

Fairfax CONNECTION

Have Guitar —Will Play for Pray

By **CHUCK HAGEE**

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Hooking up with an old friend who "had become a Jesus freak" to attend a Sunday rock concert is not the usual way to enter the ministry. But then Keary Kincannon is not the usual pastor, and his church is not the usual church, particularly within the context of the United Methodist Church. "I am convinced many of my experiences were preparation for what I am now doing," he assures.

What he is doing is ministering to the disenfranchised, homeless and low-income population of the Route 1 corridor. He is doing it as the founding minister of Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church, operating from a dual townhouse on Richmond Highway.

Graduating from old Fort Hunt High School in 1967, Kincannon began his college career that fall. Over the next several years, it involved several schools, none of which resulted in graduation. The last was American University in Washington, D.C.

"I became involved with drugs and a lot of other things I shouldn't have gotten involved with. I was also caught up in the whole Vietnam War protest thing. It was 1972, the country was in a turmoil, and I was in a turmoil," this son of a Navy commander explained.

"I kinda wandered around aimlessly for a while. Then one Sunday an old friend with whom I had done drugs invited me to a rock concert at Rosecroft Raceway. When I saw him, he was a different person. He had become a Jesus freak, but he was no longer doing drugs," Kincannon emphasized.

"He was filled with joy, and I began to think maybe he had discovered something. Maybe religion was the answer. So I enrolled in Northern Virginia Community College to get my grade point average up and then went on to Virginia Wesleyan," he said.

"That's when I changed my major from communications to religion. I finally graduated in 1975. The journey had taken me eight years instead of four," he reminisced.

From there Kincannon entered Wesleyan Theological Seminary in the District. He was ordained in 1981 and entered the traditional Methodist ministry. He soon left that to join the Rev. Jim Wallis' Sojourners, a D.C. inner-city ministry to the homeless and working poor.

"I was a tenant organizer in the District for 10 years and directed the D.C. Coalition for the Homeless. And I was involved with their Homestead operation," he noted.

Kincannon was instrumental in starting the Methodist Church's Conference on Shelter and Housing and the Affordable Housing Ministries. In this endeavor he called on James Rouse — the founder of planned communities such as Columbia, Md. — to develop a game plan to get churches involved with housing issues.

"It was all very good, but I had this nagging feeling inside. I needed to be more affiliated with a church. But I knew that if I went to the Bishop and told him I wanted a church, he would assign me to a traditional, middle-class church," Kincannon speculated.

NO POOR CHURCHES —

"So I went to Steve Bray, the church's administrative superintendent, and told him I wanted to be the pastor of a poor congregation. He said that's fine, but



Staff photo/Louise Krafft
Pastor Keary Kincannon of Rising Hope Church in Mount Vernon.

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we don't have any poor congregations.

"He then said, 'But let's start one, a church that reaches out to the lost and lonely.' He suggested the Route 1 corridor as the perfect location," Kincannon recalled.

That resulted in the creation of the Alexandria District Outreach Ministry to the working poor, sheltered and homeless people of Fairfax County. In June 1996, Rising Hope was chartered as a United Methodist congregation, and Keary Kincannon became its pastor.

"We've had five locations. The first one was my car. I just drove around to various shelters and homeless locations to help those in need," he explained. The church's first non-mobile location was the Community Room at Pinewood South. It next moved to the West Ford Community Center, then to the Mount Vernon Plaza.

Since 2000, Kincannon and his staff of three, two full-time and one part-time, have been reaching out to Rising Hope's community from 8605 Engleside Office Park. Venisa McCormick serves as secretary, and Laura M. Derby is the programs and office administrator.

Derby joined Rising Hope at its inception as a volunteer. Coming to the area from Ohio as a fund-raiser for the United Way, she was very skeptical at the outset. She revealed, "I thought we have too many churches now. Why do we need another?"

Her mind quickly changed, she said, after she looked into Rising Hope. "When I found out what it was all about and the community it served, I said, 'Yes, Rising Hope is definitely needed,'" Derby enthused. "So I got involved and have now been the programs administrator for the last four years."

On Aug. 1, 2001, Rising Hope purchased 8220 Russell Road to become its first permanent home. It is presently occupied by Psychiatric Rehabilitation Services, which will continue to occupy the building for two years. "This will give us time to raise the funds necessary for renovation," Kincannon explained.

Cost of acquisition and renovation is expected to total approximately \$1.3 million. Most of that amount will be provided by a gift from benefactors Edwin and Helen Lynch, combined with money from the Virginia Conference of the United Methodist Church. Rising Hope will have to raise about \$500,000.

With a present congregation of 80 adults, Kincannon describes Rising Hope as "a church whose membership includes the least, the lost, the lonely and the left-out. Approximately two thirds of our members have been homeless at sometime in their lives."

But Kincannon is quick to point out, "Rising Hope is not only a church for the homeless. It is for everybody. Especially those most in pain. We have a wide spectrum of society in our congregation. It includes lawyers, school teachers, government employees and a barber, just to mention a few.

"One of the miracles of Rising Hope," according to Kincannon, "is that many in the community we set out to help have begun to find their own healing by reaching out to others. What we're about here is empowering people."

A living example of that empowerment sits at the front desk of Rising Hope as a receptionist. Dale Turner got involved with Rising Hope through a friend in 1997. "I had been homeless since 1995 with two children. When I was introduced to Rising Hope, I knew it was a church I wanted to be a part of," she explained.

"Rising Hope has helped me all the way, with my ups and my downs. It has been very supportive of me and my family," Turner said. She now lives in transitional housing and has served the church for four years.

Sarah Hoover is now a lay leader in the church. She also turned to Rising Hope and Kincannon when she was homeless. "I was new to the area and had just had surgery and had no place to turn," she said.

"They helped me get back on my feet. I now have a job with a law firm and my own condo. Rising Hope Church is like family to me. They are my friends," Hoover said.

A REAL PART OF RISING HOPE is its approach to Sunday services, which draw

50 to 60 parishioners each week. As an ex-rock 'n' roll band member, Kincannon still plays his guitar during services and at other functions. The telephone in his office is in the shape of a guitar, which delivers tunes rather than rings.

"It is part of my midlife crisis, I guess," he said. With his sister also a Methodist minister in Nashville, Kincannon proclaims his brother is "the only one in the family with a real job." That brother is Kirk Kincannon, deputy director of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities for the City of Alexandria. Another example of Kincannon's route to empowerment is how he has structured his board and committees. "We do a lot of work with other churches. So I have structured the governance so that many middle-class parishioners from other churches work with our parishioners.

"As our people learn to function in the church, it translates to their personal lives. This enables them to better perform tasks on a personal as well as a public level."

A living example of that is Gloria Harrell, who found her way to Rising Hope through a leaflet on her doorstep. "In Rising Hope and Pastor Kincannon, I found a place that would accept me for what I was. The people were kind and welcomed me," she stressed.

Harrell found herself in Norfolk without a home after her job was downsized out of existence. Her daughter, serving in the U.S. Army in Colorado, received a transfer to Fort Belvoir to help her mother. Harrell lived with her from 1997 until 2000, when she once again was able to get her own home, located in the development immediately behind Rising Hope Church.

Now employed by a contracting firm, Harrell serves as a volunteer leader in the church's weekly recovery circles program for those addicted to drugs and/or alcohol. "Pastor Kincannon saw possibilities in me that I never saw in myself," Harrell said.

Rising Hope is involved with an array of community issues such as safe crossings, affordable housing and community justice, according to Kincannon. Its mission is not a small one. Rising Hope serves between 300 and 400 people a week through its Food Ministry. It also offers child care; distributes clothing to 50 to 75 families per week through its Clothes Closet, located on the second floor; provides computer training; and operates three addiction recovery circles per week.

Other programs, done in cooperation with United Methodist congregations of the Alexandria District, include the Transportation Ministry, to aid those without cars; the Homeless Outreach to area shelters, houses and drop-in centers; Housing Ministry; and Camp Rising Hope, a summer week-long day camp for neighborhood children.

Kincannon's vision to bring his ministry for "the left-out" to one of the wealthiest counties in the nation will be highlighted by National Public Television on April 7 through the show "Religion and Ethics." It will run at various times that day on WETA, WMPT and WHUT.

"We make it a point to let people know we are not a social service agency, we are a church. We provide food for the soul as well as for the body. We charge for nothing. It is all free," he emphasized.

Kincannon is married, with a 9-year-old daughter. His wife, Judy Borsher, a computer consultant, is also active in the church. They live in Stratford Landing, the same neighborhood his parents moved to in 1966.

"Rising Hope was founded with the help of many churches throughout the United Methodist denomination. I had to have a lot of help. There was no way I could have done this alone," Kincannon said.



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