

# More than Bricks and Mortar?

## Responding to the housing crisis – theologically, morally, practically and politically



Britain has a housing crisis. Housing costs have risen faster than wages; there are new cuts to the housing support available to people on lower incomes; the number of new affordable homes have not kept pace with the need. As a result the numbers of people on housing waiting lists has grown, there has been an increase in homelessness amongst families and single people, and overcrowding has risen. As the recession bites, the crisis in housing will impact increasingly heavily on young people, those on low incomes and those sliding into debt. A crisis in housing affects debates around the deficit, cuts in welfare, and what the state, the individual and the voluntary sector should take responsibility for providing.

Secure, safe and affordable housing is central to a person's ability to thrive and flourish. It enables them to become rooted in a community and develop healthy family and community relationships. A sense of place, land and home resonate deeply with Christian traditions.

Churches and Christians have long been involved in supporting people who are homeless or in housing need. Projects including day centres and night shelters, housing associations, rent deposit schemes, housing advice, supported housing, or housing which creatively uses of church land are provided across the country. And together we have supported campaigns to change public policy through organisations such as Housing Justice and other campaigning bodies.

Churches care and are there. But how can Christians contribute distinctively to the growing public debate around housing?

This short booklet has been put together after conversations with a range of people involved in housing, practically or politically, and who see it as a moral question facing our Church and society, and we would like to thank those individuals.

It provides background information and four “think-pieces”, together with some questions, aimed at getting people in Methodist, Baptist and United Reformed churches to reflect on the current housing crisis and how Christians might respond. Some of these pieces are deliberately challenging, with the aim of encouraging debate and conversation in our churches.

- **Crisis? What crisis?** answers some frequently asked questions about our housing crisis
- **Housing: a moral obligation** makes the moral case for housing
- **Theology of home: a place for human flourishing** looks at the theological underpinning of some of our approaches to housing, using biblical concepts of place, community and household
- **Putting our money where our mouths are** looks at how churches have responded to homelessness and housing need, and future challenges
- **Responding to the housing crisis** offers three priorities for Government action, which could form the basis of future campaigning by churches.
- Finally we offer some **questions** provoked by the arguments made in these papers.

We hope you will use these papers to start conversations on the housing crisis and to reflect how it impacts on your area and across the UK.

**And most of all we would like to hear back from you. How do you think our churches should be responding to the housing crisis?**

Contact us on...  
northj@methodistchurch.org.uk  
020 7486 5502  
@public issues

# 1. Crisis? What Crisis? Frequently Asked Questions



## Q: The Government is building homes: how can there be a shortage?

- 2010/11 saw 105,930 new homes completed in England, the lowest number in peacetime since 1923, and 38% below the recent 2007 peak of 175,560<sup>i</sup>
- The housing charity Shelter calculates that the Government's plan to build 170,000 affordable homes over 4 years is around a third of what is actually needed<sup>ii</sup>
- Waiting lists have grown by 70% in the last 10 years, yet social housing lettings are down by 1/3 over the same period<sup>iii</sup>
- **There are currently 1.8 million households on social housing waiting lists– approximately 5 million people, or 8% of all households.**<sup>iv</sup>

## Q: If there is a lack of social housing, shouldn't people aim to buy their own home?

- The average age of first time buyers may reach 40 by the end of the decade<sup>v</sup>. An extra 1.5 million 18-30 year olds will be priced out of the housing market by 2020 and 0.5 million are expected to be forced to live with their parents<sup>vi</sup>
- House prices are 25% higher than five years ago and 117% higher than 10 years ago<sup>vii</sup>
- From 1997 to 2007/8, the average mortgage rose from £60,000 to £160,000: this represents an increase from 3 times to 7 times the average salary
- **With home ownership a receding dream and social housing increasingly hard to obtain, renting is increasingly the only option for those on average incomes.**

## Q: Isn't the private rented sector perfectly affordable?

- No. High demand, rising property prices and the expanding buy-to-let sector have made the cost of renting increasingly hard to meet

- The private rented sector has grown by 1.3 million households since 2001 – a 62% rise. Private sector rents have risen by 65% in that period, while average earnings have increased by only 35%<sup>viii</sup>.
- **Private rents are unaffordable in 55% of local authorities in England<sup>ix</sup> and 38% of families with children are cutting back on food to pay rent.**

## Q: But surely Housing Benefit is overly generous and needs to be cut?

- Housing benefit no longer covers rents. 48% of private sector claimants already pay £23 more a week than is covered by Housing Benefit.
- After the cuts an average Housing Benefit claimant living in a 1 bedroom flat will lose an additional £11 per week. In London the average will be £22<sup>x</sup>.
- The perception that only unemployed people require housing benefit is increasingly false: since November 2008, the number of in work claimants has more than doubled, rising from 430,000 to 865,000, an increase from 10% to 17% of the total number of claimants and 93% of new Housing Benefit claimants since 2010 are employed<sup>xi</sup>

## Q: Won't the Government's Housing Benefit cuts and caps force rents down?

- This was never likely to happen in view of the scale of demand for private rents and the short supply of social housing
- Sadly, landlords are already stating that they will refuse to offer tenancies to Housing Benefit claimants<sup>xii</sup>
- **The only feasible way to bring rents down – and reduce the Housing Benefit spend – is through an increased supply of affordable housing and rent controls**

**Q: How can Britain afford to build more affordable housing? There isn't room anyway!**

- The current Housing Benefit spend is £23bn but only £4bn of this is due to social housing: investing in social housing is necessary to reduce the Housing Benefit bill
- Promoting a large-scale programme of building would stimulate the construction industry and the many other related industries: this would create jobs and have many economic benefits
- There is plenty of space to build: domestic buildings cover just 1.1% of England and 87% remains open space<sup>xiii</sup>. Much of this represents 'brownfield' sites suitable for development, not merely 'greenfield' (previously undeveloped) land
- **In short, the UK cannot afford NOT to build more social housing.**

**Q: Aren't there many unoccupied homes. Shouldn't we prioritise filling those?**

- It is true that there are 720,000 empty homes, but for the last 10 years the number of households has been growing at about 250,000 per year, over twice the 121,200 increase in housing supply
- Housing is being bought as a safe haven investment by speculators, who frequently have no need either to occupy it themselves or to rent it for profit
- A study by the IPPR suggests that there will be a shortfall of 750,000 homes in England by 2025<sup>xiv</sup> and the social housing sector will be under extreme pressure.

**Q: Aren't claims of a crisis exaggerated: the streets are not full of homeless people?**

- The Rough Street Sleeping count identified 2181 nationally in autumn 2011, an increase of 23% from autumn 2010. But figures collected by local agencies suggest that the true number of rough sleepers may be considerable higher

- Crisis estimates the hidden homeless (sofa surfers, squatters etc) at ½ million
- There are 48,970 households in temporary accommodation and 565,000 overcrowded households
- **There were 12,830 applicants for help under the homelessness legislation (limited mainly to families with children and vulnerable people) between October and December 2011, an 18% increase on the same period in the preceding year. The increase in London was 36%<sup>xv</sup>**

*If you want to find statistics for the nations within Britain, you can start here:*

- **Scotland** - [www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/KeyInfo](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Housing-Regeneration/HSfS/KeyInfo)
- **England** – [www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingresearch/housingstatistics/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/housingresearch/housingstatistics/)
- **Wales** - <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/theme/housing/?lang=en>

<sup>i</sup> [http://www.housing.org.uk/publications/find\\_a\\_publication/general/housing\\_report\\_edition\\_2\\_may.aspx](http://www.housing.org.uk/publications/find_a_publication/general/housing_report_edition_2_may.aspx)

<sup>ii</sup> [http://england.shelter.org.uk/campaigns/why\\_we\\_campaign/the\\_housing\\_crisis](http://england.shelter.org.uk/campaigns/why_we_campaign/the_housing_crisis)

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.housing.org.uk/pdf/HomeTruths2011\\_England.pdf](http://www.housing.org.uk/pdf/HomeTruths2011_England.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmcomloc/1526/1526vw94.htm>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/money/mortgages/firsttime-buyers-life-begins-at-40-6265083.html>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/property/propertynews/9328406/Generation-rent-one-million-under-30s-will-be-priced-out-of-the-housing-market.html>

<sup>vii</sup> [http://www.housing.org.uk/pdf/HomeTruths2011\\_England.pdf](http://www.housing.org.uk/pdf/HomeTruths2011_England.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> As above

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-15284892>

<sup>x</sup> <http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/1112HBCuts%20-FINAL-TS.pdf>

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/tenancies/majority-of-new-housing-benefit-claimants-in-work/6521183.article>

<sup>xii</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/jun/18/worrying-impact-housing-benefit-cap>

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.centreforcities.org/assets/files/10-03-16%20Arrested%20Development.pdf>

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.ippr.org/press-releases/111/2459/england-faces-750000-housing-gap-by-2025>

<sup>xv</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/homelessnessq42011/londonist.com/2012/03/london-homelessness-up-36.php>

## 2. Housing: a moral obligation

The deepening housing crisis in the UK represents a fundamental failure of the market system to provide what should be considered a basic necessity in any society – good quality, affordable housing.<sup>1</sup> However, the housing crisis conceals a deeper moral and spiritual crisis in UK society related to the cultural trends of consumerism, greed and possessive individualism which militate against human flourishing in resilient communities which housing policy seeks to achieve.

We need therefore a moral as well as an economic rationale for building more affordable houses. Churches are ideally positioned to offer a response to this underlying moral crisis because we are located in communities across the UK, can draw upon theological and Christian ethical resources, and take practical and strategic action.

A lack of affordable housing damages people. Poor housing and homelessness are associated with poor mental and physical health. Overcrowding, housing stress and financial problems make it more difficult to sustain healthy family relationships. Unaffordable housing can force people into debt, and to cut back on food, fuel or other essentials. Homelessness is on the increase. Having a safe, secure and affordable place to live is crucial to being able to sustain a stable family life, develop a sustainable livelihood, and to fulfil one's God-given potential.

Given that poor housing and homelessness can wreak havoc on individuals and our society, what are the guiding moral principles<sup>2</sup> we should consider when constructing a decent housing policy?

- **Human dignity** – we affirm that each and every human being is created in the image of

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<sup>1</sup> Affordable housing is defined here as housing where the associated costs, including rent and mortgage payments, are at a level that does not threaten other basic needs and represents a reasonable proportion of an individual's overall income.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Catholic Social Teaching



God and is loved by God. This bestows on them inherent dignity and worth regardless of their social status, income or mental and physical capacity. We therefore reject the negative stereotyping of the poor and other vulnerable groups of people and affirm that they are not merely to be seen as objects of our pity and charity, but as individuals and communities bearing rights – specifically the right to be treated with the dignity and respect that their worth requires.

- **Social justice** – the inherent dignity of human beings leads us to an understanding of justice as inherent rights which oblige moral agents to treat other people with the respect that such worth requires. Each and every person has the *right* to be treated in a respectful way as to treat a person with under-respect is in fact to *wrong* them. Justice is therefore present in society insofar as the members of society are treated with the dignity and respect that their worth requires and can enjoy the goods in their life or history to which they have a right.
- **Universal destination of goods** – we affirm the divine ownership of all created things and our stewardship of God's creation. This is a mandate for all of humanity acting under God to use and develop goods creatively to enhance human flourishing and well-being in society. The universal destination of goods implies a universal right to use the goods of the earth, a right of which no person may be completely or even largely deprived without grave injustice (except as necessary to prevent attacks on the common good itself).
- **Common good** - people exist as part of society. Every individual has a duty to share in promoting the welfare of the community and a right to benefit from that welfare. This applies at every level: local, national and international. Public authorities exist mainly

to promote the common good and to ensure that no section of the population is excluded.

- **Subsidiarity:** All power and decision-making in society should be at the most local level compatible with the common good. Subsidiarity will mainly mean power passing downwards, but it could also mean passing appropriate powers upwards. The balance between the vertical (subsidiarity) and the horizontal (solidarity) is achieved through reference to the common good.
- **Solidarity** - as members of the one human family, we have mutual obligations to promote the rights and development of peoples across communities and nations. Solidarity is the fundamental bond of unity with our fellow human beings and the resulting interdependence. All are responsible for all; and in particular the rich have responsibilities towards the poor. National and international structures must reflect this.
- **Sustainability** - is the long-term maintenance of responsibility, which has environmental, economic, and social dimensions, and encompasses the concept of stewardship, the responsible management of resource use.

So what kinds of implications might such moral principles have as we develop an approach to housing?

- People living in **poverty**, and other marginalised groups of people, must not be required to pay the highest price for the financial crisis and ensuing economic recession in terms of lost livelihoods and well-being (of which good quality, affordable housing is a key indicator). This crisis, which the poor had no part in creating, has dramatically escalated the housing crisis which makes building affordable houses a critical justice imperative.
- Housing and particularly land are of a different order to most other **possessions**.

The scarcity of land means that those who can afford it have an economic incentive to buy it up and sit on it. This lack of a socially productive use of land has a significant impact on development of housing and businesses. One approach would be to restore the social and ethical dimensions of property ownership (land and housing) to English land law, under which “owners” are entitled to use the property or covenant it, although not sell it.

- Flourishing and **resilient communities** need to be rooted in stable and secure family lives. They require good quality, affordable housing to be built through creative partnerships between national and local government, and the public, private and voluntary sectors. This function should not be outsourced to private building contractors or property developers alone based on efficiency and competition criteria which have failed dismally to meet the demand for social housing
- **Local communities** are best positioned to engage in the planning and development of their neighbourhoods and to assess and develop an appropriate response to the housing needs in their community. This however needs to be balanced against the tendency in local communities to become parochial and resistant to new developments based on self-preservation which does not serve the interests of the common good.
- **Sustainable development** recognises the need to balance the demands of the social and economic environment with the ability of the natural environment to absorb our use of resources to ensure that the needs of both present and future generations can be met.
- The provision of **affordable housing** is both a moral and economic imperative for the UK. It is fundamental to human dignity, physical and mental health and to overall quality of life. Affordable housing is also an economic imperative. It is a productive investment that can lift millions out of poverty and can generate direct and indirect economic growth.

***“The financial crisis, which the poor had no part in creating, has dramatically escalated the housing crisis”***

### 3. A theology of home – a place of human flourishing

*“Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field till no space is left and you live alone in the land” (Isaiah 5:8)*

What are some of the theological themes related to the deepening housing crisis in the UK? This paper is premised on the understanding that the housing crisis reveals a number of underlying problems related to the ownership, use and exchange of property which has become detached from its relational and community anchoring in land and property law in the UK. This has led to the commodification of land and property ownership, viewed merely as a temporal and convenient way of transferring capital as opposed to the essential relational character of property which has its roots in early medieval law and Biblical law.

Brief theological reflections are therefore offered on the subjects of people, land and place; community and participation; and the household and family as a sign of shalom and neighbourly love in an individualistic, atomised society.

#### People, Land and Place

People and land are inextricably linked in biblical law and narrative. This is particularly evident in the Hebrew Scriptures where the people of God – the Jewish nation – and the land of Israel provide the location of Yahweh’s covenant relationship and revelation. The practice of land use and land tenure in biblical law is predicated on divine ownership based on the creation narrative which has the following important implications for the people of Israel:

- No human person ultimately owns anything, including agricultural land – this means that no one can buy or sell a freehold in land;
- All property is ultimately received as gift – Abraham receives the promised land from God as a gift (Genesis 17:8), and the biblical texts provide numerous reminder of this (e.g. Exodus 21:2-4, Deut 8:7-10, 18).



- Agricultural land is only worth what can be grown on it (with urban land being valued on a different basis – see Leviticus 25:29-30).
- Certain uses of land and its produce are prohibited – Yahweh’s promise of blessing of the produce of the land is premised on the obedience of the people of Israel to God’s laws which forbid the use of land for exploitative purposes such as selling food for profit to the needy Israelite (Leviticus 25: 37).

As Jonathan Burnside points out in his in-depth study of this subject, “the ideology of divine ownership has a number of practical implications. It means that there is a rental market in agricultural land but no purchase market. In one sense the Israelites own the land because they can trade in it to a limited extent, but in a more important sense, they do not own the land at all. The paradoxical experience of both owning and not owning one’s own property precisely signifies the moment at which the divine depth of meaning and power breaks into the structure of acquiring using, and exchanging property.”<sup>1</sup> Other key implications of the biblical law and narrative related to the people and land of Israel identified by Burnside<sup>2</sup> include:

- The people of Israel are located in a specific place with the promise of land – the promised land! As Braaten writes, “the grace of God declaring them God’s people does not and cannot reach them in a placeless void.”<sup>3</sup>
- Plots of land are parcelled out to specific families and its descendants creating a sense of rootedness and affinity (see Numbers 33).

<sup>1</sup> Burnside, J., *God, Justice and Society*, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 182

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 182-187

<sup>3</sup> Braaten, L.J., *Earth Community in Hosea 2*, in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, (Norman C. Habel ed., Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 185-203, 201.

- There is an abiding relationship between ‘families’ and ‘land’ which is reinforced in the jubilee legislation whereby land that has been lost due to hardship reverts to the original family every 50 years (see Lev 25: 10).
- Tribes and families are to ‘cleave’ to their land which has implications for land management and builds the narrative of the land, establishing the story of how the land was acquired, and the network of memories and relationships which such narrative creates. Key among the relationships created by ‘land-as-narrative’ are vertically, with God (see Deut 26:10); horizontally, with the needy (see Deut 26:5-9); and temporally, with past ancestors and future descendants (see Deut 26:5-10).

### Community and participation

The New Testament narrative shifts the focus from the land of Israel as the primary location of God’s dealing with His people, to the community of believers of the Way. This community of Jewish believers (from whom the Christian community originates)

understood the summons to follow Jesus as a call to renounce their affinity to family, property and place to gain fullness of life in Christ.

**“Everyone will sit under their own vine  
and under their own fig tree,  
and no one will make them afraid”**

This quality of life has both temporal and eternal dimensions as Mark 10:29-30 records,<sup>4</sup> and was embodied by the believers in Jerusalem who held everything in common as an ecclesial community of the Spirit. Although private ownership of property was clearly recognised in this community, the needs of the most vulnerable members provided a graced opportunity for those who

<sup>4</sup> ‘Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecution and in the age to come eternal life.”’

owned land and houses to sell them and to bring the proceeds to the apostles for distribution to those members of the community in need – see Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-37 for details.

The intrinsic order of this community of grace is described in the New Testament as *koinonia* which comes from the root *koinos*, which means shared, common or public (in contrast to *idios*, which means belonging to one’s self or private). This leads Norman Kraus, the Mennonite missionary theologian to state: “In the new order of things life is no longer lived for one’s private advancement. Selfishness and greed are now recognised for the *idiocy* they are! Life is together. Individuality finds fulfilment in a community where personal relationships are more important than individual achievement. Each brother and sister’s worth is perceived in their reflection of God’s grace, not their economic utility or social role.”<sup>5</sup>

It is within the bounds of this community of grace that individuals and families recover a shared sense of their identity and place as the

pilgrim people of God called to faithful witness in the midst of life’s contingencies. This is demonstrated by

their participation in the *missio Dei*, and the goal of this is the manifestation of *shalom* - the experience of right relationships with God, with creation and in society.

### Household and family

Despite the different approaches to people, land and possessions in the Old and New Testaments, both testaments affirm the role of the family as the basic unit of community and the home as the place of nurture and moral development for members of each household. The biblical vision of *shalom* points to every family dwelling in peace and security ‘sitting under their own vines and fig trees’ (Micah 4:4). This image of *shalom* is

<sup>5</sup> Kraus, C.N., *The Community of the Spirit*, Herald Press, Scottdale, 1993, p.125

based on restored and reconciled relationships at four levels: with God, with creation, with other people and with ourselves. At the heart of shalom is the life that God has brought into being, and the desire to ensure that it is respected, nurtured and enjoyed.

This quality of relationship begins with individuals in each household, for if there is no shalom in our homes there will be no shalom in our communities or neighbourhoods. A key factor in building shalom is through a more just and equitable distribution of public goods such as good quality, affordable houses in secure and flourishing communities. More affordable and sustainable housing enables stable and secure family lives which provide a healthy environment for fostering and nurturing the moral vision and values of a transformed humanity based on the Biblical image of *shalom* alluded to above.

### **The *oikos* framework**

The above reflections on the relationship of God's people to land, place, community and family can best be summed-up by the concept of *oikos* which brings together these various themes in a holistic framework.<sup>6</sup> Literally, *oikos* means 'house', 'household' or 'home'. It becomes a powerful term for us because it is the root for three significant words – economy, ecology and ecumenical – and therefore points to the interconnections between the church, God's creation and economic justice. The English word 'economy' comes from two Greek words: *oikos-nomos*, meaning the rules of the household. In seeking to understand God's economy, we

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<sup>6</sup> The reflections on *oikos* that follow all come directly from the booklet produced by the Diakonia Council of Churches in Durban, South Africa called *The Oikos Journey* – see [http://www.diakonia.org.za/attachments/39\\_The%20Oikos%20Journey.pdf](http://www.diakonia.org.za/attachments/39_The%20Oikos%20Journey.pdf)

must step back from a limited notion of 'economics' meaning a specialised academic subject understood only by experts, and return to these original, basic roots. To speak of God's economy is therefore to speak of the rules that God has established for our household, the world in which people live, work, struggle, flourish and die.

This earth that God created, this sphere that spins through space, this globe, the household in which humanity lives and seeks meaning, our only home – this must be the place where we start to think theologically about economics. For millions of years God has

shepherded the earth into existence so that it can sustain life. To do so requires a delicate balance between human life and other life; between life, death

and rebirth; between production, consumption and waste; between the needs of the current generation and the needs of the many generations still to come; and between our creative ability to shape and reshape nature, and our sinful desire to do so for selfish ends.

From God's perspective therefore, economy – *oikos-nomos* – is directly related to ecology – *oikos-logos*. Both concern the earth as our *oikos*, our home. God's economy concerns how the bounty of the world in terms of earth, water, air, plants, helps human life to flourish. It cannot be separated from ecology, from the intricate web that sustains life on the planet.

### **What we can learn from *oikos* about human flourishing**

First, we should be reminded again that the heart of economics as *oikos-nomos* – the rules of the house – is indeed the *oikos* – the household. This represents the place where ordinary people, old and young, male and female, sick and healthy, are engaged in pursuing their livelihoods. It is here that the



effects of economics are felt most deeply and it is the livelihoods of these ordinary people – rather than stock markets, inflation targets and the GDP – that should be the key concern of economics. God’s economy seeks to order a world in which people rather than profit will be the central concern.

Secondly, the word ecology from *oikos-logos* – the study of the household – makes a fundamental connection between economics and the environment. It is clear that the “unlimited growth” strategy of global capitalism is having a disastrous effect upon this earth, and once again it is the poor who find themselves the victims of the greed of the rich. Thus, thinking of economics as taking place within the limits of the “house” of the earth which God has given into our safekeeping is a vital contribution that theology can make to economics.

Thirdly, the idea of the *oikoumene*, the house in which God is at work – meaning the whole inhabited universe – provides us with a theological alternative to the vision of globalisation. We all know and recognise that there is much positive impact that flows from global connections, in the form of wider communication, information and insight. Yet we are also deeply aware of the way in which economic globalisation has such a destructive impact upon people throughout the world. The picture of the *oikoumene* helps us see the positive side to global networks of people, and a wider inclusion of all people in the affairs of the world. It does so by recognising them as human beings with dignity and special cultures, rather than by counting them as labourers or consumers to serve the interests of multi-national corporations. A theological perspective on the economy will therefore pit the dream of the *oikoumene* against the nightmare of globalisation.

Fourthly, we must return to the *oikos tou Theou* – the household of God, the church (Ephesians 2:19). We have noticed that *oikos* is an expansive word that can mean a local home, a nation, the whole world, and now the community of faith. This is a special term in

the New Testament. As followers of Christ, we are members of this *oikos* – but this *oikos* is connected to the wider work of God in the world.

The calling of the church is to hold up the radical inclusivity of the household of God, in which all are invited to sit at the family table as equals. In this way, the church is a sign for the wider household of earth, and should be a constant witness against the economics of exclusion which is hell-bent on ensuring that the wealth generated by human labour and the graciousness of God is the preserve of just the select few.



## 4. Putting our money where our mouths are

**Emergency Measures and Long-term Solutions**  
God calls us, as Isaiah 58:7 says, ‘...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house.’ Churches have responded to the Biblical imperative to care for people in urgent housing need in a variety of ways, notably day centres or night shelters which typically rotate around church premises. Church work with homeless people and those suffering from addiction or other problems has sometimes developed into larger social care provision, like the West London Mission<sup>1</sup>.

These emergency responses are essential and sadly in these times of recession and austerity, need for them is likely to become increasingly urgent. But those who work with homeless people are well aware of the need for longer term solutions. In some cases this may involve help with mental health problems, or addictions to alcohol or drugs. But in many cases, the fact is that poverty and the lack of affordable housing are the causes of homelessness. From the medieval institution of almshouses to the model villages of the industrial era, churches and individuals inspired by their Christian faith, have provided housing for those in need in differing social and economic conditions.

### **The Historical Context**

The deep Christian and philanthropic roots of our modern housing associations are often forgotten. 19<sup>th</sup> Century organisations like the Octavia Hill Trust and Peabody Trust were created to enable affordable housing. This went with a commitment to help residents become model citizens, which was shared by philanthropic industrialists who created the model villages of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In some cases the implicit Biblical view that decent affordable housing is a religious duty inseparable from flourishing community was explicit: the Quaker Cadbury family built Bourneville, and the Congregationalist William Lever built Port Sunlight.

The strong Christian involvement in the modern housing association movement which arose alongside concern about exploitative landlords providing poor and overpriced accommodation (‘Rachmanism’) of the 1950s and 1960s. Many successful associations including the Paddington Churches Housing Association (now part of the Genesis Housing Association) and the Notting Hill Housing Association started off as small-scale Christian responses to local housing need. However, as the sector grew, housing law, practice and economics became very complicated and the sector inevitably became increasingly professionalised.

### **Creating Affordable Housing**

There is still an important role for churches inspired to follow a self-help models: even humble projects can be of great use. Motivated groups can make use of empty properties or stalled regeneration projects – an opportunity that has expanded since the recession. There are youth training schemes for example involving affordable and ecological technologies like straw bale building. Or a single congregation

can raise funds to assist in the purchasing of affordable housing locally. Green Pastures began buying on a small

scale in Southport answering God’s call to help rough sleepers: their model has proved successful and they are now operating nationally.

### **The Strategic Use of Church Funds, Buildings and Land**

However, the current scale of the housing crisis challenges Churches to think and act much more strategically. This means putting much more energy into providing affordable housing directly, and in calling on Government and individuals to do the same. To enable this it is important that churches have access to support, locally and nationally, to enable them to make best use of their land and buildings. The main national organisation able to assist is Faith in



***“the current scale of the housing crisis challenges Churches to think and act much more strategically”***

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.wlm.org.uk/what-we-do>

Affordable Housing, an initiative coordinated by Housing Justice with which the Anglican Diocese of Gloucester has recently engaged.

It is common for a church to own a building originally intended for a larger congregation with different needs. Or the creation of a local ecumenical partnership may lead to a building becoming redundant. In these situations, it may often be possible for the church to sell the building and/or the land, or replace a church building with a smaller equivalent. This can free up funds for building new affordable housing and other mission, and also puts the local church in a position to make a deal with a housing association to help fund development.

Another method of creating keeping housing affordable is through **Community Land Trusts (CLTs)** – community owned and run, not-for-profit organisations that create housing that will be affordable in perpetuity. This is not a new idea – the Octavia Hill Trust essentially followed this model, and CLTs share many features of the cooperative movement, including the emphasis on direct democracy. As well as enabling affordable housing and protecting properties from being drawn into the economy of the property ladder and ‘buy to let’, the emphasis on grassroots involvement and participation has the potential to empower communities to envision and create housing in which they can flourish.

Two recent examples from among many that could have been chosen are:

- ***The development of a former Methodist church building in Ambleside in Cumbria to provide 15 affordable homes in an area characterised by an endemic lack of social housing<sup>2</sup>.***
- ***The East London Community Land Trust is developing the first urban CLT in the UK at the St Clements site in Mile End, which will provide affordable homes at 30% of market rate – e.g. a £300,000 house will be available for £100,000***

The Coalition Government has voiced its commitment to Localism. Nick Clegg has praised John Lewis-style mutuals. The Churches are in a strong position to put content behind these aspirations. A number of new Community Land Trusts have developed in recent years, but it is unlikely that much more can be achieved without greater organisation and Government support.

Whether through CLTs, small scale development, or even the formation of new Christian housing associations, what the Taylor Review of the Rural Economy and Affordable Housing said of the substantial quantity of Glebe land owned by the Church of England is true for all Christian Churches and individuals “...there is a moral responsibility as landowner and community leader to explore all legal and procedural avenues to support the delivery of affordable rural housing and affordable live-work space<sup>3</sup>”.



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<http://www.helm.org.uk/server/show/ConCaseStudy.169>

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<sup>3</sup> The Taylor Review Recommendation 18

## 5. Responding to the housing crisis: key policy recommendations



### Increasingly, UK citizens cannot afford adequate housing.

The social housing supply has fallen while households in need of affordable housing have increased. In the wake of the recession, with house prices are out of reach for many and mortgages hard to obtain, home ownership appears to be a vanishing option. For many on low incomes, the combination of rising rents and inadequate wages mean that housing takes an ever increasing percentage of income. Yet cuts and caps in Housing Benefit mean that groups who were unable to profit from the housing boom are being hit hardest by spending cuts deeply connected with the bursting of the 'property bubble'. **This is blatantly unjust.**

Unless the Government acts decisively and soon, the housing crisis will lead to a steep rise in homelessness, ever greater inequality and communities shattered

by the need to hunt a shrinking supply of poor, barely affordable homes far from their friends and family. **Acting to prevent this involves a variety of measures, but the essential need is to increase housing stock.**

### Priority 1: a dramatically increased Government-led programme of house building

- The number of affordable homes built fell from 49,363 in 2010/11 to 15,698. At the current rate, it is highly unlikely that the Government will meet its already inadequate target of 170,000 affordable homes by 2015<sup>1</sup>. Social housing waiting lists have reached 1.8 million in England. This forces tenants who would otherwise have been eligible for social housing into the competitive and less affordable private rental sector

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/jun/13/generation-rent-uk-housing-shortage?newsfeed=true>

- There are diverse challenges to housing policy. In cities, particularly those where property is expensive and in short supply, the cost of renting is likely to be the critical issue: in London the average yearly cost of renting a home is currently £25,824 – 71% of the average London salary of £36,384<sup>2</sup>. In rural areas, a worse problem may be the sheer lack of homes. **But the common need for all groups is a vastly increased pool of housing.**

- One obstacle is the belief that house building is not really a Government matter. Many people view social housing as merely a 'safety net' for people in poverty, and as a form of accommodation for those with moral failings. This is wrong for several reasons.

Building good social housing makes economic sense through rents paid to the Government and stimulus to the construction and related industries; it also has the potential to promote social integration and stability, whereas the safety net model may too perpetuate the existence of the clichéd 'sink estate'

- Government assistance is also needed to spark an increase in private sector building which has also fallen strongly since the 1980s. This will have benefits and implications for the construction industry. But the Government's priority must be **to ensure that both social and private rental tenants, whether in work or unemployed, can have a home and money left over to live on.**

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.charltongrace.co.uk/2860/average-rental-income-average-rental-income-percentage-revealed/>

## Priority 2: Make Housing Genuinely Affordable

- Under the Government's "Affordable Homes" programme, housing associations can charge up to 80% of the local market rate. **This misleading use of the word 'affordable' for housing which is frequently not affordable should not go unchallenged:**
- There is no accepted methodology for establishing a locally affordable rent. **The UK Government should prioritise implementing the findings of research into genuinely affordable housing, such as that conducted in 2008 by London Citizens<sup>3</sup>, and ensure that an objective definition of affordability underpins all future housing and benefit policy**
- Government spending on Housing Benefit has more than doubled from 2000/01 (£11bn) to the present (over £23bn). The main cause of this leap is the drastic rise in private sector rents, but the Government is squeezing tenants through welfare reforms. **The Housing Benefit changes will increase poverty and inequality and should be reviewed urgently.**
- Ken Livingstone made the commitment to a Living Rent, similar to the Living Wage, part of his manifesto for the last Mayor of London elections. Under this proposal, tenants would not have to pay more than a third of their income on housing. Independent research, drawing on London Citizens' experience of the Living Wage campaign should consider this carefully
- Controlling rents would be a fairer and more rational way of achieving the Government's intended reduction in spending on Housing Benefit than cuts to welfare, which will fail to prevent further rises in spending, lead to increased debt and overcrowding, while disincentivising work. **Government should prioritise rent caps over spending cuts to address the persistent market failures that lead to exorbitant rents.**

## Priority 3: Promoting Sustainable and Flourishing Communities

- As part of its Localism agenda, the Government is developing the theme of

wellbeing, which cannot always be measured in purely economic terms. The Government should develop its ability to listen to communities feeling the effects of the housing crisis and liable to suffer from the effect of the spending cuts. The Church of Scotland has been involved in the Poverty Truth Commission: similar direct engagement is needed for housing.

- As housing costs rise and home ownership becomes harder, it becomes less likely young people will be able to afford a home or live near their families. Housing policy for sustainable communities must prioritise the needs of young people.
- Many of the macro-economic factors connected with the boom and subsequent recession are connected with speculation, the relative value of land as against its use, cheap credit for mortgages and the dream of getting on the property ladder. **In view of the role of land value in distorting private sector development and rents, the Government should carefully consider arguments for a Land Value Tax or related proposals.**
- The Government should increase its support for Housing Associations both large and small, as well as structures like Community Land Trusts able to provide affordable housing which reflects community needs
- The Government should ensure that the benefits of Solar PV and related environmentally-friendly initiatives are available to those on lower incomes, for example through giving preferential treatment for feed in tariffs to social housing
- **There will be those for whom these measures will come too late. For those who are homeless or are likely to become homeless in the coming year, it is important that Government maintains funding for shelters and other provision for homeless people.**

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<sup>3</sup> <http://z2k.org/2012/05/housing-benefit/>

## 6. Questions for reflection



### The moral case for housing

- How would you make a moral case for housing for all in a conversation in, say, a pub or fellowship group?
- Is owning land or a house the same as owning anything else, or are there fundamental differences? If so, what are they?
- What models of housing and community emerge from the Bible? How can Christians put them into practice currently?
- How should we as a society balance personal aspiration – to own one’s own home or climb the property ladder – with an understanding of “the common good”?
- What role should the local community have in planning? Where is the balance between empowered communities and nimbysm?

### The theological understanding

- We live in a very different world to that described in the Bible. What might we learn from the people of Israel’s understanding of their relationship with the land and with God still apply?
- What does the Bible say about land and housing? Does it have distinctive features compared to other goods we use and how might this challenge our thinking about ‘property’?
- We are sometimes wary of views which assert a community’s special relationship with land in case it is used to justify xenophobia. How might the Bible help us?

### Church involvement

- What is your local area like? What housing needs are people are facing? Are these hidden needs or visible ones? What holes are there in your knowledge, and how you might fill them?
- Are members of your church involved in trying to meet these needs? Has there been an increase in the demand for services?

- Are members of your church involved in local community plans such as neighbourhood plans which might affect the provision of affordable housing? Is your local authority developing such plans? If so, how could you get engaged?
- What practical actions or support would help you or your church to respond more effectively to housing need in your areas?
- Dreaming dreams, are there ways in which your church might provide affordable housing, perhaps through redeveloping redundant buildings or excess land?
- If you are actively helping people in housing need, how might you use these experiences to work for justice by challenging the policies which contribute to homelessness?

### Public policy changes

- The paper on housing policy proposes three priorities - the provision of more affordable housing, making sure that housing is truly affordable, and promoting sustainable and flourishing communities. Do you agree that these are the right priorities for tackling housing need?
- What is the market for renting homes like in your area? Do you think that rent caps, or some system of a “Living Rent”, would be a good measure?
- These papers argue that the cuts and caps relating to Housing Benefit will increase homelessness and housing need. What is your view?
- What other measures do you believe are vital to tackling our housing crisis?
- How can churches bring together acts of mercy (helping others) and acts of justice (working for change) with their understanding of the mission of the Church and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?
- Do you have any other comments?

Please send any comments, questions or reflections on experiences you have after reading these papers to James North, Joint Public Issues Team Policy Officer, at [northj@methodistchurch.org.uk](mailto:northj@methodistchurch.org.uk)

Produced by Frank Kantor and James North for the Joint Public Issues Team – Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed churches working together - [www.jointpublicissues.org.uk](http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk) 020 7486 5502 June 2012