

LIVE ABUNDANTLY

After a recent diagnosis, Rev. Amy Jacks Dean commits to fighting ALS with all she's got.

by Ken Garfield

The day Rev. Amy Jacks Dean was diagnosed with ALS, a member of the medical team told her, "Go kick life in the ***."

"Alright," Amy responded, "I'm going to do it."

Talk about keeping her word. The co-pastor of Park Road Baptist Church "hiked" 51 miles on the Via Francigena pilgrimage route in Tuscany, Italy, in the all-terrain wheelchair she's nicknamed Gracie. And the rubber bracelet she wears now? On it is written "Live abundantly" and "Outlier," which is defined as an atypical person — which describes a woman who still laughs more than she cries.

Eight months after the diagnosis, Amy, 60, is fulfilling a promise she intends to keep: "I give you my word," she wrote to church members in a letter sharing the news, "I am going to do everything in my power to show this disease what I've got."

Revs. Russ and Amy Jacks Dean are a familiar presence in Charlotte's faith community, together leading Park Road Baptist Church. Their work to unite people regardless of differences in faith, race, culture and sexuality exemplifies the church's belief in the inherent worth of all people.

Amid a year of personal milestones — she and Russ marked 25 years at Park Road Baptist and 40 years as husband and wife — ALS was a punch in the gut. According to the ALS Association, ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, often known as Lou Gehrig's Disease) is a "progressive disease in which a person's brain loses connection with the muscles, taking away their ability to walk, talk, eat and eventually, breathe. Although there is still no cure or treatment that halts progression, new treatments are helping to slow and ease symptoms."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates



Left: On a pilgrimage to Tuscany, Italy, Rev. Amy Jacks Dean gets a push from her husband, Rev. Russell Dean. Their younger son, Bennett, held the safety rope, just in case.

that nearly 35,000 Americans are living with ALS. Average life expectancy is three to five years, though many live longer.

At this stage — and new symptoms can strike quickly — Amy's main issue is a lack of mobility. She relies on a rollator walker to get around. She named it Rolanda.

Amy, twice a cancer survivor, is grateful for all who are bringing to life the biblical command to bear one another's burdens.

Her husband, Russ, a self-confessed "basket case" about all this, was happy to push Amy up and down the Tuscan hills in June. He was 17, growing up in Clinton, South Carolina, when he fell in love with Amy. All these years later, he has taken to heart what a friend told him: "And now you get to do this."

Their oldest son, Dr. Jackson Dean, moved from Greenville, South Carolina, to Charlotte, to be closer to family. Along with Jackson and his wife, Madison, came 3-year-old Walker, the Deans' first grandchild. Their younger son, Bennett, who teaches sixth grade in Greenville, joined them in Italy along with his wife, Keylee, and her family.

The Deans' church family is reaching out with prayers, meals, hugs and more — tangible reminders that whatever Amy might face as the disease progresses, she will not face it alone.

"We have shed many tears already, and many more will fall," she wrote in the letter to the congregation. "I trust you will help catch them."

Amy understands that the tears will come. Her plan is to dry them, and continues showing ALS what she's got.

"I say this to Russ every day, 'I just don't feel close to dead.' My bucket list is living my normal life." **SP**