

## **History of the Shawl Ministry**

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Vicoria Galo and Janet Bristow

Web Site: <http://www.shawlministry.com>

That which is made by hand is a form of self-expression. Susan Gordon Lydon, author of The Knitting Sutra says "...throughout history, handcrafts have often been fashioned with the aid of prayer, one prayer for each bead or each stitch, while keeping good thoughts to enhance the spiritual purpose of the object." She also states that the "...motions of needlework are singularly well suited to the practice of contemplation." We agree with her: "knitting is prayer and craft is spiritual practice."

This womanly ministry has quietly come about from Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo, two graduates of the first Women's Leadership Institute, a program in applied feminine spirituality at the Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. For one of the women, it all started with a handmade gift, and inspiration from Oprah Winfrey's Angel Network. She, in turn, inspired her friend who was ready to apply what she had embraced from her time at the Seminary. For both, it was the desire to reach out to women in times of need as well as celebration.

"Shawls...made for centuries, universal and embracing, worn by people everywhere. They enfold, comfort, cover, wrap, give solace, warm, mother, hug, shelter and beautify - symbolic of a loving, mothering God - inclusive and unconditionally loving. People who have received these shawls have been uplifted and affirmed, as if being given wings to fly above their troubles (J.B. - 1998). They have benefited both maker and receiver - opening up communication between mother and child, spouses, relatives and friends. They have enfolded the elderly, people preparing for medical procedures and those facing serious illness. Religious leaders have used their shawls for prayer services, anointing of the sick and for marriage ceremonies. All those who have heard of them have been enthused and inspired by their purpose. Some of the recipients have, in turn, knitted a shawl for someone they know in need. The ripple effect has spread to the South, Midwest, West Coast and even Europe and South Africa!

One group knits them for an Oncology Center in Chicago. Another woman in Michigan makes them for her friend, a 79-year-old woman who volunteers at a local hospital. She, in turn, gives them to the patients to whom she ministers, as does another woman who is a chaplain at a Connecticut hospital. These shawls have also been given to expectant and new mothers as nursing shawls into which both mother and child are wrapped in a warm, loving embrace.

The spiritual practice begins with selecting the color of the yarn, continues with the knitting and meditating upon its purpose, and is carried right through to blessing the final product. Sometimes this process is soft and meditative, punctuated by the click of the knitting needles; at other times it incorporates the sound of women's voices sitting in circles talking, laughing, crying and sharing. The giver also receives. Some of the rewards of creating these gifts of love are reduced stress, tranquility, creative inspiration and an overall sense of well-being.

### **St. Ann's Shawl Ministry**

The Shawl Ministry at St. Ann's in W. Bridgewater began in 2004 with a Workshop presented by the founders, Janet Bristow and Vicky Galo. Since that time, knitters and crocheters have met regularly to knit together, to pray together and to bless the completed shawls, asking God that the shawl recipient be "cradled in hope, kept in joy, graced with peace and wrapped in love."