

Forms of Prayer: Prayer Shawls

Prayer Shawls

Prayer shawls have been around for centuries but became known as a church-related ministry here in the U.S. about 1998. At that time two recent seminary graduates in Hartford, CT, Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo, started an outreach project making prayer shawls for women with breast cancer and also for new mothers. They were called prayer shawls because the knitters wove prayers into the shawls as they were being made. The completed shawls were prayed over and given to a recipient with a written prayer attached. Churches all over the country now make prayer shawls and give them to a variety of types of people. Their purpose is to wrap the recipient in a mantle of love and caring - sometimes as comfort to a sick or grieving person, sometimes as hope to the lonely or depressed, sometimes to celebrate an event such as ordination, graduation or a new baby - but always as a symbol of God's love in Christian community.

Where do prayer shawls come from?

The use of prayer shawls can be traced directly back to the Judaic tradition from which Christianity arose. Known as a tallit, the use of the prayer shawl is still maintained by observant Jews today in accordance with the commandments contained in Numbers, Ch. 15. In the Jewish tradition, the prayer shawl's purpose is to function as a reminder of God's laws as set forth in the Torah (known to Christians as the first five books of the Old Testament).

Why would a Christian use a prayer shawl?

The modern Christian is under no commandment requiring the use of prayer shawls. However, many find the use of a prayer shawl helpful or comforting for some of the same reasons it is used in other traditions. Prayer shawls create an intentionally altered experience of the physical space and sensation of prayer. By changing the common, everyday sensations with which we are surrounded, the prayer shawl assists the person praying to focus on God. Additionally, some find that wearing the prayer shawl encourages the turning inward that is one of the necessary components of prayer, by providing the symbolic "cover" of prayer so often mentioned in the Psalms.

How does one use a prayer shawl?

There is no right way or wrong way to use a prayer shawl within the Christian tradition. Some people will choose to wear them around their shoulders. Some will choose to wear them draped over their head. Some may simply lay the shawl across their lap while praying. In short, whatever you find comfortable and meaningful should guide you in using the shawl.

Keep in mind, the prayer shawl is only a tool, designed to facilitate turning toward God in earnest and heartfelt prayer. If the prayer shawl helps you achieve that goal, then it is a useful tool. There is nothing magical or superstitious about its use. Using a prayer shawl doesn't mean God will hear you "better" during prayer or be more inclined to answer prayers in a manner that you may wish to see. Conversely, not using a prayer shawl certainly does not prevent your prayers from being heard or from being any less effective than any other form of prayer.

If you feel uncomfortable using a prayer shawl or find that it does not help you in focusing on God but instead distracts you, then you should not use a prayer shawl. The prayer shawl represents an invitation, not an obligation.

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