



Project Knits Parishes Together in Prayer for New Bishop

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By Carol Balinski, religion editor, *Reading Eagle*

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Lutheran voting members and visitors from Northeastern Pennsylvania wore tangible reminders that the prayers of their fellow Lutherans were with them during this year's assembly at Split Rock Lodge.

A project that originated in Berks County provided more than 1,600 handmade prayer shawls to the participants as they converged at Split Rock Conference Center in Lake Harmony in the Poconos.

"The process (of electing a bishop) is not political but is undergirded by the Holy Spirit and needs to be grounded in prayer," said the Rev. Eileen M. Le Van, pastor of Nativity Lutheran Church, 1501 N. 13th St.

Le Van said she got the idea to organize the project from a similar effort in the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod for the election of its bishop.

Her goal was to get churches to contribute 850 shawls to match the approximate number of persons expected to attend. Instead, she collected more than 1,600 from churches in Berks County as well as other areas of the synod, which includes 14 counties in northeastern Pennsylvania and 292 congregations.

In addition to reminding the assembly-goers that the election is rooted in prayer, the prayer shawls also benefited those who created them.



"It's a neat way to make people aware and to have them be connected to the (election) process," Le Van said.

This connection helped to increase awareness of an event that is significant but not widely experienced since only a small portion of the synod membership takes part in the election. Each of the 292 congregations is expected to send two voting members, along with their pastor(s) and other rostered leaders, to the assembly.

Le Van put a notice in a synod newsletter about the prayer shawl project and was pleased by the response. She estimated at least 45 congregations from all over the synod sent shawls.

Her only stipulation was that the shawls be 6 to 8 inches wide and approximately 48 inches long.

The shawls she collected are in a rainbow of colors and patterns, some knitted and some crocheted.

"Each one has its own character," Le Van said of the shawls, which were blessed before distribution.

Some shawls bear a label telling where they were made. Nativity's label says "Crafted with Prayer, Nativity Lutheran Church, Reading, PA."

Le Van said she began making prayer shawls about eight years ago for homebound congregation members.

While her own congregation does not have a prayer shawl ministry, she said the project may be the impetus to begin one.

Among those who joined Le Van to knit or crochet shawls at her church earlier this month were congregation members Michael P. Moll and Ruthann Hartman.

Moll said his grandmother taught him to knit when he was six years old and he enjoys making afghans for family and friends. He said making shawls for the bishop's election has been a spiritual practice for him.

"I'm praying as I'm doing it," he said.

Hartman said she hadn't knitted in 50 years but went online to refresh her memory on how to knit so she could take part in the project.



Joining the members of Nativity as they made shawls recently was Nancy H. Ebling, a member of Bern Lutheran Church, Bern Township.

Ebling said her church has a prayer shawl ministry and keeps completed shawls in a basket for anyone who would like to take one as a gift for someone who is ill or for some other purpose.

Often, Ebling said, church members who knit or crochet do not even realize the hobby can have a spiritual purpose.

"They have a gift they didn't realize," she said. Following the election, Le Van said voting members were permitted to either keep the shawls or return them so they may be redistributed for other purposes.