

Anything but ordinary

Church members share 'pieces of their lives' to enhance worship

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEN FOSTER

RALEIGH, N.C. — “Ack! I just stitched that chicken in upside down!”

Laughter echoed through the room as half a dozen women stopped their sewing and ironing to inspect a row of green fabric strips. The bands of fabric, each only an inch or so wide, were pieced together in a growing row.

“Gives it character and makes it unique. Leave it there.”

“I think it will stand out. I'd redo it.”

“You won't see it, even from the deacons' pew.”

This group of creative women from First Baptist Church on Salisbury Street in Raleigh had gathered for a day of sewing and ironing as part of the Ordinary Time Green Stole Project. The fabric pieces had been donated by members of the congregation, cut into strips by project volunteers, and were just beginning to take shape as additional stoles for ministers to wear during Ordinary Time.

STITCHING COMMUNITY

From its conception, the Ordinary Time Green Stole Project has been a group effort. The idea was hatched as church member Mary Hauser and music minister Mary Alice Seals shared lunch at a worship and music conference at Montreat, N.C.

Art pieces used in worship there got Mary thinking about ways to make the formality of the liturgical worship experience at First Baptist less intimidating. Mary recruited Holly Ivel, a talented quilter and fellow church member, to join her in organizing the effort to create new stoles.

Together they identified ways that the entire church could be involved in the art project, from donating fabric to cutting the pieces to sewing and ironing. It took a little while for the congregation to get invested in donating fabric to the project.

The bin for collecting fabric stayed empty just long enough for Mary and Holly to get nervous about whether they would get enough. Mary fielded a lot of questions in the church hallway.

Is it really okay to put in a knit t-shirt? What about fabric that's a very light shade of green? Are you sure you can use upholstery fabric? What if there are other colors

on a green background?

Yes, she answered, over and over. The beauty is in the mix, the color range and the varied textures. Bring anything green.

To encourage those who didn't ask, Mary seeded the collection bin. “I intentionally put in a t-shirt, and I intentionally put in something shiny and weird. I wanted people not to be afraid.”



GREEN STOLE PROJECT — Holly Ivel (left) and Mary Hauser model stoles-in-progress that are building community and bringing new meaning to worship at Raleigh's First Baptist Church.

Soon, the box began to fill: Susan contributed a piece of emerald green satin, the sash from a dress her bridesmaid wore at her wedding in 1982. Lila, age 2, added green fleece her mom used to make a turtle costume for Halloween.

Green t-shirts appeared from youth choir festivals; widows added neckties to honor their late husbands. Men brought worn-out athletic shirts and camouflage print shorts. Church members from every demographic pilfered through closets and craft project stashes to share pieces of green fabric, pieces of their lives.

Eventually, fabric arrived in every shade of green, from muted sage to bright lime, deep hunter to a soft pastel mint. The donations were more than enough and in a perfectly beautiful mix of tones, shades and textures of green fabric.

With the scraps collected, it was time to begin cutting. A well-timed churchwide retreat brought the first opportunity for a group of people to sit together and work. One participant remarked that she nearly backed out of the first cutting session because she didn't know anyone else who was participating. But shared work broke the ice, and soon the scissors were snipping away while conversation and laughter flowed.

Sewing days soon followed, and participants welcomed the opportunity to gather outside of the Sunday morning routine. Many remarked how much they enjoyed seeing a different, more creative side of fellow congregants.

Some compared it to the quilting bees that their grandmothers had loved in generations past. All agreed that the friendships forged over narrow strips of green fabric became cherished relationships within the church.

ORDINARY TIME

Many First Baptist members didn't grow up in a liturgical tradition. Baptists typically miss out on the explicit worship instruction that Catholics, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and others learn during Confirmation classes. Therefore, for some congregants, the meanings behind symbols used in worship can be a mystery.

So, about a year ago, First Baptist



STITCHED TOGETHER — When sewn together as stoles, the donated fabric pieces represent the diversity and unity of the congregation, and the importance of growing in faith throughout the year.

began including a paragraph in each week's worship bulletin explaining various elements of worship. While these written explanations help worshipers understand where a given week falls within the Church Year, a paragraph might not be enough to explain the symbolism of color or provide a larger overview.

The Green Stole Project offers another avenue for conversation about what it means to follow the liturgical calendar and why ministers wear green stoles for much of the year. While ironing freshly stitched seams at the first of two sewing days, Mary Alice Seals described the significance of Ordinary Time.

She explained that the liturgical calendar includes two periods of Ordinary Time. The first, from Epiphany to the beginning of Lent, provides a time to focus on the life and ministry of Jesus. After Easter and Pentecost follows a second, and much longer, period of Ordinary Time that extends until Advent.

In this second period of Ordinary Time, the emphasis is often focused upon the spiritual growth of the believer and the spiritual growth of the Church, the community of believers.

Faith, in light of Christ's resurrection, is lived out in ordinary time. In both periods, green signifies new growth: the growth of Jesus and the individual spiritual growth of the faith community.

When Mary Hauser had the idea to make a second set of green stoles, she planned for them to be less formal, and having another option during the longest season of the church year made sense. But creating stoles for Ordinary Time came to mean much more to participants.

In the season of worship when we emphasize the growth of the church community, the stoles will be a visual reminder that community relies on the contributions of each individual. And the symbolism of using ordinary, everyday fabrics for Ordinary Time is not lost on those who assisted in creating them.

Every piece of fabric represents a piece of an individual's ordinary life: clothing, curtains, napkins. Out of these very ordinary, utilitarian objects comes something beautiful and meaningful.

Faith is shaped by the awe-inspiring moments of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. But finding God in the ordinary, daily experiences of life makes Ordinary Time foundational to faithful Christian living. These stoles use a collection of ordinary objects to create something beautiful and magnificent.

REFLECTING COMMUNITY

When asked why they wanted to be part of this effort, participants repeated over and over that the Green Stole Project both reflected the diversity of this community of faith while also strengthening the community in their creation.

The stoles are beautiful pieces of art, but the stories they tell and the connections made as they were sewn together will make them treasured pieces of First Baptist history for years to come.

One participant remarked: "Our church community is represented so beautifully in these stoles — the fabric representing the diversity within our church family; the stitches holding it all together just as our love of God, our church, and each other holds us together. They represent who we are and who we can be as we come together to be the hands and feet of Christ."

In the end, the tiny chicken stayed upside down on his green background, nestled among old t-shirts and scraps of upholstery fabric in a gorgeous array of slices of everyday life. There is such beauty to be found in the imperfection and the ordinary. And when the ministers of Raleigh's First Baptist Church wear the new stoles, they serve as a reminder of how beautiful an imperfect community can be. **NFJ**