

Tiny gifts from God

Minister couple have quadruplets with help of eggs from woman's sister

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PLAIN DEALER REPORTER

AKRON — Life's stages seem to come in big leaps for Steve and Cheryl Clifford of Canton.

In just six years, the two have gone from being single ordained ministers of the United Church of Christ who had given up on matrimony to being a dotting married couple.

And early yesterday afternoon, following a half-hour Caesarean section at Akron City

Hospital, Cheryl, 48, and Steve, who turns 42 next month, became the parents of quadruplets.

"God's good," an exultant Steve Clifford said last night. "The next phase begins."

At an age when most women are past their childbearing years, Cheryl Clifford is the mother of two boys and two girls born eight weeks' prematurely.

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Steve Clifford reaches inside an incubator to touch Ruth, one of the quadruplets born yesterday.

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Minister couple welcome quadruplets

BABIES FROM 1-A

She had the babies, who collectively weighed in at just under 13 pounds, with the assistance of Heidi Kuchta, her 28-year-old sister, who donated the eggs that were fertilized with Steve Clifford's sperm.

Three of the four additions to the Clifford household — Robert Steven, 3 pounds; Ruth Marie, 2 pounds 13 ounces; and Heidi Lynn, 3 pounds, 6 ounces; squirmed, twisted and cried in their incubators last night. Paul, who weighed the most — at 3 pounds, 10 ounces — was taken to Akron Children's Hospital because his lungs were not fully developed. Cheryl Clifford was recovering without complications.

The Cliffords, members of First United Church of Christ in Canton, say they painstakingly arrived at the decision to have their babies through in vitro fertilization. In fact, they say, when they got married in July 1989, they did not plan to have children.

"I think the change of attitude came as we became more comfortable being married," Steve Clifford said.

Added Cheryl Clifford, "For me, it was just that I had settled that years before. I was going to be single for the rest of my life. Accepting marriage was one step."

When they did decide to have children, the Cliffords had diffi-

culty conceiving.

"There was no diagnosed reason for infertility," Steve Clifford said. "There was nothing obviously wrong, except that it's harder for older women to conceive."

After more than a year of trying to conceive, the couple looked into adopting. They came close, but decided they weren't quite comfortable with adoption.

A doctor suggested in vitro fertilization. But there were some obvious problems.

"If Cheryl was in her 30s, she could have donated her own eggs," Steve Clifford said. "But with her eggs they could give us was a 3.5 percent chance. The national success average is about 20 percent."

The doctor said a preferable donor would be in her mid- to late 20s. "As soon as he said that we looked at each other and said, 'Heidi,'" Clifford recalled.

They placed a phone call to her home in New Hartford, Conn.

"The way they presented it to me was that they wanted to ask me a favor," Kuchta said. "I wondered what kind of favor I could do for them since they are both ministers. . . . At first I wondered if they were going to ask me to carry their child for them. Then they asked me to be a donor."

"I sensed an unexpected openness on Heidi's part," Steve Clifford said. "I didn't want her to say yes that night. I discouraged her from any rash decision."

A few days later she called the Cliffords with a decision.

The Cliffords, who run a tax business in Canton, say they have received support from members of their congregation and top officials of the denomination as well as from ministers from other denominations.

Ken Iha, executive assistant to the president of the United Church of Christ, said the 1.5 million-member group has no policies covering members or ordained clergy on the issue of alternative reproductive methods.

Through counseling and prayer, the Cliffords say they are comfortable with the decision they made. Heidi Kuchta says she is too.

For now, they are concentrating on other concerns. Donations have been pouring in by the carloads. People have contributed, loaned and sold at discount everything from cribs, clothes and shoes to bedding and strollers.

Gertrude Kuchta, Cheryl and Heidi's 75-year-old mother, quit her job working in a high school cafeteria a few weeks ago and sold her home outside of Hartford, Conn., to move to Canton to help raise the children. Heidi Kuchta, a mechanical engineer, is also planning to relocate to the Canton area to be near the family.

"We're going to need the support and help and more miracles to get through the rest of this," Steve Clifford said.