



A place to
call **home**?



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Introduction

Britain is facing a housing crisis – this is a claim which few people dispute. The key arguments across the political spectrum do not revolve around whether such a crisis exists, but how it should be addressed.

The housing crisis has many symptoms that stretch across the whole of society. For some it means no home at all. Since 2010 there has been a steady increase in the number of families accepted as homeless and in the numbers living in temporary accommodation. More recently the number of street homeless has also begun to increase. More and more families (especially families with children) are forced to live in overcrowded housing.

Perhaps the most publicised effect of the housing crisis is on families seeking to buy a home. In 1997 in England, 3½ years of the average salary would buy the average house; by 2015 this had risen to 7½ years. For those who own property this represents a big financial gain, but for others it means increasing and potentially unaffordable housing costs for large periods of their lives.

Human dignity depends upon living in homes of a decent standard, and being in communities where we have stability, quality of life and access to the amenities that we need. It's more than simply having a roof over our heads or a front door to call our own. Many people are increasingly expressing concern that they cannot find decent housing within reasonable reach of their employment, or cannot afford to remain in the communities where they have grown up and see as the place they belong.

There are calls for more homes, larger homes, cheaper homes, more efficient homes, better homes, homes in the right places, homes for the right people. At times these seem in tension with those who seek, with equal vigour, to protect green spaces and express deep concerns about the environmental costs of increased housebuilding.

Changing social trends have an effect. People living longer, remaining independent for longer, and families with complex situations where children and parents can often be in more than one dwelling all have an effect on the demand for housing.

It is estimated that the country needs to build

200,000 to 250,000 new homes each year to meet that demand. At present around half that number are actually being produced, meaning that the problem is growing year by year.

But what should this mean for local congregations and how should we respond? Is it really a crisis, or have our expectations simply become so unrealistic that our demands would always be impossible to satisfy? To what degree should our need for homes overrule concerns about protecting the natural environment? Is a concern about housing simply an economic and materialistic distraction that Christians should avoid?

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”

(Matthew 6:25-27) (NRSV)

These words of Jesus could easily be used as an argument that Christians should not become too concerned about issues like housing. They are by no means the only place where we are invited to look to God to supply our needs and not become pre-occupied with what might be called ‘the material’. But there are also statements in Scripture that might lead us to a quite different conclusion:

“They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.”

(Isaiah 65:21) (NRSV)

These words, written by the prophet Isaiah, look forward to God's coming kingdom as one that will include secure housing and fruitful enterprise. Christians connect these and other Old Testament prophecies with

the coming of Christ, so we might reasonably conclude that concern about a crisis in housing should be a priority for God's kingdom people.

As we reflect deeper, we can recognise that these two perspectives are not as opposite to one another as might first appear. Jesus does not denounce or dismiss our material needs, but invites us to look to God to provide them. Much of the concern of the Old Testament prophets is not that God has failed to provide, but that as a nation people have abandoned core principles of fairness and common good, and instead have pursued personal gain at the expense of the needy and vulnerable. Jesus speaks against self-centred concern and the prophet Isaiah addresses his words not to individuals but to a whole people. God's vision of society is one where everyone is cared and provided for, not where some place their own needs and priorities above the well-being of all.

A home not an investment

Those who have analysed and reflected on the current housing situation in the UK have much to say that resonates with these sentiments. In short, housing has become an economic commodity through which many people are more concerned to achieve a good return on their investments than to see affordable access for all. This situation is exacerbated by the poor performance of other investment opportunities leading to some savers putting capital into property purely for financial return.

This quickly generates injustice and inequality where the interests of one sector in our society is only served by rising prices, forcing others into unaffordable and poor quality accommodation. In such an environment, there is even limited incentive for developers. Housing shortage means rising prices, so too big a glut of new-build properties risks diminishing returns for house builders. It also means that possessing a house can become more important than living in a house, which results in absentee owners being happy to leave properties empty provided their market value is rising.

It is the combination of these and other factors that makes the current housing crisis so complex; complexity which can be intimidating. But what we cannot escape is that this is not simply a crisis of bricks and mortar, but a reality that affects and blights the lives of many, many people.

Being forced to live in sub-standard housing or struggling with unmanageable housing costs affects the lives of families across the United Kingdom. We know that such conditions stifle the development of children, and pass disadvantage to the next generation.

These are all realities that Christian citizens will find

themselves confronted with, so of course we must be concerned. Many within our congregations may well be struggling to afford the housing they need, some within our communities may even look to local churches for help. There are also some quite remarkable success stories about how churches over many decades have provided housing and homes, particularly for those who are most vulnerable in our society.

About this resource

This resource does not seek to prescribe a single solution – for one thing housing issues can be very different in different parts of the UK, and affect different sectors of the population in quite different ways. What it does seek to do is motivate and inform local Christians so that they can develop a response that is appropriate to their own situation.

In particular, this series of Bible studies seeks to explore some of these issues further and to help local Christians reflect and apply the principles of our Scriptures to the contemporary issues we face. The studies cannot cover every aspect of the housing crisis, and indeed cannot fully predict how the political and social agendas associated with this will develop.

But what it can do is offer a biblical and theological framework to help us respond, as followers of Jesus, to the emerging issues that we might confront. It is written in the hope that through it, many local Christians, both as individuals and congregations, will be stimulated to consider their responsibilities as a gospel people, in the face of the housing issues that are becoming an increasing reality in the life of our nations. For some this might be through the combined endeavours of the faith community, for others by seeking to reflect the priorities of God's kingdom through their day-to-day working lives.

Bible Study sessions

- Session 1: Faith at Home
- Session 2: Coming Home
- Session 3: The Quality of Housing
- Session 4: Housing We Can Afford
- Session 5: A Relational Community
- Session 6: A Place to Call Home?

There is also a section on 'How to use this resource', which group leaders/facilitators may find helpful.

Acknowledgements

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Feedback

We'd love to hear how your group used these
sessions. Please send any comments to [enquiries@
jointpublicissues.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@jointpublicissues.org.uk)



How to use this resource

Preparation

We hope you will find this series of studies helpful. Here are some suggestions for using them effectively with a group.

- The group leader needs to give some thought to how the group will be asked to tackle each Bible study.
- It can be helpful if each member of the group has a copy of the notes. They could be given out in advance or each time the group meets. For Session 6, it would be best to hand the notes out after the icebreaker.
- The notes include the Bible passages generally taken from the NRSV. You may want to look at other translations of the same passage such as the NIV or CEV.
- For some sessions, group members will be asked to prepare something in advance (for example, the icebreaker in session 1). This will be highlighted in the text. The group leader should ensure that this is organised in advance.

Venue

- A private home can be the most comfortable venue for conversation, but it is usually not possible to break into buzz groups. There can also be a temptation to socialise rather than have a more challenging conversation.
- Some church venues are flexible and comfortable, but others are constrained, chilly and a bit tatty. Make an effort to create a sense of warmth and purpose. A circle of chairs will usually enable people to speak more freely.

Refreshments

- It is a good idea to include refreshments at some point. Some conversations go particularly well over

a meal. Having small snacks like grapes, nuts or sweets available during the conversation can add to a welcoming atmosphere.

- It isn't easy to act as host and facilitator simultaneously.
- Overdoing the preparation of refreshments is to be avoided. Often a 'bring and share' arrangement is best if a meal is planned.

Suggested meeting format

Each session has a similar format:

- An icebreaker
- Bible study, with questions for discussion
- Putting it into practice – a final thought or invitation for reflection. Depending on the timing of the meeting and how the conversation has progressed it may be possible to begin thinking about this together. The leader should make sure that there is time when the group next meets to allow members space to share any thinking that has taken place since people last met.

The group leader may choose to begin or end the meeting with devotions, according to local custom.

At the first session it is good to agree some ground rules for the group. Some suggestions are given below.

The group should work through the Bible studies in the order they are presented. However the material is not cumulative, in that members of the group do not need to have been at the previous meeting in order to attend the next.

Hints for group leaders

The overall aim is to make the conversation safe enough for all to feel able to contribute, but challenging enough to go beneath social pleasantries and leave everyone feeling stretched. Here are some suggestions for helping that to happen:

- When people are signing up for the group, make sure they know exactly what it is about and how many meetings there will be.

- Remember that for some people it can be very sensitive to talk about housing issues. They may know someone who struggles with housing problems or homelessness, or be (in fact) struggling themselves.
- It is often helpful to give people the chance to explore a question first in twos or threes. In groups that are fewer than eight this can feel artificial, but for groups over this size it is the only way to ensure that all feel safe enough to speak.
- Remind members of the group that the conversation is intended to be open-ended and exploratory – so rushing to firm conclusions is not helpful and may silence people.

Some ground rules

A group feels much safer and able to go 'deep' with each other if some ground rules have been agreed. Here are some common rules – try them out with the rest of the group and be open to other suggestions:

- The group will start and finish on time.
- Everyone is committed to attend each session unless they are ill or genuinely prevented from attending.
- We will listen to each other - no one will interrupt or speak over someone else.
- We will watch out for each other and invite others to speak rather than hog the floor.
- A judgemental or hostile tone is not acceptable.
- Disagreement and searching questions are acceptable however, when expressed attentively and with respect.
- Personal information shared within the group is confidential to that group and should not be passed on.



Session 1

Faith At Home

You will need:

- group members to bring something with them that is a feature of their home and/or says something about the people who live there (eg ornament, gadget. You will need to warn them in advance.)
- pens
- paper

Icebreaker

As people arrive, discreetly collect the items they have brought. Once everyone is together, place the items on a table or similar in the middle of the room. Give each a number and then invite people to put the name of the person they think each item belongs to. You can then have some fun marking and checking answers and finding out what belongs to who and perhaps something of the story behind it. (Don't spend too long on this though, which means you limit discussion on topics in the rest of the session.)

Acts 2:42-47

The various items and stories that have been shared are a reminder that our houses and the places we live say something about the people we are.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." (Acts 2:42-47) (NRSV)

These verses present us with a powerful and challenging insight into the life and values of the early Christian believers. The Church is barely a few weeks old, and many see this being as near a picture as we could ever have of how an ideal Christian community should be. With time, their shared life faced the inevitable challenges and influences that impact any human community, but this glimpse of how they lived out their new-found faith is seen as setting the standard for future generations.

They were clearly a very strong and cohesive community whose common life was quite distinct. Many aspects might be what we call 'religious' – they learned together, prayed, shared the sacraments and even experienced wonders and signs that filled them with awe. These are the sort of communal activities that we might expect of any religious institution.

But what we also notice is that their Christian identity affected their attitudes to property, in the way they used their homes and their whole understanding of wealth, ownership and mutual responsibility.

Discuss

- Reflect on these verses and note how much emphasis is given to the use and disposal of property in relatively few sentences.
- Do you think it is significant that housing, hospitality and property should be given such emphasis alongside prayer, miracles, sacrament etc? What might this say to us about the relative importance of housing to our faith in general?

(At this point, reference could be made back to the icebreaker that was used at the beginning of the session. Just as the way in which we decorate, equip and use our homes says something about us, so the way in which these early Christians used their homes says a lot about the people they were.)

Discuss

- In what ways do our homes reflect our identity as followers of Jesus?
- How does this align with the attitudes and behaviour of the early Christians?

Psalm 24:1

“The earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”
(Psalm 24:1) (NRSV)

The early Christians took this idea seriously. They recognised that their faith identity affected every aspect of their lives – if the earth was the Lord’s and everything in it, their homes and property were included. If they were God’s people, then their houses were God’s houses, their social gatherings were gatherings in God’s presence, and so on. At one level, we might associate this with the simple fact that they were seeking to live in loving, relational community with one another, expressing the kind of fellowship and hospitality that we might associate with that.

But the Early Church was more than that, it was also a prophetic community – this was a way of life that was not simply intended to be a private and introspective experience, but one that made an impact on others. Like the Old Testament prophets before them they lived out God’s message before the eyes of a watching world. The writer of Acts particularly emphasises this when noting that they enjoyed “the goodwill of all the people” (Acts 2:47) and attracted a daily stream of new members who were clearly drawn by what they saw.

Discuss

- How might Christians today express the belief that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it”, particularly in relation to property and housing?

You might use some images or simply the descriptions below – for each pause and reflect on what thoughts and challenges emerge when you consider the verse from the Psalms: “the Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world and all who live in it”.

- A millionaire’s mansion in a gated community
- A run-down area of social deprivation with poor housing

- A young professional living in a cramped, overpriced rented flat with a private landlord
- A new-build housing estate, where a modest home costs a few hundred thousand pounds.

Jeremiah 32

There is a rather unusual story in Jeremiah chapter 32 of the prophet buying a piece of ground from his cousin Hanamel. What is remarkable about the prophet’s actions is that the nation is about to be invaded; in fact Jeremiah had already declared this as God’s expectation. No rational person would buy land, knowing that within months it would be overrun by an enemy army and any claim of ownership would be futile. Despite the fact that (in human terms) his investment will become worthless, Jeremiah makes a very public show of the transaction even putting up for display the bill of sale. Jeremiah explains his actions as God’s message to the people:

“In their presence I charged Baruch, saying, Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Take these deeds, both this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land.”

(Jeremiah 32:13-15) (NRSV)

This is no mere land transaction; it is a message of hope wrapped up in a land transaction. It is Jeremiah ‘putting his money where his mouth is’ even to the point of organising his investments around what God’s message is telling him. The activities of the Early Church were no less a statement of their values, beliefs and expectations – expectations that God had not just placed upon them, but the whole of humanity.

Back to Acts

When we observe the way in which the early believers opened their homes to one another, were willing to share and release individual possessions for the sake of the common good, we might reasonably say that this is an example of how God wants every community to operate.

Discuss

- What does Acts 2:42-47 tell us about the way in which the early Christians understood and used property and housing?

Some things we might note:

- They retained property – they had homes which they offered as places of hospitality and friendship.
- They disposed of property – when their property became the basis of inequality, they sold it so that those in need could benefit from the proceeds.
- They shared property – they opened their homes and sought to use them as a reflection of their commitment to hospitality and community.

This raises some interesting questions and challenges for us.

Further discussion

- What messages about home ownership and the use of possessions were the believers of Acts 2 expressing to the wider community? What challenges does this raise for our society today?
- What messages does our use and stewardship of property communicate to the world around us?
- How would the behaviour of the early believers translate into our understanding of property stewardship today?
- What does this story reveal to us about how followers of Jesus should respond to housing issues in our own society?

Putting it into practice

- What resources and assets do we have access to and influence over?
- Are we using these in a way that reflects the values of God's kingdom?
- What actions can we take?



Session 2

Coming home

Icebreaker

- What would you look for if you were moving house to another location?
- What community facilities would you consider essential – access to good schools? Good transport links? Shopping and leisure facilities?
- What is the one thing that you would definitely want in the vicinity if you were looking for a house? What would you not want nearby?
- What might really entice you to want to live somewhere?
- Why are some locations particularly popular places to live and others are less so?

Through our conversations, we can recognise that our ‘home’ is more than just the house we live in. In fact, people will often place greater emphasis on the location of their home, the community it is in etc, than the house itself. One obvious consequence of this is the significant difference in house and rental prices depending on where a property is situated. In this session, we will explore and reflect on what God’s word says about such realities.

A matter of perspective

Begin by spending some time reflecting on some quite contrasting verses of Scripture.

“As they were going along the road, someone said to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’”

(Luke 9:57-58) (NRSV)

When the Lord your God has brought you into the land ... a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”
(Deuteronomy 6:10-12) (NRSV)

Discuss

- How do you respond to these contrasts?
- What different viewpoints do they offer?

These verses present us with two very different perspectives. Jesus appears to invite people to pay little attention to their housing or material needs, whereas the promises of the Old Testament are that a people who are oppressed and enslaved will live in communities of plenty. Although the people are reminded not to forget the Lord their God, this is not presented as an alternative to living in good conditions, but as a sign of God’s provision. Before thinking about this further, we might reflect on a couple of other statements from the Bible. The first is part Mary’s response to the news that God’s Messiah is coming into the world:

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”
(Luke 1:52-53) (NRSV)

In these words, like the Old Testament prophets before her, Mary perceives Jesus as fulfilling God’s promises of well-being and prosperity. We can notice how she uses the same phrase “good things” – echoing the promises of Deuteronomy.

At the end of his life, Jesus speaks again of God's promise, albeit looking forward into eternity:

"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

(John 14:2) (NRSV)

We might easily argue that Jesus connects the promises anticipated by Mary with life in the hereafter, and it would be wrong to suggest that this is not so. But as reflected in the life of the early believers in the first of these group studies, Christians are called to model and 'live out' God's coming kingdom in the here and now. As we explore our Scriptures more fully, it is hard not to conclude that God's purposes are for human beings to live in wholesome and flourishing communities. The concerns that we have about living in good conditions are something about which God speaks too, but we need to remember that this is something that extends to all of humanity.

Numbers 2:1-2

This is one example of a series of quite meticulous instructions about the layout of the Israelite camp.

"The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: 'The Israelites shall camp each in their respective regiments, under ensigns by their ancestral houses; they shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side.'"

(Numbers 2:1-2) (NRSV)

Discuss

- Why do you think it is that God wanted people to camp in family groups with the tent of meeting in the centre of their community?
- What messages would this convey to the community?

It is likely that as you discuss this, it may evoke images of traditional English villages as tight-knit dwellings clustered around the steeple of a parish church. This may be more of an aspiration than a reality in today's world, but the idea of a God-centred community is more than just its physical appearance. Numbers, Deuteronomy and the other Old Testament law books have much to say about the place where God is worshipped, but they also spell out how God's values of justice are to be lived out in everyday circumstances.

We might also note how people's belonging to established clans and families was reflected in the layout of the camp, even to the point of their ancestral symbols being on display. Again, our modern way of life is much more likely to require families to live at quite some distance from one another, but does this mean that the principles of living in a community that has a shared sense of belonging and identity need to be abandoned?

Discuss

- Of course it is easy to build a physical community when we are starting from scratch with a patch of desert sand and a mass of tents and shelters. But how can we embed the principles behind this into our own communities? Reflect on this together.

Haggai 1:2-6

Concern for the physical state of God's House is an ever present reality in God's word. We can see this reflected at a much later stage in the history of God's people, when they are seeking to rebuild their land after returning from a painful exile. One example is found in the writings of the prophet Haggai:

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord's house. Then the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai, saying: Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared. You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages to put them into a bag with holes."

(Haggai 1:2-6) (NRSV)

Discuss

- How do you respond to this passage?
- What stands out for you?

Although the language of verse 6 is somewhat poetic, it may well have resonances for how many people feel about modern living – a sense of being on a treadmill that no matter how hard we try, there never seems to be enough. We may even reflect on how this reality is exacerbated through rising housing costs.

These verses may well draw us back to the conclusion that we should not be too concerned about issues of housing and physical community, but take a few moments to think about them more deeply. It would seem that God was quite content for the people to build reasonable houses for themselves, but there are hints that their housing had become something of a pre-occupation. While we cannot be entirely certain about what is meant by “panelled houses”, there is a clear sense that investing in their individual homes had become more important to people than developing the spiritual well-being of the community. They were becoming a self-centred rather than a God-centred people.

Haggai spoke to the people at a time when they were returning from exile. For many years they had been forced to live in Babylon – a long way from their homeland and the promise of ‘coming home’ was central to God’s message of hope for the people in those exile years.

Coming home

Look together at these verses from earlier Old Testament prophets – written while the people were still in exile – to express that promised homecoming.

*“They shall build houses and inhabit in them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat.”*

(Isaiah 65:21-22) (NRSV)

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”

(Zechariah 8:4-5) (NRSV)

Discuss

- Imagine you are in exile or far away from home. How would hearing these passages make you feel?

‘Coming home’ remains a very powerful and significant ideal in our society today, particularly when many people in our world find themselves displaced through all kinds of political, military and economic circumstances. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he connected with this deep human reality and indeed promised a future destiny in which all people could be ‘at home’ in his Father’s house.

Yet it is also clear that God continually seeks this reality for people in the here and now. God draws people away from oppression and slavery to settle them in a land of promise; they are called to remember their oppression and make sure that no-one within their communities is treated with similar injustice. God calls people back from exile, but reminds them that they will never be ‘at home’ if their shared life is dominated by self-interest and personal gain.

These ideals have much to say to our contemporary society where homes can all too easily become expressions of personal interest and status; where they can be seen primarily as economic units rather than places to settle and build community.

Further discussion

As we reflect on housing issues today in what ways do we need to re-configure our understanding of human communities in ways that place the values of God’s kingdom at the centre?

Putting it into practice

- In what ways does the community in which you live and worship make it difficult for some or all people to enjoy a good quality of life? What could/should you be doing about this?



Session 3

The quality of housing

Icebreaker

Share with others your response to the following question: What is the worst place in which you have ever had to spend the night? There will no doubt be some horror stories about terrible hotel bedrooms or camping holidays that became complete washout. Stories like this tend to be quite fun to share afterwards, even if they are not so pleasant at the time.

After a while, take this further by thinking and talking about another question: What if, instead of that just being one or a few nights, you had to live in those kind of conditions all of the time? Although the initial conversations will probably have been quite fun, there is a serious side to consider when people are continually forced to live in poor housing. Some of us may indeed feel we are in that very situation.

Statistics

- Although there is an improving trend, around 4½ million homes in England (20% of the housing stock) fall short of the recognised decent housing standard. (Separate figures are collected for other parts of the UK.)
- Around a million homes have problems with damp. There are 3 times as many (9%) in the private rental sector as those which are owner occupied (3%). Damp housing conditions are recognised as having an adverse effect on health, particularly amongst elderly and very young people.
- The private rental sector has the highest proportion of non-decent homes (30%). Current housing policy is increasingly making people dependant on this sector.

Discuss

- To what degree should statistics like this be a concern for Christians?
- Share your answers to that question – why have you responded in the way you have?

Leviticus 14:34-53

“The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘When you enter the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as your possession, and I put a spreading mould in a house in that land, the owner of the house must go and tell the priest, “I have seen something that looks like a defiling mould in my house.” The priest is to order the house to be emptied before he goes in to examine the mould, so that nothing in the house will be pronounced unclean. After this the priest is to go in and inspect the house. He is to examine the mould on the walls, and if it has greenish or reddish depressions that appear to be deeper than the surface of the wall, the priest shall go out of the doorway of the house and close it up for seven days. On the seventh day the priest shall return to inspect the house. If the mould has spread on the walls, he is to order that the contaminated stones be torn out and thrown into an unclean place outside the town. He must have all the inside walls of the house scraped and the material that is scraped off dumped into an unclean place outside the town. Then they are to take other stones to replace these and take new clay and plaster the house.

‘If the defiling mould reappears in the house after the stones have been torn out and the house scraped and plastered, the priest is to go and examine it and, if the mould has spread in the house, it is a persistent defiling mould; the house is unclean. It must be torn down – its stones, timbers and all the plaster – and taken out of the town to an unclean place.

‘Anyone who goes into the house while it is closed up will be unclean till evening. Anyone who sleeps or eats in the house must wash their clothes.

‘But if the priest comes to examine it and the mould has not spread after the house has been plastered,

he shall pronounce the house clean, because the defiling mould is gone. To purify the house he is to take two birds and some cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop. He shall kill one of the birds over fresh water in a clay pot. Then he is to take the cedar wood, the hyssop, the scarlet yarn and the live bird, dip them into the blood of the dead bird and the fresh water, and sprinkle the house seven times. He shall purify the house with the bird's blood, the fresh water, the live bird, the cedar wood, the hyssop and the scarlet yarn. Then he is to release the live bird in the open fields outside the town. In this way he will make atonement for the house, and it will be clean.”

(Leviticus 14:34-53) (NIV)

Discuss

- What is your first impression from reading this rather long section from the Bible?

You may well respond by expressing a sense that this is a rather tedious and pedantic set of unnecessary instructions – so much so that in places, it almost verges on the comical. But it is important that we recognise these words for what they are. It is the law code of an ancient civilisation, so is couched in the language of instruction and religious ritual. As you look at it further, try to see through the particular style in which it is written to the concerns and intent of the God who prescribed this as a way of life for a holy people. The following questions might help you do that.

Discuss

- Why do you feel God expresses such a specific and detailed concern about the condition of people's housing?
- Where are the connections between the practical issues of housing and the religious life of the people?
- How far do the responsibilities of religious leaders extend?
- To what degree is the plight of any individual the concern and responsibility of the community as a whole?

The verses from Leviticus offer a number of answers to these questions. The very fact that God places regulations about housing within the laws of the community reflects the priority that is given to it.

There is careful detail about properly disposing of the contaminated stones and plaster, so as to make sure that the problems do not spread into the houses of others.

Although the required sacrifice ritual feels rather gruesome, it reflects the instructions in an earlier part of Leviticus when the community as a whole comes together for great religious festivals. It is as though this is now being re-enacted on a small scale, bringing worship to the very heart of the everyday issues and problems that people face. Take a moment to look at these words from the prophet Amos...

Amos 5:21-24

*“I hate, I despise your religious festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

Even though you offer me burnt offerings and grain offerings,

I will not accept them;

and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals

I will not look upon.

Take away from me the noise of your songs;

I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,

and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

(Amos 5:21-24) (NRSV)

These are strong and difficult words, spoken by God to the people of Israel when they had forgotten the laws and lifestyle of mutual care and concern that had been spelled out for them in law books like Leviticus. It is interesting to notice the same connection between the worship of God's people and their commitment to maintaining a just, inclusive and caring society for all. These words follow on from a catalogue of criticism aimed not simply at individuals but of legal and economic systems that left some in society severely disadvantaged and oppressed while others built stone mansions and planted lush vineyards (see Amos 5:10-12).

Discuss

- In what ways does our worship of God need to take account of issues like housing justice?

Community

We notice in this passage from Leviticus the key role that the priest is expected to play in making sure that a person's home is restored to a safe and hygienic condition. We might also note how much of the language used is communal – this is presented not simply as one individual's problem, but that of the community as a whole – when a person is in need, it is a matter for everyone's concern. Take a moment to reflect on these words of Peter to the early Christian believers:

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

(1 Peter 2:9) (NSRV)

These words place the identity of priestly responsibility and being called a holy nation fairly and squarely into the hands of Christian believers. As we have already noted, instructions like those for dealing with contaminated houses are presented as the practical outworking of what it means to accept such a designation.

Discuss

- In what ways do these instructions from Leviticus impact our understanding of what it means to be "a royal priesthood [and] a holy nation"?

An emerging theme from much of our biblical reflection is that God perceives 'home' much more from the perspective of a community than individuals. One of the powerful images that has shaped our faith is the story of God's people living as slaves in Egypt, before making an epic journey to freedom and a land of their own. God gave his people 'a home'.

But this journey and occupancy were made in community. The book of Numbers particularly offers

insight into how the land began to be occupied by God's people. Some of the language and narrative is difficult and troubling, because it is set in the context of invasion and war, but even within the narrative, the principles of community are not lost.

One relevant example of this is a brief episode recorded in Numbers chapter 32. A significant part of the land has now been occupied, and for many of the people, there was ample space and opportunity to establish homes and livelihoods. But for the tribes to be settled to the west of Jordan there was still work to be done. Those who already had land and homes in the east were tempted to settle down and consider themselves to have 'arrived' but Moses challenges them to recognise that they are part of a greater community. Their response is recorded in Numbers 32:

"We will not return to our homes until all the Israelites have obtained their inheritance. We will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on this side of the Jordan to the east."

(Numbers 32:18-19) (NRSV)

The people are encouraged to recognise that just because they have a good and settled home does not remove from them responsibility for their fellow citizens. The whole community has a responsibility to ensure that everyone has the home they need.

Discuss

To what degree do our current attitudes to housing and property reflect or contradict the principles of shared responsibility for one another?

Putting it into practice

- Where in your community are there examples of sub-standard housing?
- What could/should you be doing about it?



Session 4

Housing we can afford

Icebreaker

The group's approach to this will depend on its make-up. Some may be more or less comfortable to talk about the price they paid (and when they paid it) for their current home. Alternatively explore questions like "How much did you pay for your first home?" or "How much did your parents pay for the home you grew up in?". If people have rented accommodation, ask similar questions in relation to the cost of their rent. If people are able to offer values from a period of around 30-40 years, there will be startling variations. Those who are now in their 80s are likely to have paid no more than a couple of thousand pounds for their first home – significantly less than what someone might spend today on a new kitchen.

Some facts and figures

Affording a place to live has long been a challenge for many people and this has been exacerbated in recent years by rising prices, stagnant incomes and the loss of "council" housing. The percentage of people owning their own home has been falling since 2003 and the number of people relying on private rental has doubled in a decade, overtaking the falling proportion in social housing. Looking ahead, the prospect of rising interest rates will worry anyone with a mortgage. Behind these facts are other realities that affect people's lives:

- Many people in key employment sectors cannot afford to live in higher-cost housing areas.
- Many people are now unable to live in the communities where they grew up, or near to parents and other family members that may depend on them.
- The value of housing is growing faster than most other forms of investment. This means that for some people it is worth owning a house, even if they never live in it. This simply exacerbates the problems highlighted above.
- According to official statistics, over 200,000 homes in the UK have been empty for 6 months or more.
- In places where housing prices are low, absentee owners have little incentive to improve properties

because they are unlikely to get a return on their investment.

Discuss

- How do you respond to these statistics?
- What do you see as the underlying causes of them?

Luke 12:13-21

"Someone in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'" (Luke 12:13-21) (NRSV)

This is a difficult and challenging story.

Discuss

- How do you respond to what it says?
- Can any of its lessons be applied to our attitude towards housing? If so, how?

Jesus does not condemn the man in the story for being rich, but his attitude towards the wealth he has accumulated. His prosperity presents him with something of a dilemma leaving him to ask, "What should I do?" In reality, his problem was not caused by his wealth, which he could have shared and used for the benefit of others, but his desire to find a way of keeping it all to himself. This, in turn, fed his sense of security and well-being, believing that he could relax because his material needs were met for several years. This was not wrong in itself, except his financial security became the thing that defined his ideas of success. Jesus poignantly reminds us that this is the wrong perspective. He describes his demise in unusual terms – "your life is being demanded of you". With these words he hints at the fact that even life itself is not something we "possess", but a gift of grace from God.

Leviticus and Isaiah

"The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but alien and tenants."

(Leviticus 25:23) (NRSV)

The book of Leviticus outlines a vision of a fair and just society; a society that reflects God's values and priorities for humanity. It presents an attitude to possessions that we struggle to conceive of in today's western world; this is a startling and disturbing contrast to those who would see capital and goods as something to be invested solely for personal gain and material security. Instead we are invited to see such things, even landholdings, as something we should treat as belonging to God and simply on loan to us.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God unequivocally applies this principle to the issue of housing:

*"Ah, you who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
and you are left to live alone
in the midst of the land!"*

(Isaiah 5:8) (NRSV)

It is important to recognise that God does not condemn home ownership outright. In fact, part of the promise of restoration in the later parts of Isaiah is that people will have access to safe and secure housing. This is reflected in verses like the ones below:

*"They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my
people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their
hands."*

(Isaiah 65:21-22) (NRSV)

Discuss

- How do these Bible passages challenge not only our attitudes as individuals, but the way in which home and property ownership is perceived in wider society?

Sharing our wealth

A common theme in these Old Testament verses and the parable of the rich fool is the way in which the accumulation of wealth becomes an expression of isolation and self-interest. There is a very powerful contrast between this and the actions of the early believers in Acts 2 (see Session 1) who saw their homes as something to be shared and a reflection of belonging to a community.

Discuss

- To what degree are issues of housing affordability affected by the way in which housing has increasingly come to be seen as an investment rather than a place to live and flourish?
- How do our current attitudes to property investment contradict the values and messages of Scripture? In what ways should Christians take a different attitude?
- What things can we do in our own lifestyles to better reflect God's attitude to housing?
- What actions can we take to make housing more affordable and accessible in our own communities?

Putting it into practice

- Could your church use its assets differently or what other ways might you get involved in helping provide affordable housing for those who need it?



Session 5

A relational community

You will need:

- Bibles (or at least copies of Psalm 107)

Icebreaker

- Who would be your ideal houseguest?
- Who is the one person living, or from history, you would love to have around for a meal and why?
- Who would be your nightmare houseguest?
- If you were someone's lodger, what do you think would annoy them most about you?

"Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets."

(Zechariah 8:4-5) (NRSV)

In Session 2 we used this verse to reflect on the importance of the physical community in which we live. But we can also recognise that it has much to say about relationships. It is not simply that young and old are able to settle in streets that are safe and secure, but they are safe and secure with one another. The conversation about 'house guests' helps us to recognise that at times part of our feeling 'at home' is affected by the people we are with as much as the place we are in. We might have a beautiful home, but if we are forced to share it with people that we do not feel comfortable with, then we are unlikely to enjoy it very much. This is something that we will think about further in this session; we can begin to do this by recognising some of the broader contexts in which we use the term 'house' and 'home'.

Luke 2:4

These words from the Christmas story are likely to be quite familiar to people:

"Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David."

(Luke 2:4) (NRSV)

Discuss

- What do you understand by the term "house ... of David"?
- What do we mean by "house" when we use it in a context like this?

Although the circumstances may not have been those that Mary and Joseph would have chosen, there is a reminder here that the term "house" is often used both within Scripture, and in our everyday language, to refer to some form of community. 'The house of ...' can describe a dynastic family, a well-known brand or a group of like-minded people. In this context, belonging to a 'house' is not so much a matter of living under the same roof or even the same neighbourhood, but our roots, our history and our sense of identity.

At home

Now look at the following phrases:

- Make yourself at home
- She seems to be very at home with that musical instrument
- He was at home with the group quite quickly.

Discuss

- What do we mean by the word 'home' in these contexts?
- In what ways do these reflect and connect with our more traditional use of the word to relate to a physical house?

When used this way, 'home' conveys something of an emotional state. This will often be something that we experience in the physical environment of our house, but can also be true when we are doing a particular task or with a group of people that are miles away from where we actually live. Home note is also a musical term – if a piece of music in a particular key does not end on the note that gives its name to that key, it sounds unfinished and leaves the listener hanging and expecting more. All of these uses of 'home' convey a sense of being fulfilled and at ease. They do not refer to a place but a state of being.

This session offers a chance to reflect on these two strands:

- being in a place of belonging, where our roots and identity can have clear expression
- being in a state of well-being where we feel fulfilled and secure.

This will often have less to do with the physical environment of our home than the relationships we forge and experience with those around us.

Discuss

- What does it take for you to feel 'at home'?
- Where do you find your true sense of belonging?

Psalm 107

Spend some time reading Psalm 107. It is quite long, so you may prefer to reflect on the selected verses below:

*"O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures for ever.
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.*

*"Some wandered in desert wastes,
finding no way to an inhabited town."*

(Psalm 107:1-4) (NRSV)

*"He led them by a straight way,
until they reached an inhabited town.
Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
For he satisfies the thirsty,
and the hungry he fills with good things."*

(Psalm 107:7-9) (NRSV)

*"He turns a desert into pools of water,
a parched land into springs of water.
And there he lets the hungry live,
and they establish a town to live in."*

(Psalm 107:35-36) (NRSV)

Notice how often God is described in these verses as having 'settled' people. This conveys more than simply being provided with physical shelter, but being in that place of security and well-being that we have outlined above. It is a term that is quite often used alongside 'house' and 'home' in other parts of the Old Testament. We might also note that this is reflected in the words that Jesus uses when he speaks at the Last Supper to his disciples of a Father's house in which there are many rooms (John 14:2). One reason that this is translated quite differently in various versions of the Bible is because the word that appears in the Gospel is not one that so much describes any physical construction as a good place to dwell. (The NRSV translates it as "dwelling places".)

Discuss

- To what degree do the words of Psalm 107 connect our human instincts about needing a place to feel ‘at home’ with God’s purposes for humanity?
- Is there a difference between ‘obtaining a home’ and being ‘settled in a home’?
- What aspects of our current housing provision can undermine people’s sense of being ‘settled’?
- Is it fair simply to consider someone’s housing needs on the basis of physical space and number of rooms? To what degree does being moved against our will undermine being ‘settled’?

Coming home

It is interesting to note how often the theme of ‘coming home’ appears in the Bible. When God sent Moses to rescue the Israelite people from Egypt, it was not so much that they needed a physical place to live, but one where they would be free from oppression, slavery and injustice. A key message to the exiles in Babylon was of God’s intention not only to bring them home, but also draw other nations and people groups into a new community of well-being. Parables like that of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7) and the lost son (Luke 15:11-32) forge strong connections between the gospel message of Jesus and the idea of coming home. The messages of the Bible culminate in the book of Revelation, which paints a picture of God making an eternal home with a redeemed humanity (Revelation 21:1-5).

We can of course recognise a very strong spiritual dimension in this message, but as we reflect again on our call to be heralds and proclaimers of God’s coming kingdom, it seems hard to avoid this having implications for God’s people in the here and now.

Discuss

- If God’s purpose is for people to discover an eternal ‘spiritual home’, how should this be reflected in the way kind of communities that we seek to build and the provision that we make for one another?

We cannot reflect on these realities without recognising that many people in our world, for a variety of reasons, are forced to leave their places of birth and belonging, often coming as refugees to seek a new place to call home. Net migration into the UK is one factor increasing pressure on housing provision but, as we reflect on Scripture, we can both see how people have been impelled for thousands of years to cross borders in search of a new home, and that the desire for a home is part of the intrinsic human identity that God has given us.

Discuss

We often speak of human life as being something that is sacred.

- Given what the Bible reveals about God’s concern to ‘settle’ people, and God’s purpose for humanity containing so many echoes of ‘coming home’, to what degree is it reasonable to describe a person’s home as sacred too?
- And to what degree could we consider it a sacred duty to provide ‘home’ for our fellow human beings?

As you consider the questions above, you might also reflect on some further verses from the law book of Leviticus:

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”
(Leviticus 19:33-34) (NRSV)

Ruth

General principles like this will often become more significant for us when we apply them to real-life situations. One example of this in the history of God's people is the story of Ruth. Although born in Moab, and realising that her economic prospects were probably better if she remained there, she recognised both her responsibility to her older mother-in-law, and the importance of being in a community where she could be 'at home'. In essence she placed her hope on the community of God's people living up to the expectations of their sacred law codes. Her commitment to this is poignantly expressed in the covenant she makes with Naomi:

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

(Ruth 1:16) (NRSV)

Through these words, Ruth clearly expresses a sense of 'home' that is based not so much on place, but the relationships that she forges with her immediate family, the wider community, and the God of her humanity.

Discuss

- We often use the phrase 'social housing' in our society. Look at this phrase together and try some word association. What words and phrases are evoked by this term?

God's word offers us some powerful reminders that being 'at home' has some significant social dimensions, and indeed, that it is a shared responsibility to provide 'a place to settle' for everyone.

Discuss

- To what degree do the words used in your responses to the question above reflect the messages of God's word?

Putting it into practice

- Who are those in your community who may have adequate housing, but struggle to feel 'settled' and 'at home'?
- Who are the strangers that God is calling us to welcome?
- How might you and your church respond?



Session 6

A place to call home?

Icebreaker

Ask everyone in the room to imagine that the group are all about to go over to their house and hold the meeting in their bedroom. How would you react to this announcement? What would we find there? Would you want some time to go home and sort a few things out first?

Hopefully this will be a light-hearted and fun conversation. Some might not be able to remember whether the bed is made – others may well have rushed out and left the clothes they have changed out of around the floor!

Whilst we might be able to laugh and joke about such things, few if any of us would have had to stop and think about whether or not they had a bedroom tonight.

Take some time to imagine that when you got up this morning, you had no idea whether you would have somewhere to sleep when evening came. Has anyone ever been in those circumstances? How would it feel if you were?

Luke 2:4-7

Take a look at these words from Luke's Gospel, which form something of a centrepiece to the Christmas story:

“Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

(Luke 2:4-7) (NRSV)

It is interesting how these words are often perceived and presented in our interpretations of the Christmas story. The manger is assumed to be situated inside a warm stable, which has been donated and made comfortable by a kindly innkeeper in an act of great provision and benevolence. But most of these features are of our own invention – we have no idea whether the manger in which Jesus was laid was inside a stable, or how far it was from the nearest ‘no vacancy’ sign. The reality of the story is probably quite different from how it is depicted in our classical nativity scenes – all we know for sure is that Mary and Joseph were left with no roof over their heads and pretty much had to fend for themselves around what could well have been no more than an open-air feeding trough.

Discuss

- Spend some time looking carefully together at this passage and try to identify the various factors that combined to leave Mary and Joseph homeless.

A number of realities emerge from the story. The first is that Mary and Joseph were only forced to leave what we assume was some form of secure residence in Nazareth because of the dictatorial decree of an invading superpower in their land. Ironically, it is Joseph's heritage as a member of one of Israel's most celebrated family lines that forces him to leave the place that he has come to call home. Because of this, we can work out that all of Joseph's family must have been there too – so how come none of them made room for him and Mary? We can be reasonably certain that the answer may lie in the condition in which Mary found herself; unmarried and pregnant, which in that society would have been seen as a matter of shame and disgrace. Yet even her pregnancy is not the outcome of any wilful action on their part. This homeless couple are a victim of circumstances on a scale that many of us would struggle to take in.

Through the lens of 2,000 years of Christian tradition, it is easy to see this as a somewhat nostalgic and romantic scene; yet if we were friends and contemporaries of Mary and Joseph, we would be quite likely to declare “This isn’t fair”. Take some time to reflect on this further as a group.

Discuss

- How do you think you would have responded if you had come across Mary and Joseph in the streets of Bethlehem one night?
- What do you feel when you come across rough sleepers in your own community today? Where do you imagine that the fault lies for their situation?
- How do you feel about Mary and Joseph being depicted as a homeless couple? To what degree have you allowed human traditions and nostalgia to blur this reality?

Matthew 2:13

If we switch to the narrative of Matthew’s Gospel, we quickly discover that the plight of this couple and their new-born child hardly improves.

“An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’” (Matthew 2:13) (NRSV)

Having been forcibly displaced and left homeless in their own homeland, this young family’s only chance of survival is to head for the nearest border and become refugees. But we also know that this story is much more than the account of a particularly unfortunate family, it describes God’s coming into our world as Jesus, the Messiah.

Being born human

One of the names of God that has particular relevance in this story is first identified by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, whose words are quoted in Matthew’s birth narrative:

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’”
(Matthew 1:23) (NRSV)

This is no mere title or theoretical ideal – it defines the meaning of the events that are being described in the streets of Bethlehem and the refugee camps of Egypt. God is literally becoming one with humanity, and those with whom God chooses to identify are not the rich and privileged, but the homeless and displaced. This reality is described in more theological terms by the New Testament writer Paul, in his letter to the church in Philippi:

“Though he was in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself ...”
(Philippians 2:6-8) (NRSV)

Jesus himself spoke of this reality in John’s Gospel:

“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.”
(John 6:38) (NRSV)

The ideas conveyed in these short passages are likely to be familiar, but spend some time reflecting on them afresh particularly remembering that Jesus was born into a situation of destitution and homelessness.

Discuss

- In what ways are the circumstances of Jesus’ birth a practical example to us of what these passages are describing?
- What might this reveal to us about God’s attitude and concern for those who are homeless?
- In what ways do our attitudes need to be shaped by this?
- What might that mean for us in practice?

Homeless

Take a moment to reflect on the term that we attach to people who need housing – we always describe them as ‘homeless’. Would you ever say that someone was ‘houseless’? Think back to some of the themes that have been explored in previous sections of this resource – is it more than just an accident of language that we describe someone as ‘homeless’ rather than ‘houseless’?

We have come to recognise that having a home is more than simply having a roof over our heads and a bed to sleep in. There are many people in our society who may not find themselves sleeping on the streets, but nonetheless don’t have accommodation that is safe, secure and suitable for their needs.

In previous reflections we have noted the importance of the word ‘settled’ when talking about God’s concern for people to have a home. Another example of this broader concern is echoed in the words of the prophet Isaiah, when he describes God’s future promise and purpose.

*“My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places.”*
(Isaiah 32:18) (NRSV)

Discuss

- How does this need to inform the way our society responds to those who have no home?
- In what ways might we be described as ‘homeless’ even if we have a bed to sleep in tonight?

While we can obviously offer support, care and provision for those who are homeless, we might also recognise that it is not a new problem. Look at these verses from the Old Testament prophet Micah:

*“Alas for those who devise wickedness
and evil deeds on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in their power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away;
they oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance.”*
(Micah 2:1-2) (NRSV)

Micah’s prophecies are not simply addressed to individuals, but to the political and economic structures of his day – he challenges society as a whole about systems and institutions that enable some to become rich by leaving others destitute. Such messages resonate with the realities of the society in which we live today. In the Gospels, Jesus offers a quite disturbing challenge that suggests that even organised religion can sometimes leave people destitute and homeless:

*“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets!
They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”*

(Mark 12:38-40) (NRSV)

Discuss

- What do we need to challenge in our own society that exacerbates the problems of homelessness?
- In what ways do our lifestyles contribute to the destitution of others?

Putting it into practice

- What are the issues of homelessness in your community?
- Who are the ‘hidden homeless’?
- How might God be challenging you to respond to this?

For more information

Housing Justice

www.housingjustice.org.uk

Scottish Churches Housing Action

www.churches-housing.org

Joint Public Issues Team

www.jointpublicissues.org.uk

Church of Scotland

www.churchofscotland.org.uk

The United Reformed Church

www.urc.org.uk

The Methodist Church of Great Britain

www.methodist.org.uk

The Baptist Union of Great Britain

www.baptist.org.uk

To read the Joint Public Issues Team's resource 'Faith in Foodbanks' visit

www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/faithinfoodbanks-resources

For information about the annual Homeless Sunday visit

www.homeless-sunday.uk

Church Action on Poverty

www.church-poverty.org.uk

Trussell Trust

www.trusselltrust.org

Fare Share

www.fareshare.org.uk

Shelter

www.shelter.org.uk

Crisis

www.crisis.org.uk

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