

Anna Sims

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The call in action

Dear friends,

The first time I set up my absent flatmate's sewing machine, Pinky, our house rabbit, fled into her cage, frightened by the flurry of unexpected activity and the whirring sounds. However, she soon became accustomed to the noise and started to lie in companionable silence near my foot that wasn't on the pedal. We were trapped in my flat at the beginning of the incredibly strict lockdown in Peru, so I decided to have a go at a machine-sewn patchwork quilt kit.

Like a lot of things I put my hand to, I'm eager, but not always very precise! So, as I followed the kit's instructions using the resources I had to hand, I created a very wonky quilt. It was my attempt at making a beautiful final product out of lots of imperfect pieces.

I enlisted my friend and fellow CMS mission partner Pat Blanchard for some illegal sewing classes (we informally "bubbled" – bubbles aren't a thing here). Pat's background is in textiles and so, as she lovingly tutted at my wonky seams and visible "invisible" stitches, she kindly shared her technical skills with me. We both enjoyed the creative break from our quarantine isolation. I got a taste for it and started scrounging scraps of cotton from anywhere I could get my hands on it; fabric that we had in the flat, bedding, and some sent by friends in the UK. I bought what I could without a real plan. The gift of a quilting ruler revolutionised my life!

The pandemic raged on and in my varying stages of isolation I carried on sewing. I love the different stages, the infinite possibilities of fabric scraps, colourways and patterns. My desire is to create something beautiful and coherent out of a mishmash of patterns and colours.

I found the whole process therapeutic and I relished the order that is brought to a chaotic stack of fabric through cutting straight lines and making uniform shapes. My favourite part is playing around with the layout of the blocks, trying out different combinations where neighbouring pieces bring out and enhance the ones next to them.

Each quilt is made with someone in mind and I often pray for the person I'm making it for while I am working on it. When my friend Carmen became increasingly ill at the end of last year, I made her a quilt and prayed her through her illness. It helped me process my grief at yet another loss and when she died on Christmas Eve, I carried on working on the quilt and eventually gave it to her family. I am currently making a pair of quilts using the shirts of a friend's husband who died suddenly and unexpectedly last year. The quilts are for his daughters. We met



Name: Anna Sims

Location: Lima, Peru

My call: I am passionate about God, Latin America, people and the arts.

My role: I am part of Walking in Liberty, a prison ministry supporting English-speaking female foreign inmates and ex-offenders in Lima.



Continued over the page

Quilt blocks in process

to talk through ideas a few weeks ago and they each chose some of their favourite shirts to be prominent in the design. I started cutting the shirts up on Father's Day, which felt very poignant. I pray that my gift, made with love, will be one of their many physical reminders of him. There is blessing in making something new and beautiful out of something old and cherished.

As I continue to take bags of supplies to the foreign inmates that I support, I think about Elizabeth Fry. In the 1800s she used to visit the ships taking women and children to Botany Bay and give them baskets of useful items, including the materials needed to make patchwork quilts on the long voyage. The women that we currently work with don't make quilts, but pre-pandemic, when the prison workshops were still open, they were making items like wallets and bags out of scraps of leather. They were making new things, beautiful things, out of the scraps that they could get their hands on.

Realising that the possibility of continuing to produce patchwork quilts probably has a finite time to it, and also struggling with a loss of role, productivity and meaning due to the pandemic, I wanted to have a gallery space to show the fruits of my lockdown sewing. So, I set up an Instagram account (@lockdownquilts) to document them. This has opened up a whole other joyful activity with my now present flatmate/photographer as we scour the local neighbourhoods for interesting backgrounds to frame the different patterns and colours, seeing old and dilapidated edifices as potential backdrops. Combining wonky quilts and decaying buildings with scruffy peeling walls creates its own beauty.

The more I make, the more God speaks to me through the process, gently whispering to me through the rough edges about the hidden and the celebrated, through the layers of pretty fabric and coarse but necessary wadding. He speaks to me of creating new things out of old scraps. Creating new things that have wonky lines or scars from the needle. He reveals final products that don't look how I imagined them.

I'm not sure for how much longer I'll keep up quilting, but I hold onto the hope that as I return to the UK feeling worn out and in bits, God will use this time for restoration, and for making something new out of the scraps of my life.

As I prepare to finish this term in Peru, I give thanks for Pinky and my housemate's sewing machine – my faithful lockdown companions. I give thanks for those who shared their skills, knowledge and resources with me. I give thanks to the loving creator who continues to transform us into something new and beautiful, no matter how many wonky bits we are in when we come to him.

Love, Anna xx



Photos from top to bottom: Rough unfinished edges; with a finished quilt top; photoshoot in Barranco; detail from Carmen's quilt

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