

Rejoicing Spirits ministry at St. John embraces disabled

Written by Cindy Nevitt

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OCEAN CITY – Dan Miller stood up Sunday afternoon during the first-ever Rejoicing Spirits service held in New Jersey and said a prayer for U.S. troops, people without power and people who had lost their houses.

The 40-year-old public works employee, displaced due to flood damage to his Tioga Terrace home, bowed his head and asked for God’s blessing before a congregation of about 45 people who were attending a service for the intellectually and developmentally disabled at St. John Lutheran Church on Nov. 11.

Miller’s spontaneous participation in the service gratified Glen Stewart, an Upper Township resident who is the Rejoicing Spirits coordinator for St. John, as well as the church’s council president. During the service, Stewart – who had told the congregants, “The whole point of Rejoicing Spirits is to feel free” – said he was pleased Miller, a special needs member of the congregation, had stepped to the front and joined others in praying for a specific cause.

“We’re so happy with what has happened and the turnout,” Stewart said following the 2 p.m. service. “There is a real need for a faith-based community for people with special needs.”

Later, Miller, whose home took on three feet of water during Superstorm Sandy, said he wasn’t praying for himself or his mother, Nancy Miller, with whom he lives. He said his prayer had literally been meant for people whose homes had been washed away or torn apart by the hurricane. He still had a home, he said. He just couldn’t live in it.

“It’s hard to find something at his level,” Nancy Miller said of religious services. “There’s such a

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need for this type of thing for people with special needs because they're really left out."

Rejoicing Spirits, which started in October 2003 in Exton, Pa., has spread to 11 states, five denominations and more than 30 churches in less than 10 years, said David Hartzman, national executive team member, whose home church in Pennsylvania was the third in the nation to start a Rejoicing Spirits ministry.

"We reach out to men and women with intellectual and developmental disabilities who don't feel comfortable in their churches," Hartzman said. "Some of these people have never been in a church before. For them, this could be a stepping stone into church."

Glen Stewart was instrumental in bringing the ministry to St. John, as was Rich Deaney, former Ocean City business administrator.

"My nephew has Down syndrome, so I have a personal connection with somebody who has an intellectual disability," Stewart said.

He added that when he first read about the ministry in "The Lutheran," a monthly publication, he asked, "Why isn't anybody in New Jersey doing this?" followed by, "Why aren't we doing this?"

Deaney said St. John had a small fund named for his late twin sister, Carol, who had been disabled, and that the purpose of the fund was "to help people with disabilities, both mental and physical."

"This is a perfect match," Deaney said of using the fund's reserves to support the formation of the Rejoicing Spirits ministry at St. John.

Before the service, Pastor Mark Bruesehoff spoke of how his preparations for Rejoicing Spirits worship differed from that for a typical Sunday service.

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“This is a very specific audience,” he said. “The message is no different than any other message, but it is like talking to children on their own level.”

After a Bible reading about giving to God not from abundance, but from need, Bruesehoff led a group of enthusiastic dancers in performing the Hokey Pokey, which illustrated the lesson of his sermon “Put Your Whole Self In.”

The service was liberally sprinkled with simple, catchy songs that were purposely repetitive to facilitate easy learning, Hartzman said, a consideration taken because some of the congregants can't read. Upper Township residents Alexia French, who is studying American Sign Language at Ocean City High School, and Serena Lin, a younger participant, signed the song “Together in One Spirit,” which was written specifically for the Rejoicing Spirits ministry.

“We go from here to life,” Bruesehoff said at the conclusion of the service. “Take what we've learned here and take it out there.”

St. John plans to hold a Rejoicing Spirits service the second Sunday of every month at 2 p.m. The next service will be Dec. 9.