

THE 'HIDDEN' HOMELESS

by Keary Kincannon

Working poor often find themselves out on the street

Not far from Rising Hope UMC are camps of homeless people hidden in the woods. They do not want to draw attention to themselves for fear of being run off by the police.

Right across the street from Rising Hope is a run-down motel (some might call it a flop house) that houses families and individuals who can't save enough money for a first month's rent and deposit. At \$60 a night a family of four will end up paying \$1,800 a month for a single room with two beds and a microwave oven.

A 10-minute bus ride in either direction from the church will get you to two county-supported homeless shelters. Both have long waiting lists to get in.

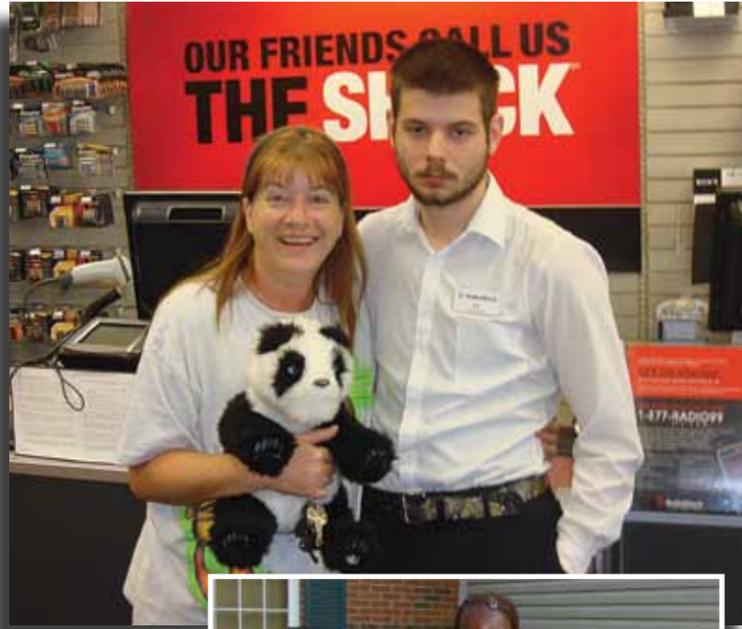
More and more often the parking lots at Rising Hope and other area churches are visited at night by homeless persons sleeping in their cars.

Earlier this year, President Obama recognized the growing numbers of homeless people during a televised news conference. He said "the homeless problem was bad even when the economy was good ... It is not acceptable for children and families to be without a roof over their heads in a country as wealthy as ours."

The Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness estimates that the current recession will add another 21,000 Virginians to the current 40,000 to 50,000 state residents who experience homelessness every year.

Our common perception of a homeless person is that of an unkempt addict or schizophrenic individual with multiple layers of clothing pushing a shopping cart down the street. But that is only one segment of the homeless population that needs our help. When Rising Hope opened its doors as a hypothermia shelter, I was startled by the number of homeless who hold down jobs in retail stores, fast food restaurants and other service industries. The problem is that their \$7.50 an hour job will not cover the average apartment rent in Fairfax County of \$1,311 a month.

Marcella and her children found themselves homeless after her oldest daughter became pregnant in her senior year of high school. Her daughter managed to graduate and get a job to cover living expenses. But childcare options did not always work out. Marcella found herself taking time off from her own job at Safeway to care for her new grandbaby. Unfortunately this led to Marcella losing her job and the subsequent loss of her apartment. After more than a year of uncertainty, living in one motel after another, Marcella and her family were able to get into a county program that provides temporary housing and the training and skill develop-



(Above): Eric works at Radio Shack, but his limited salary and his mother's disability check are inadequate for rent, food and other living expenses.



(Right): Marcella and her daughters are hoping to get their lives back on track thanks to the help of Rising Hope UMC.

ment to get a better-paying job.

Carol and her adult son, Eric, managed to survive by living with her mother. When Carol's mother died, Eric's job at Radio Shack and Carol's disability check were not enough income to pay the rent, buy food and cover other living expenses. They were forced to live out of her car. Carol started looking for whatever limited work she could do with her disability but was soon diagnosed with ovarian cancer. The surgeons removed her ovaries and four feet of her intestine. After the surgery she was released to the street to recover. With Eric's limited income and the financial support of Rising Hope, Carol was able to get through the critical days of her convalescence recovering in a motel room. She and Eric, however, soon were forced by their financial situation to return to living in her car. Just recently, by the grace of God, Rising Hope was able to connect them to a landlord with a heart for the dispossessed who is renting to them at below market rate.

I share Carol and Marcella's story not because they are unusual but because they are typical stories of homeless families.

Isaiah (58:7) exhorts us "to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house." Jesus reminds us that "whatever you did for one of the least.. you did for me," and "whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

Isaiah and Jesus remind us that we must do more than give lip service to supporting the needs of the poor. These Scriptures demand action. Policies, structures and institutions must be developed in our communities to ensure that a nation as wealthy as ours does not neglect its poor.

I have discovered, through decades of working with the homeless, that no one is beyond help when they know they are loved. I urge you to find ways to reach out in love: volunteer in a soup kitchen or shelter, buy a meal for a panhandler, stop to talk to the next homeless person you see and ask them their story. You will soon discover that we are all created in the image of God.

I believe that when we get to know the homeless as real persons, and not just statistics and stereotypes, we will not stand for how our society neglects and ignores their real needs. As followers of Christ, we understand that faith without works is dead. We also understand what Isaiah discovered. When we refuse to turn away from our neighbors in need and begin to find ways to assist them, "Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard." (58:8) □

— The Rev. Keary Kincannon is pastor of Rising Hope UMC, Alexandria District.

More congregations respond as more people are on the streets

Rising Hope UMC is probably the most visible Virginia Conference ministry to the homeless, since it was established to serve those persons living in poverty along the U.S. 1 corridor in northern Virginia.

The church, located on Russell Road in Alexandria, helps operate a hypothermia shelter four months out of the year, which is part of a 24-church partnership. "It's the best run shelter in Fairfax County because of the number of volunteers we have," said the Rev. Keary Kincannon, pastor at Rising Hope. "It's almost entirely run by volunteers."

Thanks to the economy, the number of people seeking help from Rising Hope has more than doubled in the past year. The church's food pantry serves about 1,200 people a week, and nearly 200 hot meals are served weekly to those who come in off the street. During the winter months, that figure triples.

In exchange for their meal, visitors are asked to spend a few minutes helping out at the church, whether by taking out trash or pushing a broom. "It's a dignity issue," says Kincannon. "We're trying to build a community that empowers people to get their lives stabilized and identify things they need to work on."

The church is open most of the time for people who want to come in for coffee and a conversation with a volunteer or staff member.

Kincannon also mentioned several other United Methodist congregations which are reaching out to the homeless. Mount Olivet UMC in Arlington serves a meal once a month as part of A-SPAN (Arlington Street People's Area Network). On the fourth Tuesday of the month volunteers make sandwiches and bag lunches to be given out to the homeless of Arlington.

St. Paul UMC in Woodbridge has an active ministry to the homeless. On Thursday nights throughout the year, St. Paul offers a meal for clients of the Prince William County Drop-In Center and others who are without a hot meal or a roof over their heads. St. Paul also supports the Prince William and Hilda Barg shelters.

As more and more people are finding themselves on the streets, more and more United Methodist congregations are responding to their needs. □



Ways you and your church can help:

- **Work at a shelter.** Take an evening or overnight shift. Help with clerical work such as answering phones, typing, filing or sorting mail. Serve food, wash dishes or sort and distribute clothes.
- **Help build or fix up houses or shelters.** Check with your local public housing authority or find the nearest chapter of Habitat for Humanity by calling 1-800-422-4828 or visiting <www.habitat.org>.
- **Organize an event at a shelter.** Plan an evening program such as a board game or chess night, poetry reading, guest storytelling, musical performance, or holiday party.