

The United Methodist connection in VIRGINIA



Cultural immersion helps Wesley Seminary student find reasons to change the world

Melissa Lee, food pantry manager at Rising Hope, proudly displays National Geographic's newly released *Feeding America* publication. The book documents the community involvement and feeding ministries at Rising Hope. Photo courtesy of Monica Reynolds.



By Emma Johnston

This past January, I had the opportunity to spend two weeks on the Route One corridor of Fairfax County. I was part of a group of 10 students from Wesley Theological Seminary participating in our Intercultural Immersion requirement for a Master of Divinity. I, along with nine of my peers, were partnered with Rising Hope UMC in Alexandria, and we were led by our partner in ministry, the Rev. Keary Kincannon, as we spent two weeks learning about the hidden culture within the Route One corridor. Fairfax County has the second highest median income in the entire nation. But just behind the Costco, there is an 800-unit

trailer park. I spent the two weeks racking my brain trying to figure out how such a large disparity was able to occur between the socio-economic classes. To give you a sense of what we did, I want to share with you several moments and days that spoke to who I am as a child of God.

I struggled to find my place in the group when I first entered this experience. Some people find it natural to quickly lead and jump headfirst into things. I like to observe. I like to see where people are in their journey, to hear their stories and get a sense of where I am and where I fit in before diving into something. The problem is, when you have only two weeks to be as fully present as possible, you cannot take your time to adjust as you might wish.

During the first week, we met with Ventures in Community (VIC), which is composed of non-profits, educators, law enforcement and local churches. They meet once a month to discuss upcoming events, planning and envisioning what the future of the Route One corridor looks like and how they can be catalysts for change. They understand what the phrase "it takes a village" means — they know that it is through the combined efforts of

their organizations and resources that they can be the most helpful to those in the community.

At the halfway point of our immersion, we went to the Alexandria/Arlington Bi-District meeting, where the keynote speaker was the Rev. Joe Daniels of the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference. While there is much to be said about the day, Daniels gave us three questions to ruminate on as we begin or continue to be in ministry: 1) What does your heart break for? 2) What does your church's heart break for? and 3) What does your community's heart break for?

Those questions became the turning point for me in the immersion experience. They allowed me to see the work of Rising Hope UMC in a new light. They allowed me to see the intersection of the work of the Holy Spirit, the community and the church and where their hearts break for the same things. They gave me room to see the transformational work of the church in the lives of people who are considered to be the least, the lonely, the lost and the left out. The people at Rising Hope UMC take you in and make you feel like family. No questions asked. No pretenses about who I was or who they were. Just

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A group of 10 students and ministers from Wesley Theological Seminary gather at the Eleanor Kennedy shelter to learn and to serve. Kennedy is a 50-bed shelter for 38 men and 12 women, located on Fort Belvoir grounds. Photo courtesy of Monica Reynolds.

a group of people coming to the Table to gather and worship the God that works through our mess and our pain.

The highlight of my experience was on the last night of the immersion. We were all encouraged to sign up for a police ride-along and to spend at most four hours with our officer and experience an average night of life on the Route One corridor. I was the last person to take this on.

My friends experienced moments when they had to deal with someone we had met at Rising Hope, or they had quiet nights when they were part of a traffic stop. Somehow, I drew the lottery when it came to my ride-along. I was able to experience every kind of call possible, and they were heartbreaking. They

made me want to reach out and hug the people we were with. I was able to have very frank and open conversations with the officer, and we were willing to explore different ways in which we see the Holy Spirit at work in our different fields. My evening inspired me to want to be part of the long-term change in my neighborhood. The people I met are the people my heart breaks for, these women and men and their children — they are who I want to change the world for. 🇺🇸

— Emma Johnston attends Wesley Theological Seminary. She is a certified candidate for graduation in May 2016 and is on the deacon track. She is a staff member at the office of Spiritual Life at Shenandoah University and is currently exploring ministry opportunities in the non-profit, community organizing sector.

April 10 to be conference-wide day to pray for General Conference

The United Methodist Council of Bishops has invited each annual conference to designate one day to hold a 24-hour prayer vigil for General Conference. These prayer vigils began on Jan. 1 with the Greater New Jersey Annual Conference and are continuing through the 131 days from Jan. 1 to May 10, the opening day of General Conference. Because The United Methodist Church has 131 annual conferences throughout the world, each annual conference is able to take one day.

Bishop Young Jin Cho selected Sunday, April 10, to be the day for the Virginia Conference prayer vigil. Each district is invited to plan activities using resources being developed on both the conference and general church levels. (For more information, go to <http://www.vaumc.org/2016GeneralConference>.)

Organizers are encouraging districts to use a Prayer Wheel to allow all congregations on the district to sign up for half-hour or one-hour increments so there will be 24 hours of continuous prayer beginning at 12 a.m. April 10 and continuing until 12 a.m. April 11. As part of this initiative, the chapel in the Virginia United Methodist Center in Glen Allen will be open for prayer. In addition, all congregations are asked to include the prayer initiative in their Sunday services on that day. A common prayer that can be used in all services will be part of the resources offered.

