

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 22, 2013

"Pretty immediately, we knew something was wrong," says the Rev. Alicia Spring, speaking about her son, Evan. "He was sick all the time and wasn't making eye contact. This was at the beginning of the autism epidemic and we pushed to get him diagnosed." Evan was diagnosed with autism at 39 months. At the time, says Evan's father, the Rev. James (Jim) Rapp, "It was quite a shock."

Alicia and Jim met at Eden Theological Seminary; after graduation, they were called as Associate Pastors of the United Church of Marco Island, Florida. They remained in Florida, and had two children, Renee, now 23, and Evan, 20. Over the years Jim served three UCC churches and a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation, and was called to his current pastorate at Church of the Isles in Indian Rocks Beach in 2009. After Marco Island, Alicia served as a hospice chaplain and then at Riviera United Church of Christ in Melbourne. She began teaching after the couple divorced, and is currently on the faculty of Eastern Florida State College, where she teaches world religions.

When Evan was about 10 years old, he had a series of urinary tract infections that persisted even with medication. His bladder became enlarged and his kidneys were failing. Dialysis was necessary, but as Alicia notes, "while it can keep a person alive, it doesn't always restore health. We wanted to keep his kidneys as long as possible and were able to for 10 more years. By the time he went in for transplant, he only had 14% kidney function." Jim turned out to be a donor match. "It was a no-brainer for me to want to share a kidney with my son. I shared my spare."

Evan's surgery took place in May 2013. The procedure was covered by insurance, but after being discharged, both recipient and donor needed to remain near to the hospital for post-operative follow-up, which meant several weeks of housing and meal expenses. The emergency grant they received enabled them to meet the costs. "Ministerial Assistance came through quickly and generously and we were able to be ministered to," says Jim.

Evan is now fully recovered. He is in a vocational program at a local hospital that trains young adults with special needs in how to be good employees, and enjoys "all things pop culture," says Jim. "When it comes to what's cool – he's on top of it!"

Jim hopes to see Church of the Isles become the highest in per capita giving to the Christmas Fund, and has already invited the Rev. Krista Betz, Director of Ministerial Assistance, to be there this year when the Offering is received. "We always supported the Christmas Fund," says Alicia. "I had always thought of elderly and retired ministers and spouses...I never thought of the other side – people who were in difficult situations. It was a real blessing to have that weight lifted."

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.

