THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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The theologian Stephen Backhouse writes about how the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Housing, Church and Community is seeking to express a distinctly Christian vision of housing and community

Theology is not 'theory'. Theology is thinking and speaking as excellently about God as possible, and endeavouring to act accordingly. The best theology arises from experience: the earliest Christian theologians were people whose lives had been changed by their encounter with Jesus, and their writings and teachings were attempts to understand and pass on this experience to the best of their ability. Later theologians use their study of scriptures, history, social sciences, languages and religion to help the faithful remain true to the revelation of God. Thus, the theological stream of the Archbishop's Housing Commission does not pretend to be laying out some academic 'theory' which we hope might influence 'real life'. Instead, we are endeavouring to think Christianly about our shared human experience of what it means to have a home, to build houses, and to create neighbourhood and to do so in such a way that remain faithful to the excellent way of Jesus Christ.

The theological stream seeks to articulate a distinctly Christian vision of housing and community. It is a part of the wider Commission's work, responding to the day-to-day realities of housing policy in the UK, as well as suggesting the long-view that only a global tradition over 2000 years old can provide. The theologians work in tandem with the other members of the Commission, responding and reflecting on the experienced as they arise. In turn, the hope is that the developing theology will shape and inform the Commission's work, so that the conclusions are in harmony with this Christian vision.

Already a number of key topics have come to the fore as a result of the Commission's work. Current questions attracting theological attention include: what does 'home' mean? What is the significance of Jesus command to love your neighbour? What role can or should national interest

hold in developing neighbourhood policy? How can housing policy create space, offer hospitality, and allow people to flourish? What is the Christian view of justice? Of fairness? What is the theology of risk? Is there a Christian value to owning over renting, or vice versa? What does it mean to "own" land or to "manage" it?

The theology stream has already hosted one symposium on these topics, drawing together theological voices from across religious, political and social spectrums. The stream will generate resources for the Commission and the wider public, including reports, books and bible studies for use in local churches. In the longer term, it is a goal of the theology stream to help create a culture of thinking Christianly about housing and place, establishing 'the built environment' as a legitimate and growing area for theological enquiry. The theological arm of the Commission will engage with policy makers and government, shining a light on what it means for people to live as people of peace. The theology stream is also for the church, helping to resource the local and national level, instilling amongst the faithful a renewed Christian imagination that the work of flourishing space, hospitality and loving neighbours is not peripheral to the Gospel. It lies at the heart of it.

*- Stephen Backhouse is a theologian and a member of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Housing, Church and Community. He is an international speaker and teacher and Director of* ***Tent Theology*** *which aims to make theology accessible to everyone.*

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