

Quilting women at Highland share talents in community



From left: Portia Carver, Jennie Puffer, Betty Cornett, Marilyn Massey, Sheri Liles, Kim Chaney-Bay and Cheryl Baker hand stitch a quilt they will give away. The group is called The Care Quilters and they gather at Highland Presbyterian Church each week to quilt.

Highland Presbyterian Church

Rev. Dr. Billy Newton, pastor of Highland Presbyterian Church in Maryville, will conduct a Blessing of the Quilts during the 10:30 a.m. service Sunday. Members of the Care Quilters in the church have made and given away 51 quilts. Recipients can bring them to the special ceremony. Sweet Young is founder of the women's quilting group.

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By **Melanie Tucker** |

On this Valentine's Day weekend, the focus at Highland Presbyterian Church in Maryville is the expression of love through giving.

The church's pastor, the Rev. Dr. Billy Newton, will lead a Blessing of the Quilts during the 10:30 a.m. service Sunday. It's a special ceremony when quilts made by a group of women at the church will be part of a colorful procession along with prayers and love for their recipients.

The Care Quilters are responsible now for making and presenting a total of 51 quilts to congregation members and families. The hand-stitched quilts have been given to families of newborns, to those suffering through illness and loss and for celebratory reasons. Highland's communion table will be draped with one of the quilts made by children of the church.

"We started this ministry in 2007," said the founder of the Care Quilters, Sweet Young. Young, along with Jennie Puffer and Betty Cornett are original members. They have been joined by Portia Carver, Marilyn Massey, Sheri Liles, Kim Chaney-Bay, Cheryl Baker and Sayoko Yodono.

Hand quilted

All of the quilts are hand quilted and then pieced on the sewing machine, Young said. On the backs of each is a reminder of the talented hands that created it and the recipient's name. "Each is different," Young explained. People donate fabric to the women who then choose an appropriate pattern and color scheme. There's the Snowball, Nine Patch and Jewel Box.

"We try and think about the people while we are making the quilts," Young said. She is definitely one of the expert quilters, having 40 years under her belt. Puffer has been doing this for almost as long, at least 30 years.

So, every Tuesday morning at Highland, the women gather to sew and pray for those about to receive their gifts. On this particular morning they were stitching together a quilt for an elderly woman in the congregation.

"There is a prayer in every stitch, Puffer said.

Rev. Newton came up with the idea for this Blessing of the Quilts. He has a personal reason for getting behind the ministry. "My mother, who is in hospice, received a beautiful rose pattern quilt, which was a surprise to both of us," he said. When she received it, I remembered the Bible passage, 'Clothe yourselves with compassion and kindness.' That's what I think this ministry is all about."

The women will work for more than three hours each Tuesday. Young said she embraces the role of keeping everyone on task. Some days that's easy; sometimes not.

"We are very loose, but I'm not," she said with a laugh. To which the other women replied, that's how they have done 51 quilts and counting.

Liles said Young is indeed a leader. “She is strict but not to the point that what she asks is un-doable.” Liles has been part of the Care Quilters for more than a year. She took a class at a folk art school. This is therapy, she said.

There are quilters like Young and Puffer who have probably made hundreds over the years, and those like Cornett who are fairly new at it. “I’ve learned a lot working with these women,” she said. “I’ve probably helped with 30 of the quilts so far.”

Cornett, Massey, Liles and the others agree these gifts come from the heart and are graciously accepted by the recipients.

Going to the blessing

They are all anxious to see how many of the 51 quilts will be brought in for the Blessing on Sunday.

Chaney-Bay got on the sewing machine to do some practice work on this day. She said Young teaches classes sometimes after the Tuesday sessions are complete. “It helps for people like me who haven’t quilted before,” she said. “It’s a learning process and I am so glad we have Sweet.”

Young not only teaches here in Maryville but she’s taken her sewing supplies to Cuba on a few occasions to help teach women there. She’s been to Cuba about 15 times. She and husband David have organized the trips at Highland. One is planned for spring.

Highland’s partner church in Cuba is located in Taguasco, Young said her Care Quilters made a quilt for them, featuring the Smoky Mountains. “So they will remember us,” she said.

Baker looks around at the talent in the room and expressed her gratitude for being part of this ministry. Come Sunday there will be a sanctuary full of people also grateful to be included, especially those who have received the handmade symbols of care and compassion.