

Rising Hope

UNITED METHODIST WOMEN VOLUNTEERS ARE A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY AT RISING HOPE, A MISSION CHURCH IN ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA. by **RICHARD LORD**



Richard Lord

Perry Taylor lives in his car and uses some of the services at Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

For 23 years Debra Brothman was a nurse. Then, within one year, her husband died and her daughter committed suicide. Ms. Brothman's life began to unravel, and she became addicted to crack cocaine. When she lost her housing, she lived with another daughter for a while, but the situation became so untenable that she moved to the Kennedy Homeless Shelter in Alexandria, Virginia.

While living in the shelter, Ms. Brothman was able to get lunch, food

pantry items and clothing at Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church in Alexandria, Virginia. By 2007 she had overcome the addiction. She moved into her own housing. She joined the Rising Hope congregation and began volunteering in the food pantry and helping to serve the lunches that had drawn her to the church initially.

Today Ms. Brothman is president of Rising Hope United Methodist Women.

"If I hadn't found my way to Rising Hope, who knows where I'd be," said Ms. Brothman, who has served as the church's receptionist and secretary of the church council.

At Rising Hope, Ms. Brothman is not alone. Seventy percent of the church's membership is either currently or formerly homeless. The church is located along a 12-mile strip called the Route 1 Corridor, known throughout the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area

as a poverty pocket in Fairfax County Virginia. With a median household income of \$107,000, Virginia's Fairfax County is one of the most affluent counties in the United States.

The church bustles with activity every day with myriad social service programs to meet the needs of people in the community. Rising Hope offers devotionals Tuesday through Saturday in addition to a hot lunch program, a food pantry, a clothing distribution center and job training.

"This church has a lot of love," said Andy Powell, 62, who came to the church in 2002 when he was homeless and living between vehicles and on the street.

Mr. Powell was walking past Rising Hope on Christmas Day 2005 when someone came outside of the church and invited him in to join Christmas dinner. That's how he started using Rising Hope's hypothermia shelter. Next came the social services. Now, he has his own apartment. And he is a church member.

Church member Annette Lucas, 55, came to Rising Hope while raising three grandchildren as her daughter served a six-year prison term. Her daughter has since completed her term, but Ms. Lucas is still has custody of the children. Rising Hope's "clothes closet" became a critical resource when Ms. Lucas lost her job at Walmart after foot surgery in 2011. Ms. Lucas now volunteers at Rising Hope, sings in the choir and is a member of the local United Methodist Women. The 25-member group received the Alexandria District United Methodist Women Silver Social Action Award for its outreach efforts.

There are many routes to the different forms of participation in the Rising Hope community. Desiree Christian's ex-



United Methodist Women member Brenda Romenius helps stock shelves of the pantry at Rising Hope United Methodist Mission Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

perience was similar to Andy Powell's introduction to Rising Hope, but her life circumstances were different. She was not homeless nor in need of services. She was walking past the church on a Christmas Day. A homeless person invited her to enter the church and to join the group for Christmas dinner. She accepted. Soon, she was a volunteer. It has added a new dimension to her life.

"This church is so special," Ms. Christian said. "We reach out to those

people that other churches won't take."

For Brenda Romenius, volunteering with Rising Hope is a manifestation of being a United Methodist.

"Being United Methodist propelled me to social action," said Ms. Romenius, who has served as president of United Methodist Women at St. John's United Methodist Church in Springfield, Virginia, and as vice president and social action chair for Arlington District United Methodist Women. A grandmoth-



Richard Lord

Debra Johnson serves up lunch for homeless and low-income guests at Rising Hope.

er of one, Ms. Romenius retired early to become a deaconess and to volunteer.

St. John's United Methodist Women is one of more than 20 units from the Alexandria and Arlington Districts and United Methodist congregations in the area that are helping to support the ministry of Rising Hope.

"Our purpose is to minister with people," said Joyce Winston, president of Virginia Conference United Methodist Women. "Rising Hope is such a wonderful way to do that ministry. It fulfills our mission."

The Rev. Keary Kincannon, Rising Hope senior pastor, says United Methodist Women volunteers from around the area are an important part of the church's mission outreach. Volunteers make the church's mission action happen. Volunteers in the church's food pantry alone give the labor equiv-

alent of five full-time employees each year. And many of those volunteers are United Methodist Women members.

"United Methodist Women is an extremely important connection for us," Mr. Kincannon said. "Our own United Methodist Women circle is very similar to the circles in other churches. When you add the women who come from other churches, there is a very strong core. They are the pillars of the church."

Mr. Kincannon worked as a housing advocate for 11 years before starting Rising Hope from the back of his car in 1996. He recruited the first members at Laundromats, housing projects and even the woods.

"The homeless can remain invisible in this community," Mr. Kincannon said. "There are many people in this area that you don't know that they are there."

Rising Hope has changed locations many times since its creation. For 10 years, it was hosted in a series of community rooms. Since building a permanent structure, the membership has grown to 250 with 125 active and average Sunday attendance at 75.

Rising Hope tends to the spiritual, emergency and chronic needs of the 8,000 people who pass through its doors annually. Government-funded programs require people to prove their need, but Rising Hope receives no government assistance. Any person who asks receives services at Rising Hope. The only requirement is the person's statement of need.

The most widely used program is the food pantry. About 1,000 people in 350 households use the food pantry every week. Rising Hope also delivers food to 40 homebound people a day.

Rising Hope's "clothing closet" distributes 26,000 items a year at no charge. The items come from churches and individuals like Mary Wright.

A United Methodist Women member at Cokesbury United Methodist Church in Woodbridge, Virginia, Ms. Wright began donating clothes to the clothing closet in 2006. Then a United Methodist Women sister invited her to visit Rising Hope. She went, and she's been volunteering ever since.

She also leads devotions.

"At these church services, you can feel the spirit," she said. "No one just sits there and stares."

Walking through a bustling Rising Hope on a Tuesday afternoon, Mr. Kincannon concurred and said, "This is what church is about." ■

Richard Lord is a freelance writer and photographer living in Ivy, Virginia.