

## **Introduction**

When I was a small girl, I had a yellow quilt. Two pieces of yellow nylon polyester with some thin batting, framed by a narrow border of yellow satin. It was nothing special.

Except to me. To me, it was everything, and throughout the tiny tragedies and small miseries that occasionally disrupted my childhood, I kept that quilt by me. It had been given to me when I was a baby living in my grandmother's house in Ohio, a place where I always felt part of a family. When my mother and I moved hundreds of miles away, that quilt went with me. When I held it next to me I always felt safe and loved. Every night, I spread its yellow thinness out on my bottom sheet and lay down on top of it. It was my good luck charm, my anchor, my home.

Why should a quilt have such talismanic power? Why should a quilt come to mean more than physical warmth and softness, but stand instead as a sanctuary and shield? Why should a quilt – a mere sandwich of fabric and stuffing – be more than, well, a quilt?

The truth is, it isn't. Not by itself. But when a quilt is imbued with meaning, reinforced with love, and given away with compassion, it can become a shelter in times of sickness, heartache, and uncertainty. Made with love, purpose and hope, such a quilt can become an unbreakable link to the community that nurtures us and a tangible reminder that we are all bound up together in God's world.

That is the idea behind the Prayer Quilt Ministry, or, as it is often called, the Prayers & Squares Ministry. Under either banner, it is a non-denominational, interfaith ministry in which entire congregations - men, women, and children alike - contribute to the making of quilts that will be given away to people in crisis. These quilts are not

quilted in the usual sense – three layers of fabric and batting held together by intricate and decorative stitches. Rather, they are “tied quilts,” bound through by strands of cotton floss that are tied into square knots on the quilt’s top.

But the Prayer Quilt Ministry is not an excuse for quilting enthusiasts to get together and gossip over the quilting frame. What makes a quilt a prayer quilt is that it is made not just with artistry, but with purpose; not just with fabric, but with prayers. From the time the fabric is purchased to the time it is given away, a prayer quilt is prayed over by scores of people. The person who cuts the fabric prays. The person who sews the quilt top prays. The person who inserts the ties prays. And, most importantly, when the quilt is completed, it is placed before a congregation and every member is invited to bind a tie and say a prayer for the person it will ultimately comfort. A quilt is prayer quilt because prayers are, quite literally, part of its fabric.

Most of the time, the recipient of a prayer quilt is someone most of the people who have had a hand in its making do not know and will never meet. It is a quilt, then, made not just with cotton, but with compassion; not just with fabric, but with faith. A prayer quilt is the physical representation of the biblical principle “love thy neighbor.”

This book is not for people who want to learn how to quilt or who want to add to their quilting skills. Rather, it is for those who want to become involved in the Prayer Quilt Ministry, either by starting a chapter in their own congregation, by joining an established chapter, or by bringing the practice of prayer to their quilting skills. It is also for people who would like to add some spiritual depth to their quilting by learning about the incredible power prayer can instill in a couple of pieces of cloth. This book is not about how to quilt; it is about how to pray. The Prayer Quilt Ministry is, in essence, a

ministry of intercessory prayer – the act of praying not for one’s self, but for others. You do not have to be a *quilter* to be involved in the Prayer Quilt Ministry. But you do have to be a *pray-er*. As one California prayer quilter once put it to me, “You don’t have to be a quilter to be in this ministry. You just have to have a heart to serve.”

And that is why my own yellow blanket was so special to me. It was a sign to me that I was loved, that I was thought of. It was a link to a community of people who believed in me and wanted the best for me. My yellow quilt was invested with the love of those who raised me, just as a prayer quilt is filled with the love and prayers of those who give it. My yellow quilt was a sign that I belonged. A prayer quilt is a sign that we all belong to each other. A prayer quilt says we are all part of God’s family.