

NEEDLING THROUGH FOUR DECADES

*Faithful Women of Minneapolis
Embroider a Masterwork*

by Larry Sommers

Nature abhors a vacuum—and so did the late Rev. Elaine Marsh, associate pastor at Plymouth Congregational Church, Minneapolis.

“I think you should be able to go around the corner, at any spot in a church, and suddenly come upon something beautiful,” she said.

One day in 1968, she expressed frustration about the blank, house-shaped end wall of the large downtown church’s guild hall. Congregant Mary Carson, recalling fine wall hangings she had seen in Europe, thought she could raise enough volunteer “needlers” to fill the huge space with a work of crewel embroidery.

Carson contacted people at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., for advice on methods and techniques for a large wall hanging. But where would the design come from?

Marsh was vacationing in England when she got a phone call from an excited Mary Carson. In a little book by a well-known author, Mary had spied illustrations in a fluid, fanciful style that would be just right for the guild hall project. Marsh immediately paid a visit to the artist, Pauline Baynes, at her studio in Dulverton, West Somerset, and soon recruited her for the project.



*The Rev. Elaine Marsh,
associate pastor at Plymouth
Congregational Church,
Minneapolis, in her study.*

UNVEILING

More than 40 years later, on July 15, 2012, the Plymouth Needlers unveiled the last of a cycle of four seasonal wall hangings, titled *Summer of the First Amendment*. An enthusiastic crowd filled the guild hall and a new vocal work, “The Four Freedoms,” by David Evan Thomas, was performed.

Senior Minister James Gertmenian preached a sermon that day titled, “In Praise of the Needlers.” Though key instigators of the project, including Marsh, Baynes, and Mary Carson’s husband, Paul, had passed from the scene, many of the 145 women who have worked on the four embroideries were present, having brought the most recent hanging to a triumphant completion.

“These intrepid women over a space of four decades have not only created works of art without parallel but also have forged a lively and enduring community based on creativity, skill, shared work, imagination, mutual affection, and commitment,” Gertmenian said.

Along the way, they have become first-rate practitioners of an ancient art that in medieval times required long years as an apprentice and journeyman before one became a master.

The guild hall project originally envisioned only a single hanging, approximately 25 feet wide by 16½ feet high at its center peak. Titled *Churchmen in the New World*, completed with





From left, Karen Reed, Lora Anderson, and Dawn Wanous work on different parts of the fourth Guild Hall embroidery, Summer of the First Amendment, and prepare for its first hanging and mid-July unveiling.

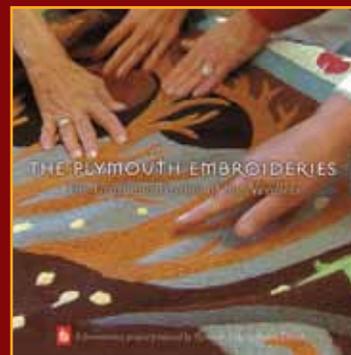
Inset: Karen Reed finishes a detail.

Larry Sommers

THE PLYMOUTH EMBROIDERIES

The Craft and Passion of the Needlers

Plymouth Congregational Church has produced a fascinating half-hour video essay, **THE PLYMOUTH EMBROIDERIES: The Craft and Passion of the Needlers**, showing this remarkable group of women and how they have approached and organized their large-scale, long-continuing practice of textile art. It is available by postal mail. Send your name and address and \$10 for a DVD or \$12 for VHS, plus \$3 postage and handling, to Plymouth Church, 1900 Nicollet Ave., Minneapolis, MN 55403-3789. Write "Video" in the memo line of your check.



amazing swiftness, and dedicated in 1974, it is a triptych in concept—its center panel showing Plymouth Colony and the fabled “first Thanksgiving” dinner, with scenes from Abolition days in the right panel and depictions of Plymouth Church itself on the left side.

The design’s borders teem with wild and domestic life forms—fish, fowl, and ever-present dogs—and a wealth of religious and secular symbols instantly recognizable to Congregational Christians.

But the people, the “churchmen” with their endeavors and struggles, occupy center stage in all three panels, telling the story of Congregationalism in a powerful way.

“We wanted it to be really lively and tell a good story,” said Mary Carson.

Pauline Baynes was a book illustrator, who had made her way in London’s art scene and won acceptance and renown



Pauline Baynes in 2007.

when J.R.R. Tolkien rejected another artist’s dull illustrations for his book *Farmer Giles of Ham* and found instead, in Baynes, an illustrator whose free and imaginative style matched his own dedication to fantasy. After her success with *Farmer Giles of Ham*—Tolkien approvingly said she had “reduced my text to a commentary on her drawings”—she went on to illustrate many of his other books.

She also became the primary illustrator for *The Chronicles of Narnia*, written by Tolkien’s friend C.S. Lewis.

Her illustrations for Tolkien’s fantasy *Smith of Wootton Major* brought her to the attention of Mary Carson and Plymouth’s Needlers.

A CREWEL KIND OF CHALLENGE

In drawing the design for *Churchmen in the New World*, Baynes had to fill a large space with many interesting details and yet make the drawings simple enough to be embroidered convincingly with crewel yarn, a challenge she accepted and mastered.

She sent a small-scale colored drawing, which then had to be transferred faithfully to the vast canvas of the house-shaped (and house-sized!) wall hanging.

The transfer was accomplished by Paul Carson, Mary’s husband, a retired dentist. He painstakingly photographed every square inch of the original drawing on slide film and built an ingenious device to project each slide perpendicularly, at its enlarged size, upon the stretched Irish upholstery linen, then carefully tracing the design’s outlines on the linen.

All that remained was for many volunteer Needlers to fill in the outlines with embroidery, using many colors (“We deal with a yarn company in Connecticut that has 800 color

choices,” confided Mary Carson), and many different stitches to convincingly represent the varying textures of life.

The results were impressive.

“There is a kind of ‘oneness of hand,’ and that takes a lot of thought, because everybody has their different quality of stitching, a different amount of tension that’s pulled, a different angling of the thread,” said Lotus Stack, curator of textiles at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

“The lady at the National Cathedral said, ‘Don’t compromise with mediocrity,’” said Carson. “And I said, ‘How do I do that?’ and she said, ‘Tear it out and start over!’”

So the Needlers’ method from the start has often come down to tearing out and starting over. If an embroiderer is dissatisfied with a piece of work, she rips out the stitches and tries again. Considering that the hand work takes about an hour per square inch, achieving top quality becomes an exercise in patience and persistence.

At last *Churchmen in the New World* was complete and was hung in the guild hall, so the wall was no longer bare.

Mission accomplished.

But they soon discovered that they couldn’t simply hang it there and forget it. Unless the fabric were taken down and allowed to rest, it was likely to stretch out of shape.

“I was getting that feedback from several museums,” Mary Carson said.

So they took the hanging down to rest it, “and the people in the church would say, ‘But we want it there while we’re having our reception!’”

ONE GOOD WORK BEGETS A SERIES

So the idea was born to do three more hangings—four in all, one for each season of the year—so they could hang in a regular rotation on the guild hall wall and rest between hangings.

The second piece, *Christmas Radianance*, was begun in 1986 and dedicated in December 1992.

The third, *Renewal of Life*, celebrating the season of spring, was begun in 1995 and dedicated in June 2002.

The final piece, *Summer of the First Amendment*, celebrating the concept of separation of church and state, was begun in 2002 and dedicated last July.

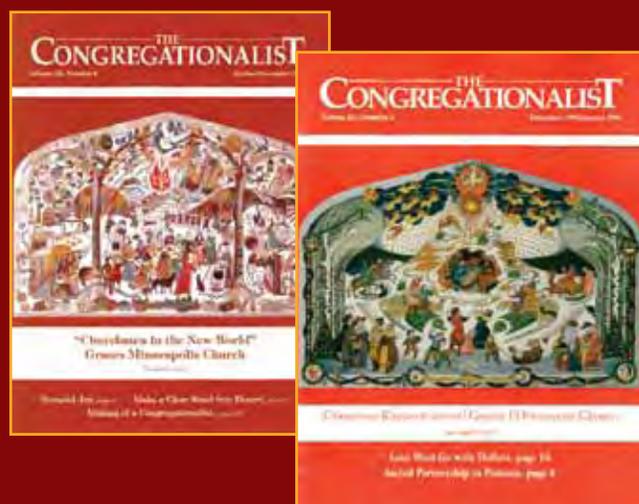
All four were designed by Baynes, and all feature the same busy, flowing style. The realization of the designs was a

departure for the artist, whose work usually appeared on the flat pages of books, not in the texture of embroidery on linen.

“I was just honored and flattered to be asked,” Baynes said in a 2004 interview. “I . . . really didn’t think that hundreds of people would be sewing for years on end. Otherwise, I think I wouldn’t have accepted the commission at all. It would be much too frightening and daunting.”

Starting about 18 years ago, there was a changing of the guard: Mary Carson invited Dawn Wanous and Marilyn Mork to lunch and asked them to take leadership in the Needlers, along with Karen Reed, who had worked in the project almost from the beginning. They accepted the challenge and at first benefited from the continued presence

CONTINUING COVERAGE



Long-time readers of *THE CONGREGATIONALIST* may recall that two of the Needlers’ earlier works graced this magazine’s covers in the 1990s. *Christmas Radianance* appeared on the cover of our Vol. 153, No. 6 (December 1993/January 1994), left; and *Churchmen in the New World* appeared on Vol. 156, No. 4 (October/November 1996), right. The former work was described on the back cover of the same issue in a reflection by Needler Alice Newman, and the latter on the back cover of the same issue in a reflection by Needler Jane Lampert.



Margit Johnson

Mary Carson works on *Summer of the First Amendment*.

of Carson. But as Mary Carson has slowed down in recent years, Wanous and Reed have soldiered on, bringing the cycle of four hangings to completion.

The new piece, *Summer of the First Amendment*, shows American political and religious thought as a river, swirling down from Independence Hall, where George Washington stands by the Liberty Bell, flowing under a “bridge of correspondence” between Jefferson and Madison, and resolving into separate streams representing church and state.

In this general theme, it manages to include a plethora of American images and personalities, ranging from Johnny Appleseed to an Amish carriage!

In a note to the Needlers, Baynes wrote: “I hope I have made it simple enough to embroider and simple enough for the basic idea to come across. It is also, hopefully, a celebration of July 4th, Independence [sic] Day—and also a celebration of the season of harvest, fruit and flowers.”

Between working on large hangings, the Needlers also executed Baynes’ designs on guild hall furniture dedicated in 1982, a Pilgrim Bench dedicated in 1985, and sanctuary furniture dedicated in 1992.

MORE THAN A PROJECT

Through it all, they have kept an artistic discipline, a persistence, and a faithfulness to their task that has enabled a great outpouring of artistic results, of which Plymouth Church members are notably proud. But it’s been about more than art.

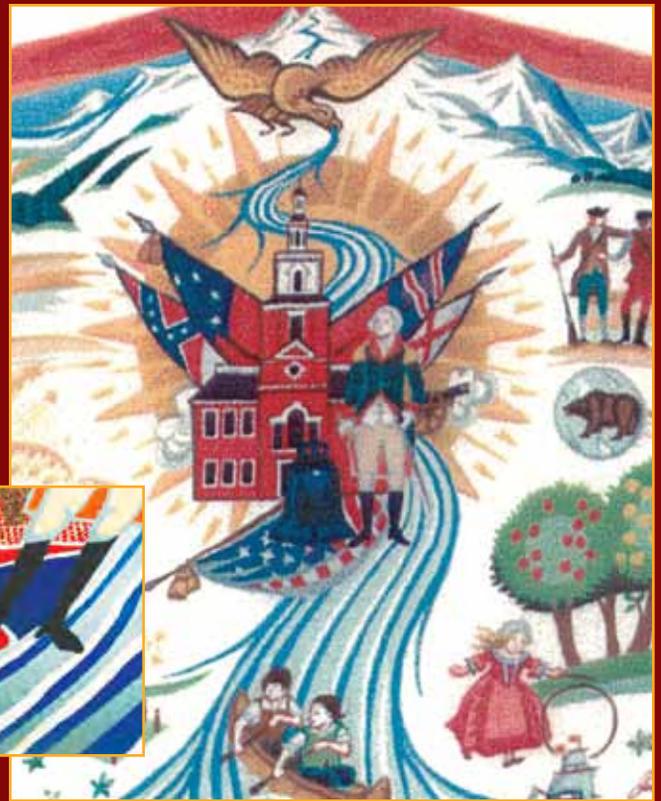
“As remarkable as these embroideries are,” said Gertmenian, “what is more remarkable still is the community that our



Members and friends react with delight at the July 15 unveiling of *Summer of the First Amendment*, the last of four wall hangings by the Needlers.

DON'T TREAD ON ME

As seen in this detail from Pauline Baynes' original sketch, the design for *Summer of the First Amendment* had George Washington standing on the U.S. flag—a transgression of mythic proportion. The Needlers revised that part of the artist's design, and the Father of Our Country—in the part of the hanging shown on our cover (see inset)—now treads, more appropriately, on the Union Jack shield of the British Empire.



Needlers have built over the last 40 years. In coming together week after week, in sharing their lives with one another, in taking up a common task in which no one person is a 'star,' they have modeled for us what Christian community can be."

"It's become a support group for all of us," said Dawn Wanous.

"It's kind of like family," said Mary Carson.

Now that the final hanging of the four has been completed, what does the future hold in store for the Needlers?

Dawn Wanous and Karen Reed, the group's present-day leaders, agree that it's not time to call it quits, but they're searching for a direction.

"Since we had the best artist and technical help for 40 years, and they are no longer living," wrote Wanous in a recent e-mail, "we are reluctant to begin

a new project. The obvious need is to transcribe 40 years of lovely correspondence from Pauline Baynes into an archival history. We are currently working with a small group on Thursday mornings, and I plan to meet with the evening group in February to enlist their help as well.

"We also need to write booklets describing the four embroideries. ... That should keep us busy for the rest of our lives!"

In an interview several years before her 2010 death, Elaine Marsh, whose *horror vacui* seems to have given impetus to the whole project, summed it up:

"It's art; it's fellowship of the group; it's a sense of well-being of the church; and, for me—it covers the blank wall."



Allison Campbell/Jensen



Norm Lemburg

LARRY SOMMERS, the editor of this magazine, is far from being an authority on needlework, but likes art, especially the Congregational kind.