

Religion and Race

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Race and Responses to Violence in Prayer Shawl Ministries

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Abstract: Prayer shawl ministries, overwhelmingly led and staffed by women, aim to give comfort to the bereaved. Shawl makers often want to respond to communal tragedy and grief such as mass shootings. This case study uses qualitative interviews with shawl makers from white and African-American ministry groups, placing their statements in the context of benevolent handwork, disaster response, and the culture of mass shootings. The ordinary theology of shawl makers is forged in a “chronic mode,” responding to individual instances of grief in the ministry’s neighborhood. “Crisis mode” operations, where shawls are part of multifaceted mobilization efforts to bring relief to a large number of victims, may clarify, test, extend, or alter these meanings. White shawl makers were appalled at the suffering inflicted by the Sandy Hook school shooting and took pride in their ability to make a difference, while black shawl makers were guided by concerns about discipline, process, and preservation of community. These results suggest that perceptions of normalcy influence the response of caretaking ministries to violence and trauma, revealing a distinction between restorative efforts and the development of resilience.

Keywords: lay ministry; ordinary theology; women; caretaking; material culture; mass shootings

Gendered vulnerability does not derive from a single factor, such as household headship or poverty, but reflects historically and culturally specific patterns of relations in social institutions, culture, and personal lives. Intersecting with economic, racial and other inequalities, these relationships create hazardous social conditions, placing different groups of women differently at risk when disastrous events unfold.¹

What is it that you receive when you receive a shawl? You receive a garment that proclaims peace—peace over you, peace under you, peace within you, peace around you. We cannot knit and hold a gun. We cannot knit and strike another. You receive a shawl that has been knit in love—love that is freely given for its own sake.²

For after all, what is knitting but an act of faith consisting of the enclosure of a series of voids with a net that hovers on the edge of catastrophe?³

Almost all churches sponsor ministries of caretaking. Groups organize to meet the needs of the sick, elderly, isolated, hungry, and helpless. These ministries, overwhelmingly undertaken by women, find themselves operating in two distinct modes: chronic and crisis. In the chronic mode, those in need are encountered in their disparate situations. Always there will be some members of the community in the hospital, confined to their homes, recovering from loss. The population of these categories of need will fluctuate; individuals

1 Enarson, “Through Women’s Eyes,” 159.

2 Jorgensen and Izard, *Knitting into the Mystery*, 92.

3 Faiers, “Knitting and Catastrophe,” 103.

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will fall into them and rise out of them. But there is always a list of people for these caretaking ministries to attend and serve.

In contrast to this everyday background level of need, crises occur rarely and affect large numbers of people at once. They may be associated with natural, technological, or structural hazards. Examples include weather or seismic events; infrastructure failures such as building collapses or transportation accidents; acute health emergencies such as contagious disease outbreaks; civil unrest; or violence perpetrated by criminals, terrorists, or military forces. In such situations, caretaking ministries might seem perfectly positioned to respond. However, for many reasons, they may struggle to do so. Their activities, paced and planned according to the relatively predictable chronic level of need, may not be susceptible to scaling up for crisis mode. Governmental and non-governmental organizations typically deploy rapidly to the scenes of crises, and the role of local groups is likely to be unclear. At the same time, women in ministries of caretaking often ache to use their abilities to make a difference in crises.

The recent spate of high-profile mass shootings has focused our attention on the ways a community grieves, and supports those who are grieving, after violent events. Prayer shawl ministry is a caretaking ministry, overwhelmingly practiced by women and situated in local churches, that frequently responds to grief. In the wake of crises that produce multiple casualties, like a rampage shooter, prayer shawl makers may seek some creative way to connect what they have to offer—prayer shawls—to the needs of a community in shock and mourning. They do this by extrapolating their experience of the chronic level of grief in their ministry's orbit, and the mitigating or supportive effect toward which their activity aims, to events of acute devastation and sudden loss. Their response, therefore, shines a spotlight on the meanings they have come to attach to their ministry in its ordinary course of action. The rarity of such crises, and the existential chaos engendered in those who bear witness to them, create an occasion in which novel and conscious thinking becomes necessary. What has been implicit and assumed in the chronic mode, must become explicit and a site of cognitive work in the crisis mode.

In this case study, I explore the meanings expressed by members of three prayer shawl groups comprised of African-American women, and three groups comprised of white women, in order to shed light on two questions. The first is more general: *What meanings emerge for lay ministry participants from the intersection of Christian community, grief, and women's caretaking activity?* The second, following from the first, is more specific: *How are those meanings modulated by (a) racial and cultural identity, (b) experiences of tragedy and violence, and (c) the occurrence of disaster or crisis?* The primary data to be examined come from qualitative interviews conducted in 2013 and 2014 with prayer shawl ministry participants. Following the lead of Jeff Astley and the North of England Institute for Christian Education, this study seeks to elicit the “ordinary theology” of lay people practicing Christianity, reconciling the received theology of their community with their own experience and commitments in creative ways.⁴ Interpretive frameworks from social science, material culture studies, and disaster studies help to place this material into context and allow a few broad comparative points to emerge, suggesting directions for future targeted research.

Prayer Shawl Ministry Background

Prayer shawl ministries make shawls and blankets, usually by knitting and crocheting inexpensive acrylic yarn, and give these handcrafted items to individuals in need of comfort. The goal of the prayer shawl ministry is to offer handmade fabric, blessed with prayer and spiritual intention, as “warm hugs of happiness, empathy and support” for the suffering.⁵ Individual ministry groups, situated in congregations and neighborhoods of varying demographics, might emphasize additional goals, such as keeping those in nursing homes or hospice care connected to the community, supporting victims of domestic abuse, or honoring the families of organ and tissue donors. The maker typically is expected to pray while knitting the shawl, and often prayers from the group, the church congregation, and/or clergy are added in more or

⁴ Astley, “Analysis,” 9.

⁵ Bristow and Cole-Galo, *Prayer Shawl Companion*, 5.

less formal shawl-blessing ceremonies. The prototypical prayer shawl, as recounted in Janet Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo's instructional and inspirational books on the ministry, is given to a person dealing with illness or a family member in mourning.⁶ On these occasions, the shawl is said to convey the loving embrace of the divine and of the community. Prayers for healing and comfort infuse the shawl and are communicated in its tangible warmth, softness, and flexibility. Prayer shawl ministries also may give shawls and blankets in celebration, e.g., to graduates, newborns, and ordainees.

As an identifiable movement, prayer shawl ministry began with Bristow and Cole-Galo, who began making shawls in 1998 after a galvanizing experience with a shawl during a women's spirituality and leadership course at the Hartford Seminary. The following year they established shawlministry.com to disseminate guidance and inspiration, in response to many requests in the wake of an article in the *Hartford Courant* that was syndicated across the country. At this writing, 17 years later, there is no official count of prayer shawl ministries in the United States, but we can be certain (based on church websites and the partial directory maintained at shawlministry.com) that there are at least several hundred. Although the ministry originated in a liberal ecumenical setting, prayer shawl ministries appear across the denominational spectrum; no sect, doctrine, or broad category of Christian churches dominates the field. Yarn companies, as well as Bristow and Cole-Galo, continue to publish books aimed at prayer shawl makers; Amazon.com lists more than twenty currently in print.

Data and Methodology

The dataset from which this case study is drawn consists of interviews with 83 prayer shawl makers, representing nineteen denominations and three non-church-affiliated groups, in fifteen states. The interviews, which were typically 60-90 minutes but could on occasion stretch past two hours, were conducted in person or over the phone, in small groups of two to six people or individually, as best suited the interviewees. I aimed for the most diverse sample possible, geographically, denominationally, and in terms of age and ethnicity; however, the prayer shawl makers I found (through church websites, the shawlministry.com list, the social network for yarncrafters Ravelry.com, and by word of mouth) overwhelmingly skewed older and whiter. No statistical information on the demographics of prayer shawl ministry exists, since no effort at a census of such groups has ever been made. Indeed, the only information available about knitters and crocheters as a population comes from market research done by yarn industry groups like the Craft Yarn Council of America, and they have not released data on ethnicity.⁷

My dataset includes interviews with eight African-American prayer shawl makers, representing three groups; all of these interviews are included in this case study. The African-American prayer shawl makers come from the Church of God in Christ, Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, National Baptist, and African Methodist-Episcopal denominations. One of the groups includes members from multiple churches, and identifies with the community rather than with any particular congregation. These interviews occurred in 2013 between May and December. Note that this period of time coincides with the emergence of Black Lives Matter, in the wake of the trial of George Zimmerman for the shooting of Trayvon Martin, but predates the wave of high-profile police shootings of unarmed black men starting in 2014, and the resulting activism in places like Ferguson, Missouri and New York City.

By contrast, the three groups of white prayer shawl makers in the study are chosen because their interviews mentioned responses to violence and crisis-mode operations specifically. These women work within Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and United Methodist churches. Two of the three white groups were interviewed in Connecticut five months after the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting, which took place in Newtown, Connecticut in December 2012; other groups interviewed in the same region and timeframe also referred to this event, as might be expected given its recency and proximity. I will also use selections from other interviews which provide insights or context that illuminate these groups' perspectives.

⁶ See for example Bristow and Cole-Galo, *Prayer Shawl Companion*, 5, and *Crocheted Prayer Shawl Companion*, 3-4.

⁷ Craft Yarn Council of America, "Crocheters and knitters."

My comparison is not apples-to-apples, therefore, and can be only suggestive. However, much can be gleaned by examining how these women talked about their priorities, the benefits they hoped to give and receive from their work, and the way they sought out and responded to need.

Contexts of Response

Prayer shawl makers' response to events like the Newtown shooting occurs within four distinct but interrelated contexts. First, and most broadly, prayer shawl ministries regularly find themselves *responding to grief*. In the paradigm case, a member of the congregation receives a prayer shawl after a death in her family. Almost as frequently, prayer shawl ministries dispatch shawls to those in the extended circles of members: for example, a son-in-law who has lost a sibling, or a co-worker grieving a parent. A Presbyterian knitter in the Northeast cogently expressed what prayer shawl makers are trying to do with these gifts: "When someone is grieving and they feel like they've had the rug pulled out from underneath them, you can give them something to tangibly hang on to, that's a symbol that they're loved, that someone cares about them, whether or not you know them or not."⁸ In contrast to traditional condolences, such as food and flowers, the prayer shawl takes a large investment of time to make and is meant to last for years or decades, far beyond the moment of crisis. Susan Sontag notes that such willingness to stay with suffering, like that involved with extended grieving and loss, is "rooted in religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation—a view that could not be more alien to a modern sensibility, which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime. Something to be fixed. Something to be refused. Something that makes one feel powerless."⁹

After a traumatic event involving fatalities, grief is an immediate, pervasive, and long-lasting reality for community members. The broader public, absorbing the news, both feels the community's grief through empathetic identification, and desires to do something to alleviate it. Organizations both local and national immediately mobilize to provide channels through which people can express grief and take some action to provide comfort or support to those directly affected by the deaths. The urge to "do something" is ubiquitous and powerful, and yet difficult to assuage. On the one hand, acts of sympathy are ways of demonstrating to ourselves that "we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering" (a response Sontag deems "impertinent" at the very least), but they also proclaim, perhaps all unawares, our "impotence" in the face of it.¹⁰ We cannot talk ourselves out of the urge, though, paradoxical and self-serving as it may be, because we cannot escape our kinship to those in mourning; we can only try to deal with it. Judith Butler explains: "What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control."¹¹

In circumstances of disastrous violence and loss of life, this heightened awareness of this condition of being "undone by each other," as Butler puts it,¹² leads many people to seek some sort of self-insertion. It has become commonplace for makeshift memorials to crop up at the site of the tragedy or related sites, to which people make pilgrimages, leaving flowers, gifts, messages, and the like. For those who want to help rather than mourn, monetary donations to relief organizations already on the ground in the affected community are the most effective action; fungible cash given to those best suited to assess the situation can be converted into exactly the resources that are needed. But many people find this response too easy, quick, and impersonal. Those who are nearby often to show up on the scene in large numbers to volunteer. Those who are more distant line up to give blood. Organizations like prayer shawl ministries, meanwhile, already having geared up to do something in the chronic mode, ask themselves how this thing they do can be fitted to the crisis mode.

⁸ Interview, June 27, 2013.

⁹ Sontag, *Regarding*, 99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹¹ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

¹² *Ibid.*

This brings us to the second context of prayer shawl ministries' response to tragedy: the tradition of *charitable knitting*. Knitters point back proudly to the "Knit for Victory" and "Knit Your Bit" campaigns during the two World Wars ("To the great American question 'What can I do to help the war effort?' the commonest answer yet found is 'Knit'," advised a *Life* magazine cover story in November 1941¹³) as the origin point of cause-oriented knitting. Previous efforts to combine handcrafts with charitable work, starting in the wake of the industrial revolution in the late nineteenth century, had concentrated on teaching knitting to urban women in order to give them a marketable skill, means of independence, and pride in their work.¹⁴ The wartime mobilization of knitters, like other public campaigns advocating Victory Gardens and reduced use of resources, provided the civilian populace a way to be involved in the fight with a skill they already had, or could easily learn. (Reportedly the campaigns were too successful, flooding the battlefield with more scarves and hats than the soldiers could wear;¹⁵ this set a pattern that would frequently recur in future knitting mobilizations.)

Knitting clothing for charity may seem counterintuitive; if the only aim is to provide for those in need, manufactured clothing is far cheaper, easier, and faster. But charity knitting appeals seek to satisfy two additional aims. First, a handmade item is said to convey a message of caring to the recipient that a storebought item would not. The handknit is higher quality, has the unique "homemade touch," is made with love, and carries with it a part of the maker.¹⁶ Second, charitable knitting allows the benefactor to "do something" and "be useful" through self-insertion. The knitter is more personally involved in responding to the need, and reaps the benefit of greater satisfaction with her work.¹⁷ Because of these dynamics, dozens or hundreds of charity drives engage American knitters at any given time, from ongoing and well-established campaigns like Afghans for Afghans (afghansforafghans.org) to short-term local efforts for homeless shelters or hospitals. Even the latter, when publicized online, can be overwhelmed with donations sent from all over. In one famous example, a 2001 appeal for 100 knitted sweaters for oil-slick-affected penguins in New Zealand went viral, resulting in thousands of unneeded tiny handknit pullovers, mostly from American knitters; the email forward recirculated in 2014 and set off a new wave of cute but useless contributions.¹⁸

We enter a vastly different realm with the remaining two contexts. First, there is the terrifying twentieth- and twenty-first century phenomenon of *rampage shootings*. It is important to understand that the context for thinking and action created around events like the Newtown shooting is racialized and mediated. Over 60% of perpetrators in mass shootings since 1982 are white, and all but one of that group are male.¹⁹ As William Mingus and Bradley Zopf note with reference to Columbine and Northern Illinois University shootings, when the perpetrators are white, the racial context of the event is erased, considered neutral or void:

In both of these incidents, race is carefully omitted as a relevant factor. They were, after all, white perpetrators who shot randomly, impacting mostly white victims. White privilege, then allowed the discourse to be shifted away from a generalized social problem associated with race, to one of personal issues representing individualized pathologies.²⁰

At the same time, the phenomenon of black murders of black victims is considered chronic and unremarkable, while white murders of white victims are extraordinary aberrations that require explanation: "The shooting of whites by someone else who is also white is considered so out of the ordinary that it receives massive media and governmental attention while more mundane violence, an everyday occurrence in poor urban areas, is ignored and attributed to a culture of poverty (often Black or Latino culture)."²¹

¹³ Quoted in National WWII Museum, "Knitting During WWII."

¹⁴ See for example Gunn, "Art Needlework," 55.

¹⁵ Strawn, *Knitting America*, 105; quoted in Aspeck, "Knitting for Victory."

¹⁶ Johnson and Wilson, "It Says You Really Care," 123-126.

¹⁷ See for example Duffy, *God Knits Three-fold*, 45-47.

¹⁸ Mikkelsen, "For the Birds."

¹⁹ Follman et al., "US Mass Shootings."

²⁰ Mingus and Zopf, "White Means," 69.

²¹ Ibid., 68.

Furthermore, it is that attention paid to these tragedies (seen as extraordinary) that brings them into our orbit from a distance, mediated by television images and social media shares. We experience what Sontag calls “imaginary proximity” to the suffering; we may seek relief through sympathetic action that fails insofar as it (1) does not interrogate how “our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering,”²² and (2) seeks to transform it into a problem that can be fixed, that is susceptible to closure, from which we should move on. The impulse to “do something,” after all, suggests that when the thing is done, we should regard ourselves as satisfied. Feel-good media stories about citizens responding with help after a tragedy, which often label the helpers as “ordinary heroes,” reinforce this narrative of crisis and resolution. Butler wonders whether we would learn a different lesson about the suffering involved in these events, and our relation to it, if we responded differently:

Is there something to be gained from grieving, from tarrying with grief, from remaining exposed to its vulnerability and not endeavoring to seek a resolution for grief through violence? ... If we stay with the sense of loss, are we left feeling only passive and powerless, as some might fear? Or are we, rather, returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another?²³

Black and white prayer shawl makers respond to violent tragedies within this racialized and mediated context. They contend with the differences in the ways that whiteness and color are highlighted in the victims and in the perpetrators, and with the effects of selection, distance, and narrative framing imposed by the media through which the tragedy comes into their orbit.

Finally, we must understand the context of *disaster response*. First responders and governmental agencies join forces with NGOs like the Red Cross to organize relief and recovery after any large-scale traumatic event. Ad hoc groups and individuals, as well, converge on the site to volunteer. There is frequently great concern about lawlessness and chaos, yet a comprehensive review of historical evidence led Henry W. Fischer III to conclude that public perception is distorted: “While the public often believes the behavioral response to disaster is deviant and chaotic, it tends to believe emergency organizations are prepared to respond fairly effectively. The behavioral response, as previously noted, is actually very altruistic. Ironically, the organizational response is often quite chaotic.”²⁴ Prayer shawl makers who want to contribute their handwork to those affected by mass shootings navigate a landscape controlled by authorities tasked with disaster response, a landscape where everyone without an official role falls into the category of “helper” or “victim.” According to Patricia Short, popular images of both categories are distorted: Media stories “portray ‘victims’ as bewildered, dependent, resourceless people without possessions or home and in desperate need of help from others,” and portray the helper as “a capable, sensible, resourceful and well organised person, unhindered by emotional distress but showing considerable compassion for the ‘victims’.”²⁵ On the contrary, Short’s surveys in the aftermath of devastating flooding in Brisbane, Australia, showed that “victims” effectively utilized their own resources, as well as those of their existing social networks, to embark on recovery. At the same time, “helpers” had needs that those controlling the disaster site should recognize and try to meet. Nearly half of the helpers surveyed mentioned “the ability to help” as a source of satisfaction, along with “personal enrichment,” “learning,” and “feeling useful.”²⁶ Short concluded that, in an ideal world,

it would be realized that ... the motives of other “affected” people—those who converge on the impact area—should be taken into account so that their needs also can be met. ... If it is realized that there are at least two different sets of needs to be met, much activity which has been seen as dysfunctional because it does not directly meet the needs of victims, will be seen as functional because it will meet the needs of convergers. ... An organization or group involved in disaster relief

²² Sontag, *Regarding*, 102-103.

²³ Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

²⁴ Fischer III, *Response to Disaster*, 73.

²⁵ Short, “Victims and Helpers,” 449.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 457.

should then examine situations in the light of two questions: Did this help to meet the needs of affected people, and/or did it help to meet the needs of this organization or group?²⁷

As noted above, in-kind donations, or donations of material objects, present logistical challenges for those coordinating disaster relief. Unlike money, they are what they are; a blanket cannot be transformed into bottled water, if there turn out to be too many blankets and not enough bottled water. They require storage space, may deteriorate or rot, and present problems of distribution and disposal that cash does not. Prayer shawl makers are often aware of these issues. Yet the tangible objects they desire to send do address needs that offset these burdens. In his comprehensive survey of lessons from disaster studies, Thomas E. Drebek notes that victims evaluate aid more negatively the more bureaucratic and impersonal it is. Especially in the longer run after the initial disaster response, the human touch is badly needed: “Having experienced the outpouring of help that typically characterizes the post-event environment, bureaucrats are now much harder to take.”²⁸ Beverly Raphael contends that this human touch, whether direct and immediate, or indirect and mediated as the prayer shawl makers intend, communicates “empathetic human engagement” needed to mitigate “the stresses of traumatization, of dislocation, of disruption, of the inability to carry out the multiple rituals that bind family life, and of the complex cultures of family behavior, including the lack of a ‘place of one’s own’” in the aftermath of disaster. “We need to endorse the vital importance of human contact from touch to holding, from words to silent presence, from time shared, to experiences validated.”²⁹ Prayer shawl makers unanimously express the hope that their handiwork communicates exactly this.

To conclude this brief overview of the disaster response context, consider the category of “emergent organizations” that operate in the wake of mass trauma. Those who study organizational behavior in disaster find themselves dealing with groups that are not classically bureaucratic, that are “indistinct” or transitory and therefore difficult to pin down in research, “but their functioning may be crucial to the whole trans- and post-disaster response.”³⁰ Combine this with the emergent quality of social concern over mass shootings, due to intense media coverage, and we see that the intersection of prayer shawl groups and large-scale violence reflects an application of the concerns underlying the chronic-mode response to circumstances perceived to be extraordinary in their significance, in the suffering involved, and in the urgency of the need.

Prayer Shawls, Race, and Violence

We now turn to the words of the prayer shawl makers themselves. I did not ask any particular questions about violence; those who brought it up did so spontaneously. Qualitative research allows for the meanings that the prayer shawl makers expressed in these responses to be elicited and analyzed, not via statistical or strictly comparative frameworks, but within the holistic self-presentation of the speaker. A case study approach enables us to juxtapose the words and attendant meanings of a few of these women, paying special attention to how meanings responding to violence, and meanings related to racial identity, appear explicitly and implicitly in their self-expression.

When I interviewed Janet Bristow and Victoria Cole-Galo in Connecticut in May 2013, the Newtown shootings—and how prayer shawl makers responded to them—were at the forefront of their minds. As the founders of shawlministry.com in 1999, as the authors of four books on the ministry, and as the leaders of prayer shawl workshops around the country, they speak from a unique vantage point at the center of the prayer shawl movement, as well as from the perspective of the promoter or brand manager. They told me that by spreading the word through the discussion forums on their website, over a thousand shawls, blankets, and prayer squares (small knitted squares meant to be kept in a pocket as a reminder of the prayers of the maker) were sent to Newtown. To Bristow, the shawls fulfilled a primal need for comfort:

²⁷ Ibid., 459.

²⁸ Drabek, *Human System*, 214.

²⁹ Raphael, “Human Touch,” 333.

³⁰ Quarantelli and Dynes, “Response to Social Crisis,” 31.

“One of our friends is a Red Cross volunteer and she went to Newtown, she lives on the Cape and she was assigned to Newtown. And she said she looked around and she saw people holding on to shawls. That blankie you had when you were a baby. It’s that basic.” On the makers’ side, providing prayer shawls after a tragedy is both a response to the urge to do something, and an antidote to the inadequacy of language in the face of such trauma: “After 9/11 people were so desperate, so desperate, to do something, to reach out in some way and there weren’t any words you could say.” Prayer shawl makers were “so eager” to get shawls to Newtown (and to Boston after the marathon bombing, and to Oklahoma City after the Moore tornado) that they overwhelmed the contacts who agreed to receive them in those towns. “The woman in Newtown who said yes to receiving the shawls. She showed us pictures ... you couldn’t see her dining room!” Cole-Galo imagined how the hundreds of shawls were “moved out” to recipients: “Just take it and don’t ask what it is. Read the letter later on. Just take it for now and just wear it.”³¹ Crisis mode changes the way shawls are given. In its normal chronic-mode operations, a ministry sends a shawl to an individual, and it is given at an in-person visit. Often the visiting giver (a clergyperson, deacon, or ministry member) places it around the recipient’s shoulders and prays with them. This intimate setting contrasts with the bulk distribution of crisis mode, and prayer shawl makers must come to terms with any diminution or change in the message they intend to send through their handiwork.

Bristow and Cole-Galo are perhaps better placed than anyone to estimate the racial demographics of prayer shawl ministry, although they keep no specific counts. Cole-Galo said that “this is predominantly white communities where this is occurring ... We have yet to see it really get into ... more ethnic, Hispanic and black ministries, getting to bring this to [their] community.” Bristow reported that few women of color come to their workshops, and Cole-Galo speculated on cultural differences and alternative priorities of caretaking ministry among these communities that could account for the lack of prayer shawl work, as they conceive it. In a few cases, they told me, they’ve seen Hispanic ministries focusing on functional items (hats and scarves) rather than shawls, whose anachronistic decorousness and rarity increase their capacity to carry spiritual messages.³² There are “a lot of crocheters in Hispanic and African-American communities,” Cole-Galo observed, calling the potential for spiritual yarncraft there “a huge untapped flow.”³³ Although both their observations and my research amount to anecdotal evidence, what I found largely validates their intuitions about the lack of ethnic diversity in the prayer shawl ministry movement, and about the culture and priorities of the black congregations in which prayer shawl ministry has taken hold.

White Shawl Makers: Appalled at Tragedy, Anxious to Help

The day before I collected this background from Bristow and Cole-Galo, I conducted an interview with a prayer shawl maker I’ll call Emily.³⁴ During our 70-minute conversation, she brought up her astonishment at the amount of suffering in the world no less than eight times. “It’s amazing to me how many people are dealing with awful stuff,” she said, in one form or another, over and over. She seemed to sense that the impact of tragedy was both accelerating and coming closer to people like her, a 68-year-old Dutch Reformed deacon in rural Connecticut. Cancer, she said, “scares the living daylights out of me,” and she couldn’t believe the news about looting following the Moore, Oklahoma tornado: “I thought, how low can we sink? ... It’s just mind-boggling.” She said that she and those working with her “can’t make shawls fast enough,” and repeatedly defended her strong feeling that shawls needed to be reserved for what she called “real need”: “a crisis, a life-threatening something or other.” It wasn’t that she thought she could solve problems with the shawls—only

³¹ Interview, May 23, 2013.

³² Cf. Bowman, *Prayer Shawl*, 4: “The shawl, however, commands attention because of its strangeness. We don’t see shawls every day; in fact, we rarely see them outside of special occasions. They are unlikely to be emblazoned with a message in language, and yet they convey some particular intention on the part of the wearer. ... What we know for sure is that no one wears a shawl without meaning to — because almost no one wears a shawl at all. Its material presence, therefore, must mean something.”

³³ Interview, May 23, 2013.

³⁴ Prayer shawl makers spoke to me with the understanding that their identity would be concealed behind pseudonyms in any public presentation of this research.

that she could show the love of God to those *in extremis*. “I just know that when I think of what Jesus did for me, you know, I mean really, how can you ever do enough for his people, if you will?”³⁵

Emily was appalled at the scope of the tragedies both in her circle of acquaintances (such as cancer) and in the world brought into her living room by media. This sense of dreadful things happening all around them expresses well the perspective of the three white prayer shawl ministries in this case study. Juanita, a 57-year-old Catholic, wrote in her report to the church on the prayer shawl ministry’s activities: “This ministry has taught me, personally, to see the Face of Christ in all I meet in my journey here. So many, many people are suffering and so many, many people are lonely.”³⁶ She wrote about the shawls they had sent for “very sad situations, situations that have a profound effect on the world,” such as the Amish school shooting at Nickel Mines, and more personally, a triple murder that occurred in the family of a college acquaintance.³⁷

Juanita’s prayer shawl group responded to the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary after being mobilized by the call from Janet Bristow. But by the time they met to plan their response, only a week after the incident, she got the message “hold off” from the woman who had agreed to accept the shawls in Newtown; “she had 500 shawls that she had to distribute at her house.”³⁸ That circumstance led them to a place where all of the Newtown-responding white prayer shawl ministries found themselves: searching for a pathway to connect what they had to offer with those who might need it. Constance, a Greek Orthodox shawl maker in Massachusetts, told me that “as soon as I brought [shawls for Sandy Hook] up to the group, they said ‘Oh, you know, they’ve talked about how they don’t really want people sending things.’” The women were aware of the burden of material donations, and anxious that their efforts not go to waste. In Constance’s case, she reassured her group that they were responding to a specific request; someone was using the shawlministry.com registry to locate ministries in the Connecticut region, and asking them to donate shawls to be given to first responders. “And I sent them all out and we got a lovely thank you note. They were geared specifically to first responders,” she emphasized to me. “It was not something that we thought of. I said, ‘This is a request. And that’s a little different.’ So everybody was very pleased to do it at that point.”³⁹

The reaction of Constance’s group speaks to a sense of ownership, even protectiveness, that prayer shawl makers feel about their work. They are not merely doing for the sake of doing, or trying to stay busy; their desire to be useful means that they want the recipients to use what they have given. Crisis mode ministry puts a strain on the normal processes by which they are assured of this usefulness. The shawls go out in bulk, are distributed by intermediaries whose sense of responsibility to the ministry is unknown, and are given to recipients not identified individually but defined by a relationship to an event affecting a large number of people. Yet even the normal mechanisms of feedback, in chronic mode, are sporadic. Prayer shawl makers told me that the thank-you notes and word-of-mouth anecdotes they get back from recipients are essential to reassure them of their effectiveness and motivate their ongoing work. Yet many shawls disappear without a ripple. “I think one of the hardest things about the ministry is you have no idea,” Sherry, a Methodist in Connecticut, told me. “You know, this girl at Sandy Hook, did she get it? Didn’t she?”⁴⁰

The shawl Sherry is talking about went to the friend of a parishioner’s daughter. This friend’s mother was a social worker in Newtown. When the parishioner mentioned her daughter’s friend during prayers in

³⁵ Interview, May 22, 2013.

³⁶ “Prayer Shawl Ministry, February 28, 2013.” Report to her parish, provided to the author by Juanita.

³⁷ “In September an incident hit much closer to home for me, it happened to the family of a Dr. I knew when in college in WV many years ago. Through a pastor in the area I learned that, on Labor Day 2012, Doc’s son, daughter-in-law and 10 year old grand-daughter had been shot and killed by their 16 year old son and brother, leaving a 17 year old and 19 year old who were not at home at the time. We made shawls specifically for the 3 young people (including the one in prison) and for Doc. Just last week I received the most beautiful handwritten letter from Doc (now in his 80’s) expressing his thankfulness for the love we shared with him and his family. The Pastor I mailed the shawls to said that Doc was so touched that he brought his shawl and my letter to church the following week to show several of the people.” Ibid.

³⁸ Interview, May 21, 2013.

³⁹ Interview, February 3, 2014.

⁴⁰ Interview, May 24, 2013.

the worship service, Sherry and her colleague Rosemary were able to spontaneously offer her a shawl out of their already-completed inventory. “This is really how a lot of the prayer shawls work,” Sherry confided. “I went up to [the parishioner] and I said ‘Would you like to bring a prayer shawl to this young lady?’” The Newtown shawl was a source of pride to the women of this prayer shawl ministry. Rosemary made sure their vestry heard about it: “Being on vestry I said ‘Hey, I just want to let you guys know, this is how far—well, far-reaching, close, but this is a major traumatic event and we were able to provide comfort to somebody for that.’”⁴¹ Even though this shawl went to an individual as per usual in chronic mode, the importance of it to the makers was dictated by the larger crisis in which it participated. Their ministry was a part of something big. Yet the anxiety of crisis-mode unknowns, highlighted by the ad-hoc nature of the gift and the tenuous friend-of-a-friend connection to the recipient, left them uneasy even as they made that bold claim for significance and effectiveness.

In fact, the work that they felt proudest of, and brought up again and again in our interview, was not their prayer shawls. “All of our high school seniors that graduate, we make them afghans to take off to college with them,” Rosemary told me, and Sherry chimed in: “I think we both feel very strongly that that is, without a doubt, the single most important thing we do, even over the prayer shawls. If the prayer shawl ministry diminished, we would continue to do that ... That’s where we have some of our best stories.”⁴² Here we see the stresses that plague prayer shawl ministry, which are exacerbated in crisis mode, ameliorated by the choice of a manageable project with known recipients and oriented toward celebration. While all three white prayer shawl ministry groups were appalled by the violence of the Sandy Hook shooting, and responded with eagerness to find points of contact that would allow them to help and to be useful, Sherry and Rosemary’s group located the heart of their caretaking ministry in an activity where they could exercise more control and receive more consistent affirmation.

Black Shawl Makers: Protecting Their Work, Embracing Community

This powerful desire for control and credit marked two of the three African-American prayer shawl groups in this study. When I contacted Norma, the leader of an AME prayer shawl ministry in New York City, her email reply was signed with a graphic design, a brand image for the group. In our interview, she brought up the design unprompted. “We have our logo now,” she told me. “We’ve gotten our own logo which makes our emblem certified, which is good. We’re registered now which is our trademark.” Norma said that the group raised \$2000 to secure the logo, and that any other funds donated to them go toward “the paper that we put in, the material that we supply them with, and the little emblems ... ‘cause there’s a lot of insignias that we put on our prayer shawls.” She called this use of funds “like actually buying the productivity that we use to state who we are.” When I asked her why the logo was so important to her group, she responded: “So this way nobody else could take what we’ve done.” The shawls represent her church, and let people know “what we are, what we stand for, and our purpose.” When her prayer shawl ministry started becoming successful, “it was like, ‘Oh no, we need to keep this.’”⁴³

Norma’s logo is perhaps the most concrete exemplar of an *internal focus* that characterizes these two ministry groups. This focus manifests itself first in the importance placed on discipline and proper process. Josephine, who makes prayer shawls in a National Baptist congregation in Ohio, indicated this when she told me the story of how their group started:

So I went to my pastor, and he was very ambivalent about it, for the simple reason that it is kind of a large congregation, and he said “That’s not going to be cost-effective. I mean, how are you going to do this?” ... He allowed me to go ahead and proceed because in the church as in any organizations, you always follow chain of command. You don’t just go off on a tangent and do what you want. You always ask permission. So he just kind of looked over his glasses at me, you know, and said “Well okay. Go ahead, go ahead. Just do it.”

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Interview, October 10, 2013.

Left unspoken in Josephine's recounting is the fact that the pastor is Josephine's husband. Like Norma, Josephine is determined to do things by the book, to avoid careless appropriation of others' work. "The graphics that we use are from the prayer shawl ministry and they give you permission to use them," she volunteered without prompting. "I think there are some specific legalities regarding their graphics, but we have privileges to use them. And then I found that as time went on, you can incorporate your own graphics. You don't have to use theirs, but I like theirs."⁴⁴

These two groups are also internally focused when it comes to the recipients of their shawls. Josephine's group gives only to those on the church's membership rolls. "They have to be registered members of the church," she told me. Her reasoning is that they could not afford to send out shawls indiscriminately. In addition, she worried that some requests were frivolous and failed to appreciate the purpose of the prayer shawl. "Well, if you honor one person's request, you have to do them all," she said. "So we had to eventually write some bylaws. We don't like to be too structured, but with anything that you give away, you have to have rules."⁴⁵ Norma's group began with the idea of giving shawls to "the sick and shut-in of our church," a list compiled by 25 "class leaders" assigned to segments of the membership.⁴⁶ The importance of working within these structures, of recognizing and respecting boundaries, of adhering to protocol, marked these two prayer shawl ministry groups in a way I did not see elsewhere.⁴⁷ Theologically, the groups evince a strong sense of preservation, protecting structures from forces that tend toward decay and dissolution. Community must above all be consolidated, and its core membership cared for. The reverse side of this coin is the pride that comes from a gift of quality into which the maker has poured her heart; when those gifts stay within the community, everyone connected to them is enriched.

Norma, however, suggested an opening in this internal focus toward a greater range of action. "It started becoming a real joy to us," she said. "And we saw how it was really helping our sick and shut-in, within our church. So what end up happening is, by the members receiving it, they started telling us of more people who wanted it, because I mean the shawls were coming out so nicely. And because everybody basically was doing it from their hearts." Her group began to take on projects where the individual and personal connection of chronic mode operations shades toward the aggregate anonymity of crisis mode: guests of Ronald McDonald House, dialysis and cancer centers, and homeless shelters.⁴⁸

This leads me to the third African-American prayer shawl ministry in this case study, a group of women from two different charismatic churches in the greater Seattle area. They are led by Ruth, a bus driver, who recruited others to make shawls and still others (who could not knit or crochet) to pray with them. Their wide-ranging ministry encompassed anyone who came into their orbit, and recognized no boundaries of congregation or regulation. As Ruth crochets on her bus while waiting at a stop, people ask what she is making and then often follow up: "Will you make one for me?" Dorothy, a group member, saw the hand of God in these random requests: "And we don't know why, but we just know that when a request comes, there is a need, so if we can fulfill that need for that individual then we know that what we're doing, is God's going to get the glory." During the interview, which took place in a restaurant meeting room, Ruth spoke to two women at another table and came back with the news that they were prayer shawl knitters too. "Don't you see God all in there?" Dorothy exclaimed at the coincidence. "That was God. God's all up in that." "That's you! That's your bus!" Joanne, another group member, said to Ruth, who had spoken eloquently of the circulation of prayer shawls through the city on her bus. "Say, we all gonna ride that bus, huh?" laughed Dorothy.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Interview, October 21, 2013.

⁴⁵ Ibid. This structure was confirmed by Willie, another member of the group, who told me that the prayer shawl ministry is congregational care, not outreach (Interview, December 10, 2013).

⁴⁶ Interview, October 10, 2013.

⁴⁷ The significance is all the more striking given the class differences between these two populations. While both churches serve neighborhoods that are more than 90% black, Norma's New York church is located in a middle-class neighborhood with a median income in the \$60,000 to \$70,000 range, while Josephine's Cleveland church serves a lower-class neighborhood with a median income under \$25,000 and an unemployment rate three times the national average (according to demographic data from <http://www.city-data.com>, accessed September 30, 2016).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Interview, July 1, 2013.

Ruth and her colleagues operated in this ad hoc, spontaneous way for two reasons. First, they themselves were open to hearing the voice of God in places outside of the church proper, such as radio preachers; these messages and inspirations merged seamlessly with their own prayer and worship life. Second, they focused on the hand of God working in mysterious ways to connect blessings with those God wishes to bless. For example, one member of the group told me a story about a relative who received a badly-needed kidney transplant because of a young man who crashed his car; to her and the group that uttered exclamations of praise at her testimony, that car crash was a divine gift. In such a framework, the meaning of suffering and our Christian response to it becomes a panorama of joy. All things truly do work together for good for those who love God. The women of this ministry believed that their work was part of this divine fabric of blessing for everyone they encountered, whether or not they received any feedback. Their empathetic imaginations, primed by the way they perceived God acting in their own lives, more than filled the empty space left by their lack of control over their products and their process.

Conclusions

Although the examination of white and black prayer shawl ministries in this case study is not an apples-to-apples comparison, consideration of the interview data in the four contexts mentioned above suggests three possible interpretative conclusions. I present these as tentative theses for disputation, followed by directions for further study.

First, given the racialized and mediated contexts of mass violence events, we might expect the perception of such events to differ between white and black communities. Burns and Crawford, in their investigation of “moral panic” during outbreaks of school shootings, pinpoint the effects of these contexts on the discourse surrounding the events:

Since the recent fervor over school shootings, Americans appear to be gripped with fear. This fear has extended beyond the poor, inner-city neighborhoods, reaching affluent suburbs, towns, and rural areas. An issue that was once thought of as an urban problem has recently touched historically stable suburban and rural communities. For many, the violence suggests a breakdown in the social order, as no place seems safe anymore. ... [M]any Americans feel as if violence has invaded their lives, and that much of the violence seems to be petty, senseless, and random, suggests a wanton disregard for human life.⁵⁰

Note the assumption that “poor, inner-city neighborhoods” (where blacks live) have had this “urban problem” for a long time, but that it was not something that aroused this fear of “invasion” until it began to touch “historically stable suburban and rural communities” (where whites live). My interviews took place during a pivotal moment in the national conversation over race and violence, as gated communities, neighborhood watches, historical patterns of housing segregation, gun ownership, school security, and police use of force emerged as hot-button political issues. White prayer shawl makers’ shock and horror at the Newtown shooting and other tragedies illustrate a sense of a frightening malevolence metastasizing from its containment in diseased, abandoned urban environments, into pristine, healthy towns and neighborhoods. Black prayer shawl makers’ concern for preservation and protection, meanwhile, might reflect a different relationship to violence in those urban communities.

Second, recall the distinction drawn by Butler between grief to be endured and gotten over, and grief to be lived with and experienced as relationality’s unavoidable shadow side. The prayer shawl ministry, with its lasting material manifestations, points its participants toward the latter. The prayer shawl itself is a kind of expression of *resilience*, an embrace that one can wear for strength and comfort whenever needed. In that way, prayer shawl makers often speak of the long-term life of the shawl, years after the occasion that prompted it has passed. In crisis mode, however, the disaster response is often framed as an *intervention* aimed at restoring normalcy; the word “rebuilding” is often used, a conceptual apparatus that suggests an end point. One reason prayer shawl makers sometimes have difficulty finding a point of contact with

⁵⁰ Burns and Crawford, “School shootings,” 147.

disaster or tragedy is that the work of resilience, which focuses on provisioning for a sustained and open-ended condition, fits poorly with the interventionist approach of disaster relief. Even Bristow and Cole-Galo spoke of Newtown shawls as links to normalcy, tangible connections to a primal experience of security.

Finally, this case study illuminates a key tension within prayer shawl ministry work between chronic-mode meanings and crisis-mode meanings. The original prayer shawl, in Bristow and Cole-Galo's telling, signified support for the surviving spouse of a terminally-ill man, worn during prayers for the sick and later appearing draped over his casket. This links the shawl to the long term, and suggests that prayer shawl ministries themselves need structures and conceptual underpinnings that are routinely maintained, buttressed, and put into practice. Crisis-mode shawls were highly meaningful to the white prayer shawl makers in this case study. The women point to them as sources of pride, showing that their work was involved in this great mutual effort of disaster response, and that the violence that shakes us to our core can be met and perhaps overcome with an accumulation of such small gestures. Yet I also encountered many ministry groups casting about for these large projects, as if the chronic mode were not important enough or motivating enough for their efforts. In Josephine and Norma's ministries, by contrast, the careful tending of the prayer shawl process and its relationship to the congregation is a significant, conscious part of the group's work. And in Ruth's ministry, sensitivity to unmet needs all over their community bolsters and nourishes an ongoing, fluid, organic sense of mission. This suggests that perceiving violence and profound suffering as *invasive*, as Burns and Crawford suggest happens in the dominant (majority) narrative, might lead white shawl makers to underplay the shawl ministry's strong suit of support, resilience, clear vision, and long memory.

Social scientists, religious studies scholars, and theologians can work together and share methodologies to understand the meanings that emerge for lay people around issues of violence. A focus on caretaking ministries creates opportunities to observe these meanings in the process of formation and formulation, and contributes to our understanding of gendered theological meaning-making in religious communities. Much more demographic work is needed to understand the population involved in these ministries, and to apply data on race, gender, class, and attitudes to the particular sites of religious communities and to the particular instances of violent tragedy. I especially urge collaboration between scholars in the field of disaster studies and scholars in religious studies generally, to break through the impasse of siloed observations about the role of religious groups in disaster relief. Such crises, as I have argued above, give us an opportunity to see the ordinary assumptions and everyday, taken-for-granted meanings that implicitly guide caretaking ministries brought to consciousness and applied to novel situations. These situations can illuminate what theological meanings prove central and peripheral, practical and impractical, retained and discarded.

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