Magnificent Obsession Is Easy Cross To Bear

By PAT BORDEN
Observer Staff Writer

CLAREMONT — The intriguing clutter of the Rev. Stanley Stiver's office suggests a jam-packed life led by the man who has pastored St. Mark's Lutheran Church since July 1959.

On one wall, shelves are crammed floor to ceiling with historical novels and biographies, as well as inspirational books, both serious and humorous, and some of his mementos from trips to 30 countries around the world.

"My wife, Mary Jane, and I have been on 20 international trips since 1967," said Stiver, a 5-foot-10, enthusiastic man of 61. "That is beyond our comprehension, that we could have done this. We may not be able to have a house when we retire, but we'll have all these wonderful memories."

In 1975, wanting to lend a religious touch to the Southern Christmas Show, Stiver put together an exhibit from his collection of crosses. "I am a collector of crosses," he said. "That is my magnificent obsession, you might say. I must have 600 of them from all over the world, all different kinds of crosses."

He has contributed to the show every year since, using religious and historic artifacts from his travels.

Historical Theme

This year, his theme is "Christmas and the Cross in American History," with an emphasis on the Carolinas. He's been working on it since last August, using the upstairs of the rectory behind the church. The exhibit, on sheets of cardboard covered in red velvet, trace America's history, beginning with pictures of Columbus's three ships. The ships' sails, Stiver pointed out, have crosses on them.

Someone Worth Knowing

The Rev. Stiver displays his historical collection

Stanley Louis Stiver

Born: June 29, 1921, in Youngstown, Ohio.
Occupation: Lutheran minister.
Fun reading: Historical novels.
Hobby: Collecting crosses.
Favorite haunt: The British Museum.
Secret Desire: To visit China.

Other display boards deal with victorious Confederate battles in the Carolinas, with mementos that include spent Civil War bullets, uniform buttons and Confederate bills. Crosses, made from wood taken from trees on historic sites, are pinned to nearly every board. Other display boards have photographs of Confederate generals and information about the Confederate prison in Salisbury.

Stiver's interest in history includes the short-term, and on the opposite wall of his study, dozens of church-related photographs reflect a busy 23 years within the church.

Stiver pointed to the three rows of framed pictures of girls in white confirmation dresses. "You can trace the rise and fall of hemlines in these pictures," he said with a chuckle.

He'd just come puffing in from a meeting with a group of Catawba County manufacturing executives, trying to round up blood donor commitments. This will be the sixth year as chairman of the countywide Christmas Blood Visit for the Red Cross, he said, and this year, he is trying to coordinate the effort through business and industry.

"We are trying to collect 1,200 pints of blood in one day, on Dec. 15, and I wanted to see if they would help us get commitments."

Model Citizen

Stiver is affectionately known as "a walking, talking chamber of commerce" by Ron Leitch, exective vice president of the Catawba County Chamber of Commerce. In 1980, the chamber named Stiver its Outstanding Citizen for "extraordinary contributions to the economic, civic, cultural and educational betterment of Catawba County and its cities, towns and communities."

Stiver is a well-known figure — in this town of 880 persons in southeast Catawba County and beyond.

"I kind of think of myself not just as pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, but as pastor of Catawba County," he said.

Mary Jane Stiver, his wife of 34 years and retired director of nursing education at Davis Hospital School of Nursing in Statesville, testifies to that.

"We live in a constant change all the time," she said. "I think he likes to make life interesting for himself."

If You're Going

Stiver's exhibit will be at the Southern Christmas Show, Charlotte Merchandise Mart, 2500 E. Independence Blvd., through Sunday. Hours are 10 a.m.-9:30 p.m. weekdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Sunday. Adult admission is $3.50 at the door. $3 in advance. Parking in lot behind the mart is $1.

Details: 376-6594, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. weekdays.

Photos By DICK BELL

Passionate Collector: The Rev. Stanley Stiver of Claremont works on his collection of religious and historic artifacts. His particular passion is crosses. "I must have 600 of them from all over the world, all different kinds of crosses," he says. His display at this year's Southern Christmas Show is called "Christmas and the Cross in American History."