

Student intern learns about serving 'the least, the lost, the lonely and the left out'

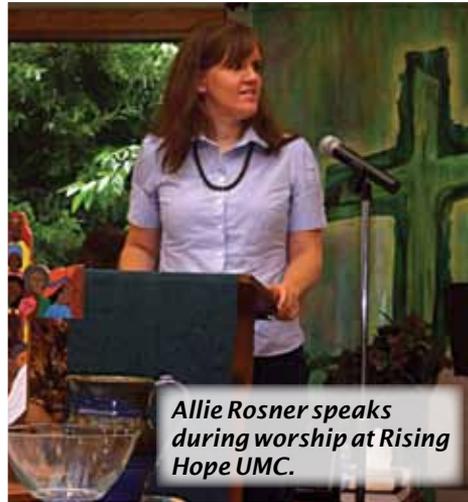
by Allie Rosner

As I've waded my way through the beginning stages of the ordination process in the past few years, I've often told people in the conference that I feel called to serve the poor. They always say, "Go check out Rising Hope." So the summer after I graduated from seminary, I checked out Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church, got myself an internship, and set out to serve the poor.

I had "served the poor" before – at women's shelters, assistance agencies and the downtown Atlanta church I attended throughout seminary. I had valued all of these experiences. But they had generally been for several hours a week, and now I was about to be immersed in a community of – as the Rising Hope saying goes – "the least, the lost, the lonely and the left out."

In some ways, I immediately fell in love with this new immersion experience. For one thing, it was probably the most colorful group of people I'd ever encountered in one space. There were ex-cons, ex-hippies, ex-addicts, and not-so-ex-addicts. There were people who lived in the neighborhood, people who lived in the nearby shelters and people who lived in the woods. There were mothers pushing strollers gathered in the food pantry. There was a guy on a motorcycle mission across the United States who wore a leather vest and a do-rag, and closed his eyes and danced when we sang in worship. I loved that mosaic quality that so many churches seem to lack.

I also quickly grew to love the lack of hierarchy I saw in the church. Over the first week or so, when I was still learning my way around the church and its various ministries, I found myself looking at the people around me and trying to categorize them. Was that person a client or a volunteer? I realized even at the time that the answers shouldn't matter, but I was surprised by more than one instance of a food pantry volunteer signing



Allie Rosner speaks during worship at Rising Hope UMC.

in for a bag of groceries before I began to get it. More often than not, the clients were the volunteers, and vice versa. When everyone can serve and be served by everyone else – well, that's a little bit of the Kingdom, right there.

But I have to admit that as my time at the church began, I had some misgivings. We often talked about Fairfax County's enormous wealth and how that wealth hid the real need in places such as the Route 1 corridor. But, as a Fairfax County native, I grew up enjoying every benefit of that wealth. I never experienced hunger or wondered where I was going to stay for the night. Pastor Keary Kincannon, at least, had experience with addiction, but I'd never been addicted to anything harder than chocolate chip cookies (and it seemed a little late in the ordination process to begin such an experience). So I was afraid of having nothing to say to this community facing struggles I'd never known. I was afraid of my own irrelevance.

So, what surprised me the most about Rising Hope was the love and acceptance with which people wel-

comed me. They asked me theological questions and told me how much they appreciated the prayer services I led. They encouraged me when I freaked out about my lack of post-internship employment options. They humored my high-church hesitance to clap and dance along to "Jesus is a Rock and He Rolls My Blues Away." Of course, as I got to know people better, I realized that the people who made up Rising Hope came with all kinds of different stories – different from my own in many ways, and similar in some. We



The Rev. Keary Kincannon serves Holy Communion at Rising Hope UMC.

had all come to that place for different reasons, in different ways, through different valleys and carried by different blessings. But we were all there as the Body of Christ, and that made us relevant to each other.

So, I went to Rising Hope to serve the poor. And I hope I was able to do so. I hope my prayer services, my lunchtime chats, my humble attempts at Spanish and my hours at the food pantry sign-in table made a small difference to some people. But in the end, it wasn't about "serving" as much as becoming part of a community of people with many different stories. And it was about realizing we all had something in common – Jesus – and something to share. Even me. □

– Allie Rosner

Ways you can help:

Support a homeless person or family. As people move out of a shelter or transitional housing program, consider raising money to contribute for a security deposit, or assist by contributing household goods, babysitting or moral support. See if your local shelter has a partnering program.