

# *Occasional Papers # 2*

Church Knitting and Craft Group

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Produced by the CIPT

*Alumni*   
*Association*

## CIPT Alumni Association Occasional Papers

This paper is the second of our series of occasional papers sponsored by the Alumni Association of the Congregational Institute for Practical Theology (CIPT).

The papers are edited versions of project reports and other submitted work produced by individuals who have either studied on the full training course run by CIPT or taken a number of its modules for specific purposes in their journey of faith.

The Alumni Association sees the publishing of these occasional papers as one way of encouraging our students in their studies and reflections. We are making these contributions available to everyone in the Congregational Federation – and beyond – who might be interested in the subjects covered.

While not everyone may be convinced by the points of view of the writers, and though the Alumni Association is not endorsing any particular point of view expressed in any of these papers, we are confident that these views are worthy of wide consideration.

Walter Riggans  
Director of Studies

## Church Knitting and Craft Group

Sue McFarlane

### Introduction

The idea for setting up a Knitting and Craft Group in my church came after reading about a Knit and Natter group on the Fresh Expressions website for work on a module on the training course. I knew that knitting as a craft was experiencing a real resurgence, with many people, including high profile stars, sharing their interest through social media, and telling of the benefits they felt. Around the same time there were many reports from various sources about the growing numbers of lonely people, living alone and often having no social interaction with anyone for days at a time, which I found heart-breaking.

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as

a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.<sup>1</sup>

We all need to be alone at times, but social isolation is different, and works against well-being. Chronically lonely people have higher blood pressure, are more vulnerable to infection, and are also more likely to develop Alzheimer's disease and dementia. Loneliness also interferes with a whole range of everyday functioning, such as sleep patterns, attention and logical and verbal reasoning.<sup>2</sup> This issue is one we wanted to address as a church.

### Initial Idea

We had wanted to set up a group where people could come for friendship and purpose; a group for some craft activity, whether people were experts or total beginners, and maybe space for those who just wanted to come for a cup of tea or coffee and some company; a group where hopefully they would find a richer and more meaningful time for their life, find wholeness and healing, and where they might learn to become more aware of the spiritual side of their life through contact and conversation with Christians.

My action research project for the training course seemed the ideal vehicle to help me to consider what we could provide. I knew there was evidence that crafts in general could help people with disabilities or chronic conditions to have more of a sense of purpose and meaning in their life. However, it was while I was researching the resources that I became aware of evidence and ongoing research about the therapeutic effects of knitting. Knitting groups were being set up to promote the therapeutic benefits of knitting for people with certain illnesses or disabilities.

And so we began. We started with three or four people who came on a regular basis, and another one or two who came from time to time. Once people got to know about the group, they began to collect supplies for us and we gradually built up a library of knitting patterns, knitting needles and wool. Our regular knitters increased to around seven people. We enjoyed knitting, chatting, drinking tea and coffee and lots of laughter.

We began to knit for charities - for premature babies, for cancer charities, twiddle muffs for dementia patients, hats and scarves for homeless charities, baby clothes for mothers we heard about through the Food Bank; we made knitted nativity sets and nursery rhyme figures for a couple of schools who had requested them.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental\\_health/en/](http://www.who.int/features/factfiles/mental_health/en/)

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20140514-how-extreme-isolation-warps-minds>

The organisation *Community Connectors*,<sup>3</sup> appointed to improve the well-being of people who need care and support, following the introduction of the Social Services and Wellbeing Act in Wales in April 2016, began to work with groups like ours, to find activities and groups that would help their clients. They visited us to find out more about us and they brought one or two people to our group.

### Basic Approach

The main purpose of my research was to discover how well the knitting / craft group met the needs of the people who came, how it could be improved, and how to attract a wider membership. Further, the therapeutic research might allow us to explore knitting as therapy, to help to move towards the wholeness and healing we find in the Bible. I discussed the research project with the group and found they were all supportive.

I explained that I intended to use questionnaires to follow these ideas through. All members were asked if they would like to participate and were given the opportunity to opt out at any time without having to justify it to me or to anyone else, and were able to skip any questions they felt uncomfortable with. Questionnaires would be confidential and anonymous, and all data used solely for the project. I received 10 completed questionnaires and 2 partial completions, with a 100% return from regular members.

### *The Questionnaires*

I wanted to find out firstly how well knitting as an activity suited the needs of the people who were coming to the group, and to explore the links between knitting and well-being for our members. Our main activity in the group had been knitting, with some crochet as well. We had called it a knitting and craft group to allow for other craft-based activities, and from time to time we had, for example, Bible-based adult-oriented colouring sheets or card making materials to give opportunities for members to try out other things.

I also wanted to find out how they felt we could improve our relationships in the group, so there were also questions specifically about group dynamics and ethos.

As part of my review of the resources, I came across an academic article about the findings of a large online questionnaire (3,500 responses) from 2010 designed to explore the links between knitting and well-being.<sup>4</sup> The survey looked at the benefits of knitting for personal and social wellbeing and found a significant relationship between frequency of knitting and feeling calm and happy, improvements in concentration, memory and problem solving, increased confidence, feelings of achievement and, for those knitting in a group, social interaction and new skills.

This had some similarities to what I was trying to find out from our group, and so I thought that it might be useful to use as a guide. I used their results to start gathering data on demographics, reasons for knitting, the effect of knitting on mood, social activity and skills, the benefits of knitting in a group, etc. I collected my own data through a range of response types - tick boxes for personal details such as gender and age, a 5-point scale for data on mood, feelings and judgements, and free-text boxes to collect extra information, like people's main reasons for knitting or their perceived benefits from belonging to a knitting group.

### *Follow-up Discussion*

The questionnaires were followed up by a group discussion about the overall findings. It is so important to the action research method to be able to capture the wisdom of the group. As Peter

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk/en/resident/health-wellbeing-social-care/getting-the-help-you-need/community-connectors/about-community-connectors/>

<sup>4</sup> Riley, Corkhill and Morris, 2013.

Reason has highlighted:

One cannot study and improve practice without deep involvement of those engaged in that practice, for the necessary perspective and information is simply not available.<sup>5</sup>

### Review of Resources

As I began the review of resources, I was amazed by how much was available. I found a great deal of evidence that arts and crafts can help with feelings of well-being for people who are housebound, disabled or suffer with depression. Research in the UK by Corkhill and other researchers really excited me and seemed to fit well with some of the changes we identified in our discussions. After a career as a senior physiotherapist, Corkhill moved on 'to investigate the world of neuroscience, pain, mental illness, well-being and knitting'.<sup>6</sup>

Similar results to those found by Corkhill and her colleagues in the UK were found in an American survey in the Craft Yarn Council's 2014 Tracking Study,<sup>7</sup> when over 3,000 people responded to the survey request. The frequency of knitting, effects of knitting, reasons for knitting, etc, were all remarkably similar to other surveys.

A Therapeutic Knitting Conference was set up in 2012, aimed at bringing together clinicians and academics interested in developing a network of therapeutic knitting groups, to establish ideas for potential research, and to draw up an action plan with the aim of bringing about positive changes for patients.

As part of her work in this area, Corkhill had set up a website - Stitchlinks<sup>8</sup> - to provide support, friendship and information, and a forum to bring together various groups of people. She also invited new or existing knitting groups to consider becoming a therapeutic group and provided information and support for that. This was one of the areas we explored in our group.

I came across other interesting non-academic writings which linked knitting with bringing a positive impact on mental health and well-being. In her book on teaching people to knit, Melville says

We need to get out of the dominant full-of-rules left brain and into the more innovative, solution-advancing right brain. And we get into the right brain by engaging in activities that are: physically repetitive, intellectually undemanding, and visually stimulating. This explains the wonderful place to which my mind goes when I'm knitting.<sup>9</sup>

An article in *Knitty*, an American knitting magazine, describes how, when sitting quietly knitting, Walsh has the experience of worries rising slowly, followed by ideas and solutions, bringing a feeling of peace, hope and contentment.

Knitting teaches us self-confidence and establishes us firmly as co-creators of our worlds. We soon find that what we can do with yarn, we can do also with our lives. Knitter, heal thyself. Knit a sweater or shawl that will be both a literal and a metaphorical token of the warmth, beauty, and peace that you have the power to create for yourself.<sup>10</sup>

There is a great deal of resource in this area, much of it American, but some from the UK, which explores the spirituality of knitting. One writer considered how prayer and knitting can be interwoven.

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<sup>5</sup> Reason, 2006, p. 189.

<sup>6</sup> Corkhill, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.craftyarnCouncil.com/>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.stitchlinks.com/your\\_guide\\_to\\_stitchlinks.html](http://www.stitchlinks.com/your_guide_to_stitchlinks.html)

<sup>9</sup> Melville, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Walsh, 2003.

Spending time in the knitting group caused me to reflect upon how knitting and prayer could be interwoven. The physical rhythm of a repetitive stitch action can be a way into a simple prayer chant, such as “Jesus is Lord” and can be a mindful way to keep your hands active and productive while stilling your mind and heart.<sup>11</sup>

This is closely linked to the Prayer Shawl ministry which was set up in the USA in 1998, and which now has followers worldwide. It provides shawls for people in need of comfort during difficult times, but these are special shawls made with prayer and meditation. The website describes it as follows:

Compassion and the love of knitting and crochet have been combined into a prayerful ministry and spiritual practice which reaches out to those in need of comfort and solace, as well as in celebration and joy. Many blessings are prayed into each stitch.<sup>12</sup>

For me, this brings us close to an experience of our Creator God, gives us feelings of a creativity which brings about warmth, beauty and peace, and brings us implicitly into the spiritual dimension of wholeness and healing. The act of creating, especially for others in need, brings us closer to God’s love in action.

Other resources I discovered talked about crafts as one way of bringing about complete absorption in activities. Neuroscience is beginning to understand how mindfulness, meditation and experiencing this type of absorption in activity has an impact on the brain, which in turn improves the quality of life and reduces stress. I only had time to scratch the surface of a huge area of writings, websites and research, but it allowed me to see how many resources there are to draw on as we try to bring healing and an awareness of spirituality into our group activities.

### Presentation and Analysis of Data

#### *Reasons for Knitting*

The members of the group were asked to identify their main reasons for knitting. Most answers were about enjoyment, relaxation and relief from stress. Knitting was also a way of being productive while watching television or travelling. It gave a sense of accomplishment, allowed creativity, brought feelings of pleasure when giving to other people, and enabled social interactivity.

The results of my questionnaires showed that most of the members of the group were frequent knitters; 75% knitted more than three times a week. As the international survey found, there was a relationship between how often people knitted and their feelings of calm and happiness. The knitters who knitted more frequently also felt that knitting benefited their concentration and problem-solving abilities as well as their memory, linked to the need to calculate sizes and patterns, counting stitches and rows, and remembering patterns.

They all felt knitting in a group helped in how happy they felt, and they talked about the laughter and fun that we had in the group. Even those who at the beginning had felt a bit unsure felt it contributed to better social contact and communication with other people. Those who normally felt shy or unsure in a group did not feel the same pressure to talk while they were knitting, and this allowed them to become more at ease and eventually enter conversations more naturally.

#### *Calmness, Relaxation and Stress Relief*

Though some of our beginner knitters felt less calm at first, because they had to concentrate most of the time, frequent knitters reported feeling calm after knitting. They felt that the feelings of calm and relaxation were related to the rhythmical nature of knitting. The great majority said that knitting allowed them to unwind from the stresses of the day.

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<sup>11</sup> Dutton, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.shawlministry.com/>

Two thirds reported having some sort of medical condition, including anxiety, depression, arthritis, fibromyalgia and hypertension. Of those, the majority felt that knitting helped with their condition, through relaxation, through increased activity of hand movements to help with arthritis and through the fun and laughter they enjoyed as part of the group interaction.

### *The Impact of Colour and Texture*

The questionnaire asked if the colour and texture of the yarn affected their mood: 65% felt that colour made a difference, while 50% thought that texture affected them. The responses for colour concentrated mainly on the difficulties of knitting with dark colours in the evening. For texture, people talked about the pleasure they felt when using soft and tactile yarns.

### *Concentration and Problem Solving*

All the respondents felt that knitting helped their concentration, though some felt it depended on the pattern. Most felt it improved their memory; some talked about the challenges of working out complex patterns and using new knitting skills as helping their problem-solving abilities; others felt that it helped them to forget about their problems. Remembering instructions and patterns were also felt to be good for their memory.

### *Social Aspects of Knitting / Learning New Skills*

On a 5-point scale, 83% rated the social side of knitting as 'very important', while the other 17% thought it was 'important'. They talked about making friends, finding encouragement, learning new skills, feeling they belong, having a laugh, helping others to develop new skills, being in a happy social group and finding more confidence. Almost all reported that they had learned new skills, and two had learned to knit from scratch. Many said they had learned about using their computer to find videos of knitting techniques and social media sites like Ravelry to find patterns and advice.

### *Knitting for Charity*

All but one of our knitters knitted for charity and received huge enjoyment from doing it. They talked about wanting to help others, the good feelings they got from knowing they were doing something positive to address the needs of others, being able to knit for someone when you didn't need anything yourself, the pleasure they felt when they got a letter of thanks or photos from the recipients. Both schools that we knitted for sent letters of thanks and photos of the children enjoying playing with the figures that had been knitted.

### Growing the Group

Manageable improvements were also identified, particularly in the follow-up discussion. These centred on the possibilities of including other activities, or by having an occasional speaker, or a demonstration, and having occasional trips, either to knitting and craft related places or just as a social occasion. We wondered whether we might attract more people if we had a wider range of craft activities on a more regular basis.

We had posters about the group in various public places, but perhaps telling people about the benefits we received from knitting and about the pleasure we found in meeting as a group, would be more effective in attracting new people. We were also interested in the idea of therapeutic knitting groups. We looked at an article about the health benefits of knitting and crochet, presented in a chatty, non-academic way and we thought that this was another aspect of promoting the group that we could explore.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Caseley, 2017.

## Reflection

Our connection with our Creator God is made clear in Psalm 139 in wonderful words of poetry. It demonstrates the immense value that God puts on each person. God knows each of us so well, because he made us; he knew us right from the very beginning. In verse 16 we read, 'In your book were written all the days that were formed for me when none of them as yet existed'. But it is verse 13 that stood out for us:

For it was you who formed my inward parts, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful.

In the context of our knitting group we wanted to focus on how God 'knit me'. The idea of God knitting or weaving us together as he created us reinforces the idea of the worth of each individual to God and the creativity that goes into this. Knitters know how much work goes into their creations; time, effort, money and love act in combination to produce something unique, because no two pieces are the same even though they use the same pattern. Different wool, different colours, the way people knit - whether tightly or loosely - all of these things affect the finished item. And the feeling of satisfaction and achievement when something is completed is like nothing else.

Is this how God felt when he looked at us and saw what he had created? Something unique, something special created with love. It reminds us of how special each individual is to God and the call on each of us to treat each person as God treats them - as someone infinitely precious, a unique individual created the way God intended. Although we are created with the freedom to use our God-given potential in whatever way we choose, God looks on and continues to search for that person whom he created to enable them to fulfil the potential that he has given to them.

Once we consider how much God values each one of us and what that means for how we should value others, it should have a transforming effect on our thinking about the world and on the way we live our lives. This value for individuals means we are called to join God in his passion for justice, peace and righteousness. It means we are called to show others how the kingdom of God can transform lives. Knitting groups will hopefully help to transform lives in small ways with wholeness and healing.

Following our discussions about how we could further develop our group, the Community Connectors independently brought four extra people to our group, including two ladies with early stage dementia. The first time they came they did not knit. The following week one wanted to try knitting and was delighted to find she still remembered how to knit. We had already introduced colouring sheets and books and the other lady wanted to colour; she chatted about a tapestry which she had brought with her and had been working on for many years, but now was unable to see well enough to compete it.

The tapestry showed a cathedral with surrounding buildings and she pointed out the shop where she'd bought it and told us it had special memories of a holiday with her husband who had now passed away. She had been hoping to finish it, frame it and put it up on her wall to remind her of the happy holiday with her husband and, much to her delight, we said we could find someone to complete it for her. Both ladies went home happy and excited.

The Community Connectors told us how much they valued the friendship and warmth their clients were finding in our group. And we felt that perhaps God was at work and asking us to find ways to be able to meet the needs of people like these ladies.

## Conclusion

Knitting has significant psychological and social benefits, which can contribute to well-being and quality of life. As a skilled and creative occupation, it has therapeutic potential.

Blaenau Gwent is one of the most deprived boroughs in Wales. It is a former mining and steel town, and with the loss of the heavy industry, little has come to replace those well paid and skilled jobs. In the valleys there are people of great warmth but at the same time a sense of hopelessness and worthlessness has crept in.

At the heart of our relationship with God is the responsibility on us to care for one another, and the care of the poor and the vulnerable members of society is a measure of our relationship with God. We want to bring wholeness and healing to mind, body and soul, particularly for those suffering from loneliness, social isolation, depression and all the associated health problems that that can bring.

Perhaps therapeutic knitting could be one key to unlock this to bring them to wholeness. We were certainly determined to try.

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## About the Author



Sue is a member of Saron Congregational Church in Tredegar. She works part time for the Open University but is active in a range of services for her church and other churches in her Area.

As well as leading worship services in different churches, she has been involved in training and ministry with Godly Play and Godly Play for Seniors, and also with the SAGES events in Ebbw Vale and Swansea.

Sue is particularly interested in the Federation's recognised ministry of being a Spiritual Enabler and is hoping to follow this through with her church and the Wales Area.