

Lansing State Journal

LIFE

'Doves' fly at Holt church for pandemic deaths

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Published 10:29 a.m. ET Mar. 19, 2021

As eager as people are to get past the pandemic, the members of First Presbyterian Church of Holt recognize that they don't want to forget the lives that were lost. To help remember, they have created a memorial in the form of a temporary art installation that honors those who died from COVID.

The outdoor installation features 538 hand-made doves—one for every 1,000 lives lost in the United States.

“Hopefully, this can be a way to help us remember and celebrate those lives,” said Rev. Kirk Miller, the senior pastor at the church. “The idea is to have each of the doves represent 1,000 deaths that have taken place in our country. We'll keep adding doves until we don't have to, then at that point, the temporary installation will come down.”

The church invited the public to send in names of loved ones who died from COVID to be honored in the memorial in their front yard at 2021 N. Aurelius Road in Holt. Submissions can be made at <https://www.fpc-holt.org/> The form asks for the loved one's name, date of birth, date of death and three words that describe them. The name and dates are inscribed on one side of a dove and the three words are inscribed on the other side.

They have been receiving names from all around the country.

On the date of the installation, the church held a candlelight vigil where they read out the names, dates, and descriptive words followed by a tolling of the bell for each one. They have left the invitation open for people to continue to send in names which will be inscribed on the birds in the memorial. Doves will be added for as long as people are dying.

In the fall, whether the installation is still expanding or not, they are going to purchase 500-plus crocuses and plant them in the front yard so that every spring they will have a reminder of the pandemic and the lives that were lost.

Miller says he hopes the installation will help people to start wrapping their minds around the magnitude of the loss.

“Those individual lives on the doves—each of those was unique and different,” Miller said. “Each one of those was created in God’s image, to reflect God’s glory. If we can hold on to those treasures at the same time we are recognizing the loss, maybe it will be a help for dealing with this in a healthy way.”

The art installation was the work of a group of 20 people in the congregation, led by their lead liturgical artist, Cheryl Gamber. People ages 8 to 80 contributed to either cutting the doves out according to Gamber’s pattern or sewing them together.

Both the material and the makers have ties to what the community has been doing to help others during the pandemic.

In addition to the art installation, Gamber was working on an art project for Lent and Easter, so she said there was no way she could sew 500 doves. However, within the congregation were sewers who throughout the pandemic had made thousands of masks and donated them to teachers, airline workers, a fire station, first responders and anyone else who asked for them.

“Why don’t we mobilize the mask makers?” Gamber said, pointing out their work had come to a standstill.

The search for material that would stand up to the elements while looking beautiful also came out of the mask making the church had been doing and Gamber’s construction in particular.

“The masks I made had polypropylene filters inside them,” Gamber said. “I saw some metallic polypropylene material. It doesn’t fray and it holds up to the elements. We sew two pieces together to make our dove with a little stuffing to make it a three-dimensional quality and it will catch and reflect the light.”

Each dove is about the size of a mask. A member of their operations committee, Ken Hoffman, came up with the idea of chains to hang them on so that they wouldn’t tangle. Seven 30-foot chains are filled with doves and hung from the church’s bell tower in their front yard and pulled out so that it appears the doves are flying up to the trio of crosses at the top of the tower.

“One of Cheryl’s wonderful gifts is that she gets the congregation involved in our liturgical art,” Miller said. “It is something that she does, but she turns it into a congregational project. She created the template for the doves and picked the materials. She put her artist hat on and really went to town. Then we did the recruiting and we’ve had a wonderful response with folks across the congregation wanting to help.”

On March 10, the church hung the chains and dedicated the memorial with a candle-light vigil. It was a windy night that made it difficult to keep the candles lit, but the doves flickered in the air, each capturing the light of cars driving by the intersection of Holt and Aurelius Road where the church sits. Miller, Gamber and the associate pastor Ben Rumbaugh read out names and the information they had received about each person and the bell tolled for each.

Gamber says she is sure that as each dove was made, it was prayed over the way the sewers did with the masks they were making.

“Each dove represents a thousand lives lost and that’s a lot of weight on this little piece of fabric,” Gamber said. “It’s an incredible, sobering number.”

She said it was important to them that they open up the memorial to the community, that anyone can send in names and information about a lost loved one.

“We want to show that as a church, we care. People are important to us and we are a church that reaches out into the community,” Gamber said.

The fact that the fabric reflects the light is important to Gamber and her philosophy as an artist. One of her mentors talked in his book about how God didn’t eliminate the darkness, he put boundaries on it and the boundaries were light.

“An artist’s job is also to do that, to put boundaries on the darkness by showing light and beauty,” Gamber said, saying that when she saw the doves hanging in the sanctuary before they were installed, she was struck with that thought. “They’re catching the light, they’re reflecting light from the sun coming through our ceiling. For those people, it’s not all darkness, there is light in this. To look for beauty is one of the things that is important to be in general and as an artist. Beauty is what we are aiming at. The absence of beauty is the absence of God.”