



**Churches
in Ireland**
Connecting
in Christ

**Irish Inter-Church
Meeting**
Working Group

Following a Homeless Christ: A Christian response to the housing crisis in Ireland

Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”
Mt 8:20

For Christians, giving shelter and hospitality go to the heart of what it means to love our neighbour. In the gospels, the example of Christ is one of a leader who frequently relied on the kindness of strangers to meet basic needs, illustrating by example the dignity of the poor and homeless. At the same time, Scripture repeatedly emphasises the need to challenge injustice and work to change the structures that trap people in poverty, isolation and despair.

In Ireland today people are becoming increasingly concerned at the relentless rise in levels of homelessness. Many of our local churches are involved in supporting charitable outreach to address the worst consequences, but with the situation now evolving into an enduring crisis there is a need for a deeper engagement leading to radical change in the way we as a society view housing and homelessness, and the value we place on a family home.

As Christians, it is important for us to make our contribution to this debate, alongside other sectors of society, from a place of pastoral concern for those who are suffering at the margins of our society, and for children whose lives are being blighted by homelessness, without a space of their own, at a critical stage in their development. We cannot afford to be complacent or rely on charitable initiatives to address this deeply-rooted problem. Tragic cases of people dying on the streets and distressing images of children sleeping in public places are the most shocking and visible manifestation of a much wider problem of housing insecurity, so much of which is unseen, and which is causing suffering and distress to individuals and families throughout the country.

We have a responsibility to bring to those affected by homelessness and housing insecurity a message of hope and solidarity, reassuring them that they do not have to face this situation alone, while working to address its root causes.

The true value of a home

In order to develop meaningful, long-term solutions to the problem of homelessness and housing insecurity, we need to understand and acknowledge that the current challenges are the result of policy choices that can be changed, recognising the decisions that have led us to this point. A crisis is a clear indication that radical change is required.

A Christian response to the problem of homelessness and housing insecurity is framed by our commitment to the common good — ensuring that all members of society are supported to achieve their full potential and recognising that neglect of the needs of the most vulnerable damages the social fabric of our communities, harming everyone. In this analysis, economic activity needs to serve the common good and people cannot be allowed to become collateral damage of the demands of the market.

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Viewed in this light, there is currently a tension at the heart of our current housing policy arising from the fact that we have allowed the family home to be reduced to a commodity or an investment vehicle, with the result that many of us now have a vested interest in the continued rise of house prices, which make housing unattainable for others. This is a global problem, as has been acknowledged at the level of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights,¹ but in Ireland the accelerated rise in housing insecurity has been particularly steep, with devastating consequences. Rent increases that are completely out of line with changes to the average wage are clearly not sustainable and evidence of a system that is not only broken, but out of control.

Housing is recognised internationally as a fundamental right because a secure home is an essential foundation for participation in society by individuals and families. Securing this fundamental right for all needs to be a national priority. Allowing current trends to continue will damage the life-chances of future generations as well as those who are affected today.

A call to action

Many of our local church communities are supporting initiatives to help those who are homeless. This is vitally important work. As the crisis continues to escalate, we need to ask ourselves whether we could do more to really hear the voices of those who are homeless and understand the causes of their situation. Too often we can make assumptions based on stereotypes and generalisations that serve to blame the victims of unjust systems, while protecting the rest of society from the need to reflect on the extent to which we have been, and continue to be, complicit in a broken system. We need to raise the shortage of social housing with our elected representatives, rather than prioritising other issues. We need to challenge the “not in my backyard language” that stigmatises social housing and those who need it.

Stigma can be a major barrier to people seeking help, making a traumatic situation worse through shame and isolation. Within our church communities we need to be more pro-active in sharing the experiences of those who are homeless or experiencing housing insecurity and those working to support them. We need to ensure that our local church communities are places of safety and welcome for those who are struggling against a system that can be brutal and de-humanising. Do we pray in our churches for those who are homeless or at risk of losing their homes? Does the way in which we speak about homelessness and its causes affirm the dignity of those affected? Do we pray for repentance on our own part where we have been part of the system that profits from high prices that prevent others from having a home of their own?

In the wider society we need to challenge the victim-blaming that compounds the stress and trauma of homelessness and deflects responsibility from those who have the power to make the changes required. Also to be challenged are the attitudes that some homeless people are

¹ Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context (18 January 2017) <ohchr.org>

more deserving than others, pitting groups of vulnerable people against each other, rather than addressing the causes of the scarcity of appropriate social housing.

There have been clear appeals from the faith sector for legislative and policy changes that would have a significant impact on the lives of vulnerable individuals and families and would establish a right to housing. We restate our call for increased investment in state-provided housing; measures to limit rent increases, improve security of tenure, and protect families who face eviction from their home; and proposals to convert unused buildings into social housing. More grassroots support is required to ensure political leaders are held to account for their response to the plight of those who are homeless. A wider cultural transformation is required to ensure that the true value of the family home, as the cornerstone of strong communities and a caring society is recognised. This is the responsibility of all in our society, but Christians have a particular calling to see Christ in our neighbours in need of shelter and care.

Social housing is desperately needed: state built, funded, owned and maintained. The private sector will never provide for the poorest in society to whom the elected government has an obligation. It is a profit-driven business and this is not compatible with the need to provide secure housing to citizens in insecure financial circumstances — circumstances becoming all the more common with the growth of the “gig” economy. Finally, we call for the formal recognition of housing as a human right, enshrining a responsibility on the state to continue to invest in social housing to ensure that all its people are able to have a secure home in which to build their lives together.