

Pastor of northern Virginia mission church reflects on 15 years of raising hope for the 'least of these'

In 1995, after nearly two decades of working with Sojourners and the inner-city poor of Washington, D.C., Bishop Tom Stockton appointed me to explore starting a church among the poor and marginalized living along the Route One Corridor south of Alexandria. In June 1996, Doug Dillard, the Alexandria District superintendent, and I chartered a new congregation in the community room of the West Ford public housing project. We had 11 members and named this congregation Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church.

Our mission has always been to bring the power of Christ and the support of the church to the least, the lost, the lonely and the left out of our community. As a result we have drawn our membership from the many homeless, formerly homeless, disabled and working poor members of our community as well as a number of middle-class families called to serve God among the least of these.

Today our small congregation has grown, not so much in membership, but in impact. With 100 active members, two-thirds of whom have been homeless, we serve the needs of 8,000 impoverished people in our community annually with our food pantry, soup kitchen, clothing closet, hypothermia shelter, recovery programs, job programs and emergency assistance. We may do a number of things that look like a social service agency, but the core of our life at Rising Hope is our worship of the God made known in Jesus Christ. And it is His power that drives all our outreach into the community. We access that power regularly through disciplined times of worship, prayer and Bible study. We worship together five times a week. Sunday morning is our central celebration, but we also come together in a shorter celebration at noon every Tuesday through Friday.

I have always taken Jesus' words to reach out to the least among us very seriously. But Jesus is not content that we should simply feed the hungry. He was transforming lives by welcoming traitorous tax collectors, revolutionary zealots,

prostitutes and sinners into his inner circle. When criticized for eating with them, he replied, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12-12). If Jesus invited the most disreputable members of society to become his disciples, can we do any less? The gospel is both challenging and life-changing.



(Above, L-R) Aceline Bapthelus, Deborah Johnson and Dwayne Sands prepare meals for the impoverished. (Left, L-R) Mauri Bishop (Wesley Seminary student) assists Pastor Keary Kincannon in serving Holy Communion to Jackie Martin and Deborah Brothman. (Photos by Ed Simmons)

As I reflect on Rising Hope's 15 years, one thing we got right was insisting that we empower the poor and not simply serve them. Our food pantry depends on the many volunteers from area churches and their generous donations of food. With their support we serve more than 300 families every week, yet equally important is the empowerment of dozens of people volunteering from the community in need. We put them to work stocking the shelves, making deliveries and welcoming the patrons who come desperate for assistance with their food budgets. By offering everyone an opportunity to volunteer, we are giving dignity to even the most destitute of individuals. Rising Hope is not about a "free hand-out." Neither are we about the wealthy sharing their surplus with poor souls who have so little. Rising Hope has a much greater goal in mind. We want to manifest the Kingdom of God where rich and poor, black and white, privileged and disadvantaged come together to be empowered to live out our highest potential and humbled to serve even

the most undeserving. Love demands nothing less. That is what God did for us in Jesus Christ and that is what God is calling us to do.

The work of Rising Hope will be recognized with a year of celebrations designed to lift up and support our work. The first will be a simple service of gratitude on June 26 at 7 p.m. at Rising Hope. On Sept. 30, the Friends of Rising Hope are sponsoring a fundraising dinner, dance and auction at the Mount Vernon Country Club. Christian comedian Scott Davis will present two benefit concerts at Springfield UMC on Oct. 23. Then, at a date and time to be arranged in early 2012, Jeff Majors (gospel and jazz musician, recording artist) will host a "HopeFest" with great musicians and preaching to culminate our year of celebration. Join us for one or more of these celebrations as we give thanks to God for God's presence in our work.

For more information go to <www.risinghopeumc.org>. □

— The Rev. Keary Kincannon,
pastor at Rising Hope UMC in Alexandria