

THE HISTORY OF THE PRAYER SHAWL

Originally known as a “tallit,” the prayer shawl was and remains a special garment worn by Jewish men as a sign of obedience to the law of God. The practice of wearing the shawl began after Moses led the Hebrews out of slavery from the land of Egypt and they were given the Ten Commandments.

The men wore them not only during times of prayer, but throughout the day in order to protect their skin from the rays of the desert sun. White with black stripes, the shawls are bordered at the hem with 613 tassels, which signify the number of commandments as given in the Torah. The shawls are described as having four “corners,” symbolizing the four corners of a tent—as if the men are gathering to have a tent meeting with God. (“Throughout the generations to come, you are to make tassels on the corners of your garment with a blue cord on each tassel.” See Numbers 15: 38-41.) While historically only men have worn the tallit, today some women also choose to wear it.

Although the prayer shawl does not hold the same significance for Christians, it can nevertheless still be special. When we take time to read the scriptures and engage in meditation, a prayer shawl can add to a sense of comfort. It can help us feel closer to God and in a more personal way enrich the discipline of prayer.

For Christians, part of the sacred tradition of the use of the prayer shawl is that it’s usually presented as a gift to someone facing difficult circumstances. Although the shawl doesn’t resemble the tallit that, for example, Jesus certainly would have worn, it still serves as a reminder that one is carried through life wrapped in the arms of our heavenly Father.

The first formal “prayer shawl ministry” most likely began at a church in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1998. From there it soon spread to many other churches. The Prayer Shawl Group of Christ Lutheran Church was founded by the late Carol Schlenker, a very active, dedicated and talented church member. This group continues to be active, even during the Covid Pandemic. Moreover, it has expanded beyond making and distributing shawls to providing personalized blankets for the newly baptized, hats for children (and staff) at the church’s daycare center, as well as scarves and gloves for the needy, including the homeless. Currently (Autumn 2022), the group is working on a Christmas project

by which it will make and then display and distribute such items on the church fence, which borders one of the major streets of the city. In this way, even more people will be blessed with both physical and spiritual comfort as expressed through the caring hands of the congregation's Prayer Shawl Group.

(Sources: Grace United Church in Burlington, Ontario, Canada; and Ashley Hooker at crosswalk.com: "What Is the Prayer Shawl and Why Is It Significant?")