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The Archbishop of Canterbury's Housing Commission is building a new vision for housing based on Christian values. Here, Prof Tim Gorringe (Professor of Theology at the University of Exeter) explains why sustainability must be at the heart of this.



What today we call 'sustainability' should be second nature to Christians. For us, it aligns with our understanding that the whole of creation, including we ourselves, is gift, the outpouring of the Creator's love.

Housing, says the architect Christopher Day, is the third human skin (after the epidermis and clothing). In 1948, in a world where many parts of the globe had been bombed to smithereens, and whole populations had been treated with unimaginable sadism and wickedness, the Declaration of Human Rights set out what it considered to be the minimum requirements for a decent human life. These included adequate housing.

But what is that, and how does it relate to the demand for 'sustainability'? It relates to that because all modern building, which rarely uses local materials, makes huge demands on raw materials and on processes which contribute to global warming. It is calculated that building, heating and cooling our houses accounts for 40% of the emission of greenhouse gases. We have to ask 'is that acceptable if we are to meet the adequacy the UN Declaration rightly demands?' I have four main points on a Christian vision of housing and sustainability, although I've made others elsewhere:

Firstly, as many architects and planners have insisted for the past seventy years, for housing to be adequate **people need to be involved in building their own homes**. There are now more than 8 billion of us, an increasing fraction of which are refugees, a proportion which will go on increasing as climate change bites. They all need adequate housing. If we go back 250 years, to before the industrial revolution, most human beings built their *own* homes using local materials: Parson Harrison, in Fielding's *Amelia* (1751), does just that. These houses were often

wretchedly inadequate but those that survive are now much sought after. They were built in response to the local climate from materials ready to hand.

As population grew and millions moved to the cities they were housed by speculative builders, then by local authorities and now by volume builders. Adequate homes can never be provided top down, whether built for profit or by some ideologically driven programme.

But people can still be involved in building their own homes. As an example of what is possible look at [the development in Broadhempston](#), near Totnes, by local people, heated with sun rooms and insulated with straw. This is also possible in cities, as the [Segal Houses](#) in Lewisham demonstrate. These houses are not only sustainable but also affordable – something which is scarcely ever true of volume building. Allowing people to build for themselves, using local materials, but informed by sustainable practice, is the way to go (see, for example, Hassan Fathy's wonderful *Architecture for the Poor*).

Second, **adequacy includes beauty** – this is part of biblical shalom. Many of the tower blocks inspired by le Corbusier, and the mass estates built by councils with the best of intentions, have now been pulled down because people found them alienating and they became hotbeds of drugs and crime. As an example of what is possible in their place look at the [Living Villages project](#). The Wintles houses, in Shropshire, are now some of the most desired properties in the area – ‘desirable’ homes should not just be for the wealthy but for everyone. The houses have solar panels, use biomass and heat recovery systems and, as with the 1930s council houses, every home has an allotment to grow food.

Third, Christians in the United Kingdom have a long tradition of **campaigning on housing** (when Octavia Hill addressed the Ecclesiastical Commissioners the Archbishop, Frederick Temple, said ‘he had never had such a beating in his life’). It is part of what it means to be church that we struggle for justice, and this includes housing. This campaigning has never been more crucial than in the post-COVID world.

We took it for granted that Christians would oppose apartheid or support fair trade. We should in the same way oppose, as Amos and Isaiah certainly would have done, social practices which make housing for the poor a nightmare and a burden, instead of something which ought to be part of human fulfilment, an expression of the Spirit inspired search for beauty and rest.

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So, finally, **what can we do?** Here we are, struggling to pay the rent, or the mortgage, in the only housing we can afford. While the government has committed to making homes more efficient to boost the economy after the pandemic, there's a lot we can do ourselves.

In the first place, look around for co-housing schemes. They are often affordable and beautiful. If you are sufficiently courageous, look around for [low impact developments](#). Various pieces of planning legislation support new and [existing low-impact projects](#).

If you have the energy, get together with people from your local Transition group, or congregation, and start a 'Community Land Trust'. A CLT is a

non-profit organisation that is set up and run by ordinary people to develop and manage housing and other community assets on behalf of the local community. CLTs act as long-term stewards of housing, ensuring that it benefits local residents and remains genuinely affordable in perpetuity.

If all else fails, contact your local [community energy company](#). They often have grants to make your property more energy efficient and if you are low waged or on benefits it might be free. In any event, remember you are born for community, so never struggle alone.

As Wendell Berry has said, trashing or harming created reality is, for Christians, not just folly, fouling our nest, but ‘the most horrid blasphemy’. Created reality, according both to the author of the opening chapter of our Scriptures, and according to Paul (Romans 8), is destined finally for the shalom of God – ‘rest’, peace, fulfilment, song and dance, glory. Here and now we seek to realise that shalom, to catch its echoes, in all our practices – in relationships, play, education, farming, in political structures – but also in housing and town planning.

As Rob Hopkins puts it in the Transition mantra:

If we wait for governments it will be too little too late

If we act as individuals it will be too little

If we act as communities it might be just enough, just in time.

Jesus intended something very like this in calling the church into existence.

Prof Tim Gorringe is contributing to the Housing Commission’s understanding of the theology of housing and land. He contributed to the Housing Commission’s Theology Symposium in September 2019.



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