

The First Sunday of Advent

December 1, 2013

The Rev. Sidat Balgobin's quest for spiritual growth has taken him halfway around the world and back. He has always believed that life is too rich and precious to live in the same way year after year. And retirement has not changed his opinion.

The Yonkers, New York native had been working in engineering for 20 years when he sensed that his life lacked challenge and growth. One day, while looking at want ads, he saw a posting for a hospital chaplain. "The light bulb went off – ministry! I went to Yale Divinity School feeling this is the place where I should be."

The first two years at Yale were "very academic," says Sidat. He felt a growing need to attend more to the inner spiritual life, and applied to the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, where he trained as a spiritual director. "It was such a rewarding thing to do...listening to others and journeying with them. Mysticism is about awareness and stillness, silence – to have people come to the truth that resides within themselves."

After seminary, Sidat considered his next step. "One day, I was down on my knees, asking 'God, what do you want me to do?'" He felt God leading him to pastoral ministry and accepted a call to Falls Village Congregational Church in northwest Connecticut, where he served from 1994-1998. By then, he was feeling a strong call to leave the United States and seek his Indian heritage. "It was a very humbling thing – months of saying goodbye."

He traveled to India, but once there, was surprised to experience extreme culture shock. "I never felt at home and came back in six weeks." After returning to the U.S., he was called as pastor of Park Congregational Church in Norwich, Connecticut, where he served for 10 years, until his retirement at the end of 2009.

Sidat envisioned retirement as an opportunity "to go more deeply into the interior life. As a mystic, an awareness of the holy has always been an important thing." But one day, as he exercised on a treadmill, he developed chest pains that would lead to two cardiac surgeries. "Like most things that are difficult at the time, it turned out to be a blessing. I got to do a lot of interior work," he says.

In retirement, Sidat is able to live a quiet and simple life and have the balance to give back through spiritual direction and supply preaching. The ministerial assistance he receives in the form of pension and health premium supplementation "is a blessing because it comes from the generosity of people of the past and present, but what's in that generosity is holiness."

HOW THE FUNDS ARE USED

The generous gifts of UCC congregations and individuals to the Christmas Fund enabled the Pension Boards' Ministerial Assistance program to provide some form of assistance to impact the lives of approximately 900 persons during the past year.

- **CHRISTMAS THANK YOU CHECKS** to 500 retired UCC clergy/lay church employees.

This special gift at Christmas time reminds these Veterans of the Cross that they have not been forgotten and that the Church is grateful for their service. Gifts totaled \$200,000 in 2012.

- **MONTHLY PENSION SUPPLEMENTATION** for 395 lower-income retired UCC clergy/lay employees.

Our retired clergy/lay employees relied on this income supplementation for basic needs such as food, utilities, living and/or medical expenses. Since needs exceed the amount received through the Christmas Fund Offering, assistance was also supported by Our Church's Wider Mission and legacy gifts to Ministerial Assistance. The amount of pension supplementation totaled \$1,344,635 in 2012.

- **QUARTERLY HEALTH PREMIUM SUPPLEMENTATION** for 228 lower-income retired UCC clergy/lay employees.

These funds subsidized premiums for the UCC Medicare Supplement Health Plan with Rx so that individuals could afford and receive quality health care. Assistance totaled \$554,208 in 2012.

- **EMERGENCY GRANTS** for 45 active or retired UCC clergy/lay employees.

Sometimes those who serve the Church need our help, and emergency funds are available to assist in covering costs that arise unexpectedly – for example, large medical expenses, or home damage resulting from natural disasters. Emergency assistance totaled \$82,718 in 2012.

