

Homelessness: Creating Just, Sustainable Communities

Introduction

In 2006 the Presbytery of New York City sent an overture concerned about homelessness to the General Assembly, and it was approved. A study was written in 2007 and approved at the 2008 General Assembly in San Jose, California.

The study team that produced this report consisted of eight well-informed leaders in homelessness ministry, affordable housing development (in New York City and San Francisco), successful program development (Shreveport and Chicago), and varied outreach efforts (Tucson, Baltimore, rural North Carolina, and Minneapolis). One member is a professor of housing studies; four have theological training; one teaches social ethics. The full report may be found at <http://www.pcusa.org/acswp/index.htm>.

Summary of Report

American households are under increased pressure to maintain housing. When eviction or several moves force a choice between being housed and being able to meet other expenses, individuals and families seek alternatives such as moving into a cheap motel or living out of their car. Then, not knowing where else to turn, they appear at the doors of churches seeking a handout, a meal, or a place to stay. Piecemeal responses to such appeals, while compassionate, do not address underlying problems and issues. A far better response is to help persons find a path toward a comprehensive plan to end their homelessness. Without such a plan, individuals and families remain in poverty and cycle in and out of homelessness. This report suggests that the cycle of homelessness will be broken when each person

or family experiencing homelessness is treated with dignity and respect and is offered hospitality and welcomed to permanent housing, and when everyone has access to resources and services to meet their individualized needs.

Though this report focuses on tested treatment and prevention strategies, it lifts up the approximately 50 percent of Presbyterian congregations that contribute in various ways to the relief of homeless persons through stocking

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food pantries, providing volunteers, and offering beds, and in almost 25 percent of churches, Habitat for Humanity construction teams are in place. Originating in the work of the Presbyterian Network to End Homelessness, this resolution and report were requested to complement our churchwide response to this visible edge of poverty.

These affirmations emerge from several principles that underlie faithful ministry with persons who are homeless:

- Universal access to safe, decent, accessible, affordable, and permanent housing is a measure of a truly just society and a sign of the coming reign of God.
- The church is called to create communities of hospitality that assure all members of society a right to basic economic and social well-being, including safe, affordable housing.
- The church is called to honor God's gift of the earth and to create, through personal lifestyle choices and

Publisher's Note

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) takes positions on many social issues. Before crafting official social policy statements, there is a lengthy process involving study papers and consultations before the final General Assembly debates and votes on the issue. This essay is a summary of either a study paper being considered by the church or a summary of the official policy. The introduction to the essay explains where the full document may be found. Please visit www.pcusa.org/acswp for more information about the process and more resources.

the structures of society, sustainable communities where people can be securely housed in just relationship with one another and the earth.

- The church is called to challenge society to provide safe, decent, accessible, affordable, and permanent housing for all persons who cannot secure such housing through their own means.
- Homelessness and the struggle to find permanent, affordable rental housing is a crisis that can be found in a diverse range of communities. People of faith are a common thread running throughout these diverse communities as well, and the church can be a catalyst for building a comprehensive response.

The Problem

There are several levels of homelessness, from “precariously housed” (persons who are dependent on others for shelter) to “chronically homeless” (persons who experience long-term homelessness or reoccurring episodes of homelessness). Some individuals or families—as a result of an interruption of income, fire, or a medical crisis—have a short-term need for housing assistance. More often, however, the crisis of homelessness is the predictable result of a complex interaction of losses and conditions. Individuals and families needing assistance with housing nearly always require a complex array of other services in order to achieve enough stability to maintain permanent housing.

Housing is considered affordable when the cost of housing plus basic utilities, apart from telephone, does not exceed 30 percent of the household’s income. More than 37 million households pay so much for housing that they cannot afford other necessities such as food and medical care. Increasing rents in 2005 and 2006 predict escalating housing cost burdens or homelessness for households with low income in years to come.

The primary legislation to address homelessness is the McKinney-Vento Act, first passed in 1987. While the availability of public funds to address homelessness is variable and severely limited, these funds are an essential component as communities work to garner all available resources to meet the needs in their area. An ideal policy would have three foci: prevention, housing assistance, and supportive services.

Theological-Ethical Framework

The people of Israel, with their experience of being strangers and sojourners before coming into the land, understood covenant with God to include care for vulnerable strangers in their midst. Worship and outreach to those in need could not be separated (Isa. 58:6–7).

Much of Jesus’ ministry as recorded in the Gospels is marked by acts of hospitality; his choices about where and with whom to share his meals break down the prevailing walls of division and exclusion. His ministry and that of his followers are dependent on the hospitality of others. Moreover, he characterizes the coming reign of God in terms of a banquet where all are welcomed and find a seat. Paul, in his nurturing of young congregations, emphasized welcoming one another as Christ had welcomed all.

God wants a chair for everyone at the banquet table. The table, a gift of God, is meant to be shared in sustainable hospitality for all. Too often, however, remedial solutions provide only a momentary respite from social stratification and its stigma. In contrast, true hospitality is equated with justice.

The call to true biblical hospitality compels us to go beyond compassion and charity. Our response must empower people to move from homelessness to hope. Our response must include elements of justice, community, and the sustainable sharing and use of God’s gift of creation.

Theologically, we serve God when we respond with compassion to our brothers and sisters and when we feed, welcome, clothe, and care for persons in need (Matt. 25:31–46). Seeing the face of Jesus in the face of “the least of these,” churches often begin with a direct response. While necessary, these responses do not address the causes of homelessness and do little to break the cycle for individuals and families in need. Churches can also respond on a deeper level by getting involved in partnerships to create affordable housing. However, to truly be about the work of constructing just, sustainable communities, the church needs to be involved in advocacy for public policies that prevent people from becoming homeless and remedy the injustices inherent in the vicious cycle of poverty.

Hospitality demands the most basic element of relationship: the ability to view each person as created in the image of God (*imago Dei*). Hospitality means moving beyond having a commitment to welcome (in the abstract) to proactively thinking about how our churches can become communities of hospitality, which means going beyond the abstract to concrete action, especially when communities strive to exclude rather than embrace. Finally, sustainable hospitality requires that we all live more simply so that the earth can continue to sustain itself and the growing human population.

Constructing Just, Sustainable Communities

Presbyterians and other persons of faith have responded valiantly to the crisis of homelessness over recent decades. But the problem persists. How can the cycle end?

A. Strategies for Breaking the Cycle of Homelessness: A replicable, community-based strategy for breaking the cycle of homelessness has several components. These components include: (1) prevention, which helps people keep their housing; (2) individualized, comprehensive programs of housing and services for those who become homeless; and (3) affordable, permanent housing with a variety of support services so that residents are able to maintain their housing.

An effective response can take many forms and be developed in a community of any size. Churches and religious communities can and should play a significant role, providing resources (financial support, volunteers, in-kind donations, and advocacy) to make the model successful. The goal is to support families or individuals who are able to become totally self-sufficient and to provide others with the services they need to maintain permanent housing. The key to success is a plan for a spectrum of programs developed to meet varied needs.

B. Faithful Response to Homelessness through Advocacy: As Presbyterians, we are led from worship into the world where we act out our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ.

While individual acts of mercy and compassion are well understood as “Christ-like,” and providing financial support to groups and ministries engaged in the relief of misery and injustice is common, many Christians are reluctant to become directly involved. Fewer still accept the call of the gospel to engage the “structures and systems which create or foster brokenness and distortion.”¹ Yet as Reformed Christians, our heritage is filled with examples of such faithful engagement, and the church has again and again affirmed the efficacy of such action. This commitment stems from a strong belief in the sovereignty of God over all aspects of life.

Part of the role of the church in relation to social witness and engagement is to call other parts of society to account and to solicit their collaboration in addressing injustice. While the church’s resources are considerable, they pale in the face of other sources, both public and private, that can be brought to bear on the needs of the world. While some would claim that tending to people who are poor and homeless is the rightful work of the church—and not of the government—the religious community cannot do it all. A vital role of the church and its resources is to call government to account and to leverage governmental funds to address the agendas in which the church and the society agree action is needed. This is called *advocacy*.

1. *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), W-7.3003.

1. Municipal- and State-Level Advocacy

As with direct engagement, advocacy often begins with what is obvious and at hand and then grows in complexity. From small beginnings, advocacy can expand as issues and opportunities present themselves, through organizations that support mixed-income communities and inclusionary zoning policies and coalitions that address poverty and aim to create just and sustainable communities. Such efforts include:

- Living Wage campaigns, which support workers in the struggle for a living wage
- Inclusionary zoning policies
- Strategies to counteract neighborhood exclusivism (e.g., NIMBYism, Not in My Back Yard syndrome).

2. National-Level Advocacy

There are several policy directions that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all levels is called to support at this time.

a. Investment in Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), a national organization that accepts investments for use in a revolving predevelopment loan fund. Funds invested

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in LISC pay a determined rate of interest and are secure, risk-free investments.

b. The creation of a National Affordable Housing Trust Fund to construct, rehabilitate, and preserve 1,500,000 units of housing over the next ten years.

c. Budget priorities and adequate revenue to assure the availability of housing assistance and comprehensive supportive services for persons who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

d. “Smart growth” development and “green” construction incentives and tax credits to enhance the growth of just and sustainable communities without leading to gentrification. (As energy costs propel more people back into cities, the need for affordable housing will increase.)

e. Taxation strategies that move away from tax breaks for upper-income homeowners and toward increased benefits for persons with low to moderate income.

f. Retention and expansion of the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program.

- g. Preservation of existing affordable housing.
- h. Increased emphasis on Supportive Housing—permanent, affordable housing linked to services.
- i. Continued investment in and expansion of the McKinney-Vento Act or other comprehensive national legislative strategies for ending homelessness at its root causes.
- j. Making the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) a full partner in the effort to end chronic homelessness and meet the services needs of all persons experiencing homelessness.
- k. Expansion of Veterans Administration programs for veterans who are homeless to include funding for permanent housing and the creation of innovative new models for service that link permanent housing with supportive services.
- l. Expanded funding for community reentry programs to help communities prevent and end homelessness for people with special needs who are reentering communities from jails and prisons and for supportive housing targeted to people who are homeless with mental illness.
- m. Restoration of flexible federal funding to states, cities, and counties to enable them to define their own priorities and enhance funding for affordable housing and supportive services as part of their comprehensive plans to prevent and end homelessness.
- n. Response to the subprime mortgage lending crisis that is designed to correct the abuses in this market, prevent future foreclosures, and create a safety net for families who have fallen victim to predatory or unwise lending.