

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Delivering smiles : Churches give sanctuary flowers to those who can't attend services

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Dorothy Smith, 100 years young, smelled the big bouquet of white calla lilies, red roses, dahlias and mini-carnations. These weren't just any flowers.

They came to her house from God's.

"She was obviously very happy," Pat Jones told the News-Press after delivering the flowers to Mrs. Smith's home in Santa Barbara. She enjoys visiting her. "She doesn't look 100 by any means. Her beautiful blue eyes are very bright."

On some Sundays, Mrs. Smith walks proudly into the church that regularly gives her the flowers: First Congregational Church of Santa Barbara, United Church of Christ.

On Palm Sunday, the bouquet given to Mrs. Smith graced the church's sanctuary during its worship service. Afterward, Mrs. Jones, the member and retired Santa Barbara certified public accountant who oversees floral deliveries, put the bouquet in the passenger seat of her tan 2013 Honda Accord. She secured the precious cargo with a seat belt and brought it to Mrs. Smith. It was the 10th time she has delivered flowers to Mrs. Smith's home, and she said the resident has told her to come back, even if she's not bringing flowers.

For 20 years or so — it's gone on so long that not even a church historian can say exactly when it started — First Congregational Church has delivered its single bouquet of Sunday worship flowers right after the service to one member. Typically, they're seniors who are homebound because of age or health reasons and can't attend services or are in nursing or convalescent homes, the Rev. Ron Meyer, the church's interim pastor, told the News-Press. Sometimes recipients receive flowers for their service to the church or other good deeds.

"It's a wonderful ministry for anybody who receives fresh flowers," the Rev. Meyer, 63, said. "It just cheers them up instantly. They're very appreciative of them, and fresh flowers always bring a smile. When people deliver it, they know the flowers come from the church, not just the person delivering them. It comes from the whole congregation."

A photo of the congregation standing outside the church is on a note delivered with the flowers. It says the flowers have been in the sanctuary and have shared the sermon, the Chancel Choir's songs, the congregation's hymns and prayers during the service.



Today, First Congregational Church of Santa Barbara, United Church of Christ, on upper State Street will hand over its 30 or so Easter lilies to the members on its care list. It's part of the church extending its ministry beyond its walls to those who cannot attend services due to illness and other reasons.

"It's a wonderful ministry for anybody who receives fresh flowers," said the Rev. Ron Meyer, interim pastor at First Congregational Church about his church's outreach to the homebound and others who can't come to services. "It just cheers them up instantly."

Pat Jones has overseen floral deliveries to seniors and others for 10 years at First Congregational Church.

Members get flowers from the Santa Barbara farmers market and sometimes Trader Joe's to create the bouquets that grace each Sunday service at First Congregational Church.

After Easter service today, the church will deliver the 30 or so potted Easter lilies in its sanctuary to the members on its care list. It does the same thing with its poinsettias during Christmas.

The church isn't alone in sharing flowers with members. Churches throughout Santa Barbara County, one way or another, keep the bloom going long after their sanctuary bells stop ringing.

Just ask the Rev. Bob Honeychurch, interim rector at All Saints-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Montecito.

"We divide them (the worship service flowers) into 10 smaller bunches. We take them to the homebound, to hospitals to distribute to whoever might appreciate them," the Rev. Honeychurch, 57, said. "We put a note to acknowledge these are flowers we use on Sunday. We pass them forward with God's blessing so people might continue to enjoy them."

"It's a real, tangible way in which they can be connected to the church," he said. "It's reminder to them and us that the church extends beyond the boundaries of the walls of the building, that the church is wherever God's people are gathered together. The flowers are a tangible expression of that."

Like churches elsewhere, his sanctuary is decorated with Easter lilies today. He said they'll remain for one or more Sundays after this week. Then the church will place some of them on the sidewalk out front. It's an invitation for anyone to take them.

Elsewhere in the community, El Montecito Presbyterian Church divvies up the flowers after each service and brings them to the homebound.

Up north, St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Lompoc delivers sanctuary flowers to eight to 10 members right after its Sunday services.

"We take them to shut-ins, people in hospitals," the Rev. Michael Cunningham, the rector, said. "Generally with the Easter lilies, there'll be a bunch of them, 20 to 30 of them, and one potted lily goes to everybody on our list. The rest of them, we'll encourage people to take home a plant."

"The bottom line is we don't throw things away," the Rev. Cunningham, 59, said, echoing a theme throughout the county. In fact, the News-Press found no instance of any church simply throwing out flowers, even if there isn't a formal, weekly delivery program.

Grace Lutheran Church on upper State Street gives its sanctuary flowers to members, but sometimes delivers them to the homebound or people who have been ill, the Rev. Lynn Bruer, the pastor, said. She added people who donated money for the Easter lilies at today's service are welcome to bring them home with them.

Other churches said their members are welcome to take sanctuary flowers home after their services.

At First Congregational Church, Mrs. Jones estimated 500 people have received flowers over the years. Scripture and personal experience motivated her to oversee deliveries for the last 10 years.

"When my mother was ill and lived in Orlando, I wasn't able to do as much for her as I wanted to do because I wasn't living there," said Mrs. Jones, a Florence, S.C., native who has resided in Santa Barbara since 1970. "I think that motivated me to do things for older people."

Mrs. Jones added she's also motivated by her church's ministry goals and the talents parable from Matthew 25: 14-20. The story tells about the wisdom of spending money to make a profit instead of simply hoarding it and gaining nothing.

It's a metaphorical call for action, and Mrs. Jones' reward is seeing the smiles on the faces of those getting flowers.

"I do enjoy going. I enjoy older people," she said. "They seem really, really grateful. One woman in church on Sunday sought me out to say her husband had written a thank-you note to the church for the flowers but hadn't included my name. I said, 'You don't have to include my name. This is my job.' "

The process begins with congregation members signing up for a particular day to give a \$30 donation toward flowers, said member Carole LaPorte, a Santa Barbara resident who oversees the arranging of the bouquets.

Each Saturday, Mrs. LaPorte or another church member buys fresh-cut flowers, usually at the farmers market on State Street and sometimes at Trader Joe's. This time of year, Mrs. LaPorte likes mini-carnations, gerbera daisies and lilacs, among other flowers. The retired elementary school teacher and her crew then take the flowers and create original, colorful arrangements.

"To me, they are a real joy to work with," Mrs. LaPorte said. "Flowers are happy. There's never a sad flower."

Each Sunday, the bouquet is displayed in the sanctuary in front of the congregation. Afterward, Mrs. Jones or another church member delivers it.

The flowers mean a lot to recipients such as Penny De Ley of Santa Barbara.

Mrs. De Ley, 74, a former high school English teacher and former volunteer English tutor at Santa Barbara City College, washes dishes after the fellowship time following each Sunday service. In appreciation, the church recently gave her a bouquet when she showed up at a worship service.

"They were absolutely spring. They were whites, yellows and orange, just delightful. It was a fairly large bouquet," said Mrs. De Ley, who lives at Vista del Monte, a Santa Barbara retirement community.

"Our apartments are arranged so we have a shelf outside the front door," she said. "So I put my flowers on that shelf so that people going up and down the hall could enjoy them."

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WORDS IN FULL BLOOMM

First Congregational Church of Santa Barbara, United Church of Christ, includes this note with the sanctuary flowers it gives to the homebound and others after Sunday services. A photo of the congregation standing outside the State Street church appears on the card.

"These flowers have been in our sanctuary.

"They have shared the pastor's message, the songs of the Chancel Choir, the hymns of the congregation and the prayers offered in reverence before God.

"Now they come to you, bringing them our loving thoughts and warm good wishes, in the name of the First Congregational Church of Santa Barbara, United Church of Christ."