If it's a cross, preacher Stiver probably has one

'In Greece, I saw a Byzantine cross hanging on a door. I made the bus driver stop. I ran out, grabbed the cross off the door, paid for it (in foreign money). People on the bus wanted to know how much I paid for it. I told them "I don't know. All I know is, I wanted it and I bought it."'

— Rev. Stanley Stiver

CLAREMONT — The walls in the Rev. Stanley Stiver's study were bare white plaster when he came to St. Mark's Lutheran Church 19 years ago.

Now they could be purple for all you can see of them.

The Stivers' son used to have a bedroom in the church parsonage behind the brick church in this small town just west of Statesville.

About all you can find in either room now are crosses, paintings of Christ, crosses, nativity scenes, crosses, madonnas and more crosses.

Stiver has turned both rooms into museums for his collection of more than 500 crosses and and dozens of other religious objects.

"Faces of Christ," part of his collection depicting the faces of Christ from birth through the Resurrection, will be on display at the Southern Christmas Show today through Nov. 12 at the Merchandise Mart, 2500 E. Independence Blvd.

This will be the fourth year Stiver, 57, has exhibited parts of his collection at the annual show.

"I've done everything but use the ceiling," said Stiver, looking up at the still-bare, white 15-foot-high ceiling. "But you know, I have some beautiful mobiles ... "

He is perfectly serious.

The collecting compulsion that covered Stiver's walls and shoved their son's bed into another room began 31 years ago when he was attending church conferences and conventions around the country.

"I always liked to have a little momento of the place I'd been. I'd end up looking in airports for things," he said.

And like the Lutheran Church itself, Stiver said "I've always had a great fascination with the cross. It's a sign of the triumph of Christianity."

On more than 30 velvet-covered boards are crosses from Mexico, Yugoslavia, Haiti, Scotland, Ireland, England, Ethiopia, Spain, Portugal, Germany and Romania.

One of the first crosses in his collection came from the Greater Pittsburgh Airport.

"I was at the airport staring at a small silver cross in the (shop) windows when a former church member of mine came by. He went in and bought it for me. I asked him why he did that and he said, 'I'm on my way to the Kentucky Derby, and I'm going to throw away more money there than I spent (for the cross).'"

During several years of just dabbling at the hobby, he mainly picked up crosses in such places as Columbus, Ohio, Miami, New York and Philadelphia.

The leisure-time pursuit didn't really begin in earnest until after he came to the Claremont church in 1959, and the church sent the Stivers on a much-desired trip to the Holy Land.

That is, the church tried to send them there.

"Two days before the trip, the Six-Day War started," Stiver recalled with a laugh.

So the trip was re-routed to East Germany, Rome, Greece, Istanbul and Turkey.

In East Germany, Stiver bought a light wooden cross on top of a ball.

"It's supposed to signify a cross (Christianity) over the world, which I thought was rather an interesting thing to find in (communist) East Germany," he said.

That launched his habit, one that has at times been virtually unstoppable, Stiver joked.

"In Greece, I saw a Byzantine cross hanging on a door. I made the bus driver stop. I ran out, grabbed the cross off the door, paid for it (in foreign money). People on the bus wanted to know how much I paid for it. I told them 'I don't know. All I know is, I wanted it and I bought it,'" he said.

Jane Lee Lisenby
RELIGION WRITER

Ever since Stiver's hobby got going full blast, his name has become synonymous with cross collecting. He frequently gets asked to speak to civic clubs, school classes and clubs at other churches.

Children and adults can't bring a friend to visit the church without taking them into what's become known as the "pastor's museum."

He's not at all surprised when members return from vacations bearing crosses from the countries they visit.

"Every country has a distinctive cross," he says, noting Ireland, Mexico and Ethiopia seem to have more crosses than any other country.

"One of the reasons there are many different crosses," he said, "is because during the crusades the various knights put a cross on their shields so the soldiers would be able to distinguish from a distance which knight was their leader."

Since that time Stiver says the cross has been "lengthened, shortened, squared and rounded"

Despite the variety, it's quite a challenge for church folks to find him one he doesn't have.

The Avon lady shouldn't bother to send Stiver any crosses. He already has three silver ones, with religious-sounding names like Abbey, Juliet and Romanesque.

"I asked them if there was any religious significance to the names. And they said, 'Oh, no, the names just sounded religious,'" he said.

A St. Mark's member who sells Sarah Coventry jewelry also has provided him with a set of the jewelry line's crosses.

He has a delicate, white crocheted one from South Carolina, from an 88-year-old woman who wanted to be sure the Palmetto state was represented.

He even has a cross-shaped planter full of cactus, given to him by a local nurseryman.

Almost every cross in Stiver's collection has a story behind it.

But the stories don't always come in the same bag with the cross. He sometimes has to wait and dig, and wait and dig some more to find out the history.

Pointing at two wooden crosses he bought in Romania this summer, he said, "I still haven't found out why these crosses have handles on them."

It took him 10 years to find out why one of his crosses has four eagles around the edge.

"The man who sold it to me in the Holy Land said the only Lutheran church in Jerusalem was built by the Germans, and this cross was on the front of it," he said.

But in his periodic research in a Washington, D.C., library, he found out "the Knights of Malta would put the symbol of their country on the crosses when they wanted to honor leaders. The eagle is the symbol for Germany."

Since he began his hobby, he says he's spent between $2,000 and $3,000 on crosses and other relics.

But the relics themselves aren't the costliest part of the habit. It's the $2,000 per trip Stivers and his wife spent to get to the places to buy the souvenirs. It comes to about $28,000 for 14 international trips.

"It's an expensive hobby," he says, "but a lot of people go to Myrtle Beach deep-sea fishing and spend $500. We figure ours make just as much sense," he said.

The crosses he bears

The Rev. Stanley Stiver of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Claremont selects some of the crosses and religious articles he'll display starting today at the Southern Christmas Show in Charlotte. A story about his collection is on Page 9A. (News photo/Don Hunter)