreach to families, friends, and neighbors?
2. The key to the success of the ministry at the United Church of Schellsburg is our ongoing “grassroots” support without the need for formal approval by boards and committees. How would you go about starting a new ministry such as a prayer shawl group at your church? What permissions would you need and whose support would be most helpful?

Immersed in Prayer

Perseverance, Faith and Hope

by Jo Ann Chance 2009

We live, confined by time and space,
Only hoping and praying that our lives
Meet the expectations and plans of God.
As believers, we are told to have hope,
To live by faith in God's promises,
And to have perseverance and trust.
God has the bigger picture in mind...
God knows the beginning, end and middle of our
lives...
God's plan may not follow our human logic or
perceived timing...
So we continue to live in faith and hope.
God is our light, salvation and source of strength;
God is gracious and compassionate,
Especially to the brokenhearted...
God is rich in love
And tender toward those in pain,
Loving toward all God has made...
God holds us up when we fall
And lifts us when we are down so very low.
Our God is always near; watches and loves us,
Broods over us, God's very own;
Blessed with holy grace.
We pray for that joy,
that affirming restoration,
that weightlessness from being without worry
which is sometimes just beyond our reach.
Help us, God, we pray...
Make this pain, this doubt, this rocky uncertainty go
away!
We finally open ourselves, our hearts
And we wait; we pray; we listen; we wait; we pray.
It comes... when we open our hearts.
God enters in
And soothes our hurts, fills our emptiness,
Calms our shaky souls and helps send the doubts
away.
Our faith is restored again.
Prayerfully,
With gratitude and hopefulness,
With praise and expectancy for peace
We seek God's presence
With us,
Within us...
Fill us, O God, and set us free!

This shared prayer poem was written when my head and heart were bursting with thoughts, feelings and concerns for a family member dealing with health and spiritual hope issues. By the time this is read, those problems may have been taken care of with the passage of time and through the prayers of many who care. And yet, perhaps not everything will be resolved...

We do not have the answers. Only God does. But the more we trust, the more we pray, and the more we understand that God is with us as we struggle with all the issues in our lives, whatever the outcomes.

Sometimes, the more we study, pray and learn about God from God's Word, the greater becomes our faith and yet the more questions we have. Confusing? Yes, but that is why we pray... to seek God's will and guidance for our lives.

In our prayers, we need to ask God to enter our hearts and then we need to be open to the Holy Spirit and simply wait and listen. We spend too much time petitioning and bargaining and telling God what we think we need rather than being completely open, welcoming and humbly asking for healing and guidance according to God's will.

I often find myself immersed in prayer and flooded with thoughts about my own concerns or those of others, with joys and thanksgiving, with sorrows or worries, and often with sheer wonder, awe and appreciation for God's power and beauty and blessings. When I am so filled, I often compose pieces of poetry. It spills out of my heart. After some editing and it seems to be completed, I can read it and know that I did not write the words alone. God was with me.

It has been said that we humans find and express our faith, spirituality, our connection with God, through nature, the arts and through the ritual of worship. Can a person not spend time in the beauty and majesty of God's world—in the glorious mountains or along a wave-drenched beach or simply in a flower garden or the prairie breezes – without feeling the awesome presence of God?

"Be still and know that I am God."

What joy to be filled with the beauty and splendor of God's created world!

Capturing those places in photography or paintings brings them home to us in a special way. Watching a graceful dance or listening to magnificent orchestration can inspire prayer. Have you never been moved to tears watching a liturgical dance to sacred music?



Jo Ann Chance is a member of Trinity United Christian Church (DOC and UCC) in Cheney, KS. She and her husband, Steve, are parents of two grown children. A pianist, published poet and Honored Lay Woman, Jo Ann is active in the local and all expressions of the church with positions of service in women's ministries at every level and in both denominations. Jo Ann will be completing her term as KS-OK Conference representative on the national Local Church Ministries Board of Directors following General Synod 2009.

Nature and the arts bring blessings into our lives. Space is blessed and is made sacred in our hearts and minds. God's presence is witnessed. There is prayer in motion and in the stillness, in the listening and in the viewing.

For myself and to enhance the worship experience of others, I love to add aesthetic elements to a worship space. Preparing a worship center assists our prayers, whether for small groups or congregations. The use of fabric, floral arrangements, meaningful objects and candles help center our thoughts and prayers. At my home, I also have a special prayer center arrangement on the wall around as well as on my piano, which has become my own small sacred space. When I play the piano, I pray. I am meditating and spending time with God in prayer as I play the notes. The special objects around me – framed prayers, art, crosses and mementos from people and places that are special – help me center my thoughts and prayers. Whether playing (or listening to) beautiful, peaceful compositions or stirring, inspiring hymns and songs of praise, adoration and joy, I become filled with gratitude for God's amazing grace, touched and comforted by knowing that all will be well, in God's time, and reminded to trust and obey while given the power and strength needed to continue on my spiritual journey.

May you, too, be immersed in prayer... through experiencing God's presence in nature, the arts and the opening of your heart and mind in worship.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you ever awaken with a song or hymn in your head? Sing it; find and read the words. Is it a prayer song you need for your day?
2. Do you walk regularly? Make it a prayer walk. Breathe in God's world of nature and be filled with God's Spirit. Say a prayer for the people or situations you observe as you pass homes or businesses. Pray for all who live in your neighborhood and world.
3. Do you have a special sacred space or prayer corner in your home? Share with others about the special pictures or objects in your space. Add a plant, a candle of God's light, Bibles of various versions and other resources. Practice quiet prayer and meditation time there.



Justice for Women

Action Is Prayer

by Loey Powell



In a very poor neighborhood in Tijuana you will find La Casa de los Pobres (House of the Poor). The building is solid, not fancy, and impeccably clean inside. There is a large kitchen and eating areas on the first floor. A small chapel is tucked in the adjacent building, across a little courtyard, where several offices are also located. A beautiful mural on the wall behind the altar shows La Virgen de Guadalupe (the Virgin of Guadalupe, a significant figure for Christians in Mexico) and the boy Jesus serving the poor.

In January 2009, La Casa fed hot meals to 14,050 persons of all ages, consulted with 1,980 people in the medical and dental clinics, distributed 2,600 bags of groceries to families in the area, handed out clothes, shoes, house supplies, tarps and blankets to 1,460 families, met other needs - including home visits to those who were sick - of 400 families, and gave out 35 scholarships to students.

You would think the staff of La Casa was enormous in order to keep up this level of service which they have been doing since the 1980's. You might be surprised to learn, as we did, that four nuns comprise that staff. Four Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Peace (out of a total of 75 in their religious community) do all the fundraising, coordinate all the volunteers who cook, clean and serve, connect with doctors and dentists and social workers who offer their services *pro bono*, and oversee the daily operations. Four women do all this, inspired by Matthew 5:7, which is found on their literature: "Happy are those who are merciful to others; God will be merciful to them."

This is their prayer, their mantra, their gospel call to serve others. And their prayer is also seen in their actions - acts of daily kindness and of necessity to those suffering the effects of poverty. There is a poignant calmness at La Casa de los Pobres, a place where the individual dignity and humanity of each child, woman and man who enters is uplifted, prayed for and honored. The sisters do not seek personal reward or recognition for their work. Everything they do is for those whom they serve.

In our work at Justice and Witness Ministries of the UCC, we stress the need to move our consciousness from the doing of charitable acts to advocacy - to address the systemic causes of hunger, poverty, homelessness, and other marginalizing conditions. And it is right and good that we should do so, just as it is right and good that our churches and other organizations like La Casa meet the immediate needs of our sisters and brothers. Suffering must be

alleviated now, not only in a distant future when justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

"Happy are those who are merciful to others; God will be merciful to them."

Action is prayer. Taking action can be a meditative endeavor which reinforces our connection to God, to the Creator, to a reality far greater than me-myself-and-I. Actions can be of kindness, of service, and of meeting the needs of others. Lending a helping hand or a listening ear can be a prayer. Serving a meal to the homeless from your church's kitchen can be a prayer.

But so can clicking on your latest Justice and Peace Action Alert which sends a message to your Congressional representatives and senators asking them to support the REAL Act (Real Education About Life Act which would implement comprehensive sexuality education in public schools), or sending a letter to the editor of your local newspaper calling for advocacy on behalf of someone wronged by racism in your community. These can be prayers, too.

Before the US invasion of Iraq, many people of faith around the country were calling for diplomacy, not war, in response to the attacks of 9/11. I talked with a UCC woman who was pastor at a small, rural church about two hours from Cleveland. She was alone in her weekly candlelight vigil for peace, standing silent at dusk in the town square with one lit candle and a sign, "Peace, not war." Hers was a courageous witness in a community not prone to peace vigiling. After a few weeks, some others began to join her, standing side by side, silent, with candles and signs. Their prayers were said in silence - and they were said visibly. Candles. Individuals. Witness. Purpose. Peace.

When actions are prayers, we are connected with our Ground of Being, as theologian Paul Tillich called God. We are rooted in hope rather than in despair. We let our tears fall for the suffering of our sisters and brothers only to water our resolve to end the misery, not to draw attention to ourselves. Being a bold and boisterous advocate for justice or a silent, visible witness can be prayers when such actions are also deeply rooted in the Source of our Life.

Be still, and know that I am God. In the midst of a protest march, be still, and know that God is there. In the bustle of volunteering at a food bank, be still, and know that God is there. Be still, and know why you are doing what you are doing, for what, and for whom. When it is of God, for God, it is prayer.

May it be so.

Women in International Mission

Erin McKinney: Weaving Life's Tapestry

by Ana Gobledale

What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.

—MICAH 6:8 (ERIN'S FAVORITE BIBLE VERSE)

Have you ever felt propelled through life, felt that unexpected events resulted in things just falling into place? When asked about her call to international ministry, Erin explains, "I didn't think I was called to international mission work. However, one thing leads to another and now I'm finding myself in a much longer commitment than I ever thought." As you read about this young woman's life, from Ohio, to Chile, Mexico and then the Dominican Republic, consider how God works in our lives, weaving the threads of our experiences into a vibrant tapestry. Consider how God, no matter which thread we follow, invites us to always do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. May Erin, whose guiding hope is "to be a faithful and helpful servant of the Lord in whatever that may entail," inspires you to look afresh at your own life tapestry.
Ana

CHILDHOOD & YOUTH



Numerous threads weave together to create Erin McKinney's life tapestry. Three prominent ones are church, camp and family. Erin grew up in First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Kent, Ohio, where her father was minister.

"Growing up in the church was very influential to my faith and my passion for social justice..., spending summers [at Camp Christian] with many wonderful people sharing the same faith but coming from a wide

range of backgrounds and ages... My parents were an incredible example of holistic living, a positive loving relationship, and how to connect my faith with social issues around the world. This very much influenced my path toward international mission."

A Disciples youth mission trip to Washington D.C. and New York City helped Erin connect her faith with social and political issues. "I left the week feeling as though I could have done more and that our group barely skimmed the surface of the underlying problems: poverty, racial prejudices and social issues. I began to realize that I came from such opportunity and privilege." She continues, "The small mission trips are huge and very important to personal faith development...What began with youth mission trips grew into an international passion once I learned more of the world."

Through contacts in the Disciples, Erin's life became interwoven with women working internationally through Global Ministries* and other international missions. "Hearing their experiences and seeing how it impacted their lives really drew me to international mission, too."

Erin's college double-major in international studies and Spanish combined "all of my passions, politics, social justice, and different cultures. Then you add my faith to the equation and international mission work just seemed to be perfect." She spent two summers, through Disciples Home Missions, working on an Indian Reservations in Washington and Texas. Then after a mission trip to the Shalom Center in the

* Global Ministries is the common international witness of the Division of Overseas Ministries, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Wider Church Ministries, one of the four covenanted ministries of the United Church of Christ. Global Ministries and Wider Church Ministries can help you hear the voices of our international sisters and identify ways to walk with them. The program Global Mission Partners can connect your conference with a woman serving overseas. People-to-People Pilgrimages can help you plan an international mission trip to one of our partners. The web site can connect you with stories and articles about women's concerns around the world (<www.globalministries.org> or go through the UCC home page).



Erin with some of her Dominican friends.



Andes Mountains of Chile with Global Missionary, Elena Huegal, Erin knew she “had a calling to take action through more mission work, even though at the time I had no idea what that would entail. After that everything just started to fall into place.”

WORKING ON THE BORDER

Following college graduation, the threads of doing justice and loving kindness thicken in Erin’s life. Directly following college graduation she headed to Southwest Good Samaritan Ministries (SWGSM), a Disciples Mission center in South Texas through a Disciple Volunteers-in-Mission internship. The year was “a tremendous growing and learning experience, the perfect stepping stone to the work I’m doing in the Dominican Republic; my Spanish improved and my understanding of how to work in a cross-cultural, international setting was enhanced.” Erin considers one reward of her work to be “seeing the transformations in people as they are empowered and also seeing a transformation in myself as I’m touched by every person I encounter.” Another reward is “discovering and seeing hope amidst some of the most hopeless situations.”

Erin explains, “There’s often no quantitative proof that you are making any impact of change in horrible situations of poverty. And more often than not the problems seem much bigger than humanly possible to solve. It can be discouraging, frustrating and lonely.

However, I’ve learned that is the reason I depend on faith to get me through and that God is greater than any of the problems we encounter. One of my favorite quotes is:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world...Indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

— MARGARET MEAD.

I feel that’s a big part of what international mission work is about. There is no one answer to poverty, but there are many small ways to make change.”

SERVING IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC TODAY

Now Erin serves as a Global Mission Intern in the Dominican Republic with Caminante, an organization working with street children impacted by the child prostitution industry and the drug trade. While she mentors and works in the after-school program, she often feels that, “my most important role is simply spending time with people and building relationships.”

Spiritual disciplines strengthen Erin in her ministry. “Prayer and meditation in the morning, especially if I can be outside in nature, always brings my mind, body and spirit to peace before beginning the day. I also have a daily devotional book that I read before going to bed to re-focus spiritually at the end of the day.”

SEEING GOD FACE-TO-FACE

Throughout her life and now her work at Caminante, God's presence provides the central thread of her life's tapestry. Erin relates an experience of meeting God face-to-face while building a new home for a poor family in Mexico. After the mother became partially paralyzed, the father left her alone to raise 3 children. Erin writes, "Their home, the size of a tiny shed (10'x 10'), was falling apart from termites, cockroaches and rotting wood. The roof was made from scrap wood, tarp and plastic with many holes. I saw the biggest spiders of my life fall as we tore down the structure. The little girls giggled at my fear of the spiders bigger than my hand, as they chased them with a hammer. Although the family was surviving on very little, all sharing a tiny bed in this one room house, they were very happy and friendly.

"Two weeks later after a solid concrete foundation had been built, a volunteer church group came from Dallas to help build the new house. The family walked from a relative's house every day to help with enthusiasm. Soon all of the neighborhood kids were around wanting to help as well. I saw God the entire week as we built the house: in the family we were building the house for, in the 14-year-old son who proudly took over the electrical hook-up, in all of the neighborhood children that helped or played soccer with the volunteers. God was apparent in the church group volunteers who came down to help but left with so much more, learning from the family new perspectives and appreciation for life and best of all new friends!"

WALKING IN THE LIGHT OF GOD

Through our prayers, letters and worship, we can weave the threads of our lives together with those of Global Ministries missionaries around the globe. The next time you sing, "Walking in the light of God," (#526 *The New Century Hymnal*; #442 *Chalice Hymnal**) remember Erin. This is her favorite hymn because, "It's upbeat and makes me excited and enthusiastic about worship and enjoying the Spirit. It's also a great song because it is often sung in different languages and I feel it connects people across cultures." As you sing, feel connected to the Dominican Republic and our church's mission and ministry there and around the world.

Ana Gobledale has served our church through Global Ministries in South Africa, Zimbabwe, the USA and Australia. She currently serves as Interim Co-Pastor at Kirkland Congregational Church UCC in Washington.

Reflection Questions

1. What are the primary threads in your life tapestry?
2. When have things "just fallen into place" in your life?
3. Looking forward in your life tapestry, what thread would you like to enhance?

Prayer Points

- For Erin and the people she encounters in the Dominican Republic through Caminante.
 - For single-parent women and their children around the world
 - For church work groups helping to build homes
 - For Global Ministries staff in Cleveland and Indianapolis, and serving around the world.
- A devotional book that Erin recommends is "Soul Weavings a Gathering of Women's Prayers" edited by Lyn Klug*

Action Opportunities

- Locate the Dominican Republic on the map. Learn three things about it and its neighbor, Haiti.
- Write a letter of thanks and encouragement to Erin McKinney, or another Global Ministries missionary.
- Choose a mission project and fire up your congregation to make a difference!

*This hymn [as mentioned in the article] directly relates to the mission Caminante, for the word Caminante means "to walk the path" in Spanish, representing the children walking through their different paths of life and the staff walking alongside them.

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