THE CENTRE FOR
THEOLOGY
& COMMUNITY

UNLESS THE LORD BUILDS THE HOUSE

A five-week course of prayer, reflection and action, on Christian faith and housing

INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THIS COURSE

In his poem *The Rock*, T.S. Eliot asks

> What is the meaning of this city?
> Do you huddle together because you
> love each other?
> What will you answer?
> *"We all dwell together to make money*
> *from each other"?* or *"This is a community"*?

Housing is a spiritual matter. It is about what Pope Francis calls our "human ecology" – the way our physical environment – whether urban, suburban, or rural - reflects and shapes our relationships with each other, and ultimately with God.

In recent years, churches have been increasingly active in speaking and acting on housing. In 2016, the Centre for Theology and Community (CTC) published *From Houses to Homes: Faith, power and the housing crisis*. Two years later, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales commended *Abide in me: Catholic Social Thought and Action on Housing Challenges in England and Wales* - the fruit of community listening, theological reflection and collaboration across denominations, involving both Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) and CTC.

In 2019, the Archbishop of Canterbury launched his *Commission on Housing, Church and Community*, which has explored the contribution that Christians can make to tackling the housing crisis and why this is an integral part of the Church's mission, rooted in a theological understanding of housing and community.

This five-week course aims to engage a wide range of Christian congregations in community listening, prayer and theological reflection. It has been produced by CTC, with funding from CSAN, the Church of England and Church Urban Fund. It is designed to help people discern how to take action locally in the context of community listening, prayer and ecumenical collaboration.

Prayer stands at the heart of the course. The Psalmist writes that "unless the Lord builds the house, those who labour build in vain" [127.1]. It is our conviction that a better "human ecology" will only emerge when we are open and attentive to the work of the Holy Spirit, so that we do not labour in our own power alone, but as "God's fellow workers...God's field, God's building" (1 Corinthians 3.9).

THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Most of this course was written – and its videos were filmed – before the coronavirus pandemic. But the pandemic has revealed much about the "human ecology" of our cities, towns and villages, and people's housing conditions have had a huge impact on their experience of lockdown.

Some of the neighbourhoods featured in the films and testimony have been among the hardest hit by the coronavirus crisis. In the first session of the course we will hear about their responses to the lockdown – and share something of our own experience.

OVERVIEW OF THE COURSE

Each 90-minute session has a mix of discussion, Bible study and video stories (so some equipment is required to access and share these films). It ends with suggestions for prayer and ideas for action – some of which can be taken between sessions, while others would require more long-term planning and commitment.

Sessions can be held anywhere your group can watch the videos – they are on the CTC website (www.theology-centre.org). We would recommend groups of 4-12 but it is also possible to have a larger group which splits up for the discussions. Feel free to include food and/or worship as additional elements to the sessions.

The course is designed for groups who all attend the same local church. It could also be used by groups who don't live near their church but who meet regularly and have a focus on the area in which they live. As the group leader, you will have responsibility for taking your group through each session and facilitating discussions. Try to keep the discussion open and informal, but be prepared to gently bring people back to the question or topic where necessary. The timings for each section are approximate so don't worry if you go over or under time on any particular element, just try to keep the whole session to time. Finally, if you have any questions about the course or any feedback you'd like to give, please feel free to contact us at [housing@theology-centre.org].

The course is built around the *See, Judge, Act* method. As Fr Simon Cuff (Tutor in Theology at St Mellitus College) explains, the method was developed by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn and included within Catholic Social Teaching by Pope St John XXIII. Jesus' interaction with the blind man in John 9 exemplifies the method:

> Jesus has seen the blind man. He has judged his situation, and has acted in his favour. One more person has been incorporated into the kingdom of God. (Guillermo Cook, quoted in Simon Cuff, *Love in Action: Catholic Social Teaching for every church*)

As Cuff explains, the *See, Judge, Act* method is a repeating cycle: we observe and listen, we seek to judge in accordance with God's revelation in Christ, and we then take action in the light of that judgment. Having completed that cycle, we then observe and listen to discern the impact of our action (another "see"), evaluate it and discern what needs to be done to build on it, or perhaps to remedy unintended damage ("judge"), and then move into further action.

At the heart of this course is the question of who is building and acting. In Scripture, we see that God's action usually emerges from amongst those the wider society underestimates or simply ignores. If we are to be God's co-workers, we will need to listen to his Word, and also to the poorest in our communities – so that we can see, judge and act with them – and not just on their behalf.

- In sessions one and two, we focus on **seeing our neighbourhood with God's eyes** – engaging with the stories of characters in the Gospels who are not "seen" by the wider society but whom Jesus tells us are precious in the eyes of God. This will lead on to a practical action to see our neighbourhood with fresh eyes.
- In sessions three and four, we focus on **hearing God's judgment** – reflecting on what the Bible has to say about God's care for the poorest, and the kinds of communities he wants to build with and for his children.
- In session five, we focus on **acting as God's co-workers** – taking realistic and practical steps to work for the good of our area.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Miriam Brittenden and Angus Ritchie
The Centre for Theology and Community, East London
The Feast of the Sacred Heart, 2020

WEEK ONE: WATCHING AND LISTENING (1)

Opening Prayer (5 mins): This is an opportunity to lift up the course, and the life of your church and neighbourhood, before God in prayer.

Each week, we suggest a possible, relatively formal, way of praying – but feel free to do something different if that is more appropriate to your group and context.

Read John 14.1-3

> Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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?* And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

Keep a minute's silence, inviting people to ponder what words particularly strike them, and what experiences and images they bring to mind.

Re-read the Scripture

Say the Opening Prayer:

> Loving God,
> we thank you for earthly homes
> that are places of welcome, warmth and peace.
> Help us to build homes on earth
> That are a foretaste of the home
> Christ has prepared for all who love him
> in your eternal Kingdom. Amen.

Introduce the course (5 mins): Introduce yourself to the group, and summarise the purpose and structure of the group – drawing on the materials in the Introduction, and the particular reasons your church (or churches) have chosen to run this course.

Opening discussion (30 mins)

Archbishop Justin Welby writes that

> If the purpose of housing was understood as creating communities and not merely building accommodation, the whole nature of the industry would be changed... How we build and what we build for is the practice that provides a basic sign of our values. (*Reimagining Britain*).

Housing both expresses and shapes our values and relationships. It is part of what Pope Francis calls our "human ecology." As he explains, "in our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and neighbourhoods, we use our environment as a way of expressing our identity... Just as in the ecology of the natural world, we need to ask, 'How does one change affect how the rest of the city is viewed, shared and understood?'" *(Laudato Si')*.

Discuss in pairs, and then as a whole group

- Think about where you live. What does a good home look like?

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed some deep realities about the "human ecology" of our cities, towns and villages. Lockdown has been experienced very differently by different people – and their housing situation has obviously been a crucial factor.

At the start of the pandemic, Pope Francis said the pandemic was "not the time of God's judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not." He identified signs of grace in the midst of the suffering and anxiety:

> Our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces,

volunteers, priests, religious men and women...

How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility. How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze and fostering prayer. (Extraordinary Moment of Prayer, St Peter's Basilica, Rome, 27 March 2020)

Discuss in pairs, and then as a whole group

- What one positive and one negative thing did you learn (about yourself, your neighbourhood, or the wider society) in the time of lockdown?
- Share specific stories of how housing has affected you or people you know – either before, during or after lockdown. (Think about affordability, quality, location, people renting privately, people renting from a council or housing association, home owners, landlords, people in the housing industry, new developments, how your neighbourhood looks).

Biblical reflection (20 mins)

Read Luke 8.43-48

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from haemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her haemorrhage stopped. Then Jesus asked, "Who touched me?" When all denied it, Peter said, "Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you." But Jesus said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me." When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace."

Discuss these questions in pairs, and then as a whole group:

- What strikes you about Jesus' first encounter with the woman - what does he see that others have not?
- Can you think of any other examples in the gospels where Jesus sees people or situations which otherwise might be 'unseen'?
- Does he face opposition? Why?

Divide in to pairs again, and discuss

- When have you felt 'unseen' – overlooked and dismissed by those around you?
- Who else do you think might be overlooked and dismissed in your community or neighbourhood?

Video and discussion (15 mins)

Reflecting on Pope Francis' ministry, Anna Rowlands writes that he "asks us to find ways to listen that will help make visible and vocal those who disappear" – especially within our heavily urbanised culture. But the question Pope Francis poses to our cities applies to every context: "how do we create communities that enable us to become leaders with names and faces?" (essay in *Realities are Greater than Ideas: Evangelisation, Catholicism and Community Organising*, ed. Dunstan Rodrigues).

The video of St George's Stamford is an inspiring story of a relatively wealthy group of Christians in Lincolnshire who have been willing to "see" those who were overlooked in their neighbourhood. (This, and all the videos for the course, are on the CTC website – **www.theology-centre.org**)

- What strikes you about the story?
- What are the housing challenges – visible or less visible – which you or others in your community face?

Supported Lodgings (see story overleaf) is a project where individual hosts can welcome into their homes people who would otherwise be homeless.

- What next steps can you take – as individuals or as a group – to "create communities" in which we recognise one another's "names and faces"?

Making a plan (15 mins)

This is one of the most important bits of the first session – and the the course leader will need to think about most in your advance preparation for this session...

Plan how the group might, between now and the next session, do some prayer walking in their neighbourhood. This would involve:

- Identifying different streets in the neighbourhood for each member of the group (perhaps in pairs) to do a "prayer walk" in.
- Reassure group members that this is a very simple activity: simply start (either in the street or at someone's home) saying a prayer for God to help you as you go out.
- Go for a walk, and simply note down things that strike you about what you see and/or hear.
- If appropriate, talk to people you come into contact with about their own experiences of housing in the area. Collect these stories, if they are happy to have them shared.

If it is impossible for any of your group to do this, encourage them to do some research in some other way – whether by conversations with others and/or using the internet to find out more about the demographics of your area (**https://www.cuf.org.uk/lookup-tool** is one website that may help)

End the session in prayer – either with your own words, or by saying **The Grace** together.

STORY: SUPPORTED LODGINGS

DePaul UK is a charity whose mission and approach is inspired by the life and work of St Vincent de Paul (1581-1660). In its Supported Lodgings scheme, members of the public offer their spare room, often for six months or longer, to someone who would otherwise be homeless. Sheffield Supported Lodgings provider Steph* shares her experiences.

Leanne* moved in with my son and I, and has been on the Supported Lodgings scheme for around six months. I really enjoy providing support, it's been an interesting experience. I'm grateful to be in a place where I'm able to share some of my skills with the young person staying with us, and teach her about cooking, cleaning, budgeting and time management.

Some of the ways that I support Leanne* are less practical – I also try to help build positive values like self-respect. I provide a safe and trusted environment in which Leanne* can come to me to share her day. If she's had a bad day, I can support her through it. I work as a team with the staff at Depaul UK, involving Leanne* in how things are run in the house. I seek her opinion and listen to her. We even spend quality time doing arts and crafts, designing lovely cards and writing out motivational cards that we can share with friends and family.

We watch a lot of TV together – everything from the news, to Judge Judy! There is mutual respect and we have effective communication, which I think are the ingredients for success. Leanne*, my guest, has been respectful and focused on her goals – she had a great work ethic. When Leanne* first came to live in my house, she had never done any cooking. It's an important skill for living independently, so it was one of the first things we tackled. We talked about health and safety first and food hygiene, then we went to the supermarket and shopped together, looking for healthy and economical ingredients. Leanne* started off helping me with meals, but to my surprise she was cooking her own meals within just a few weeks – she picked it up very quickly and I was really impressed.

When she moved in, we added Leanne* to our family cleaning rota, so she's been actively involved in keeping the place clean and tidy and learning the skills she'll need to live on her own. The transformation that I've seen in Leanne* makes it all worth it. Supported Lodgings is a really important option that helps young people at risk of homelessness to find the confidence and character they need to thrive. Working with her Depaul UK Support Worker, I've been able to help Leanne start her adult life with the right foundations. Now, when she finds a place of her own, she won't feel she's been thrown in at the deep end.

Supported Lodgings is a brilliant opportunity to make a real difference to young people who haven't had the best start in life. If you've got a spare bedroom and an open mind, you could make a difference just like I do. I've had great support from the team at Depaul UK, and there's always someone on the end of the phone to help if I'm unsure about anything.

**Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the Supported Lodgings provider and the young person who stayed with them.*

Supported Lodgings is one of thirteen Case Studies of Action on the 'Housing Crisis' produced by CSAN. Steph's story is an abridged version of the testimony online at uk.depaulcharity.or

WEEK TWO: WATCHING AND LISTENING (2)

Opening Prayer (5 mins):): This is an opportunity to lift up the course – and the life of your church and neighbourhood – before God in prayer.

Read Luke 6.20-23 (The Beatitudes)

> Then he looked up at his disciples and said:
> 'Blessed are you who are poor,
> for yours is the kingdom of God.
> 'Blessed are you who are hungry now,
> for you will be filled.
> 'Blessed are you who weep now,
> for you will laugh.
> 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

Keep a minute's silence, inviting people to ponder what words particularly strike them, and what experiences and images they bring to mind.

Re-read the Scripture

Say the Opening Prayer (by Craig Gardiner):

> Dear God
> Help us to see the world as you see it
> Not from above, but from below
> May we see you in the faces of the least of us
> And may they see you through how we live
> Amen.

Opening discussion (20 mins):

Allow the group to spend time sharing what they found in their prayer walk or other research.

- What did they do?
- What did they find?
- What was most striking and/or surprising?
- How do they now feel?

Bible reflection and discussion (20 mins):

There is a big difference between being a Church with a "heart for the poor" and being a Church with the "poorest **at** its heart." In the Bible, the poorest and most marginalised are not just people who need the assistance of those with wealth and status. God becomes flesh as a poor person – whose parents can only afford the offering of the poorest when they present him in the Temple, who has to be taken to Egypt as a refugee by his parents, who has "no place to lay his head" in his adult ministry.

Many of the earliest Christian congregations were made up of the poorest and most marginalised in society. St Paul expresses it thus:

> Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1.26-31)

The early church may not have been wise and powerful "by human standards" – but it has long outlived the empires and armies that dominated the age of Jesus and of St Paul! God continues to choose what is "foolish, low and despised" in order to challenge this world's understanding of wisdom, power and status. In doing so, he reminds all of us – whether or not we are "wise" or "of noble birth" – that, rich and poor alike, the only thing we can truly "boast" about is God's loving mercy.

Discuss:

- When has God worked through situations in which you felt weak or out of control, in ways that have revealed to you God's care and power?
- When have you underestimated and misjudged people, through whom you later realised God was working?

Stories and discussion (25 mins)

In *From Homes to Houses*, Sarah Hutt observes that "any Christian reflection on the subject needs to begin by listening to the stories of those who are affected." As she explains,

A key feature of the Bible's description of God is His ability to listen and understand the depth of human experience. In the Book of Exodus, when the Israelites were suffering as a result of debt slavery in Egypt, it is said that, "The sounds of Israel, groaning in their slavery, cried out for help and from the depths of their slavery their cry came up to God. God heard their groaning… God looked down upon the sons of Israel, and he knew." (Exodus 2.23-25). If the Church is to bear faithful witness today it needs to listen patiently to the everyday experiences and suffering of its members and their neighbours.

Watch the video of the Catholic Parish of Manor Park, and read the stories from Wigan and Forest Gate. Discuss:

- How did these parishes and the school identify the issues in their community?
- What role did listening play?

There are different ways of listening to people. Many processes of "top down" consultation simply aim to gather our opinions, so someone else can act on them (or at least promise to take them into account…)

The deep listening engaged in by these churches helps grassroots leaders to have "names and faces" in the public square, where policy is shaped and delivered – and to develop local, grassroots responses. Discuss:

- When have we felt listened to, as individuals and as a congregation?
- What did it lead to?
- How might we listen well to those around us?

Making a plan (20 mins)

Before the next meeting, invite each member of the group to identify one or two local people with they can have a 10 to 20-minute conversation (in person or on the phone) about life in the area. Explain that the aim is to keep the conversation focused around the following kinds of question:

- How long have you lived in this area?
- What do you most enjoy about living here?
- What do you think are the greatest challenges for this area? (always encourage people to be specific wherever possible – for example, if people say they are, "worried about safety" ask them to be specific – do they mean crime on their own street, or something else?)
- Have you ever taken an action to in some way address this challenge? If so, what was that? If not, what might you like to do, and what are the obstacles to doing it?

Practice such a conversation now in pairs, and reflect on what can help such a conversation to be open and fruitful.

Ask people to write down the names of the people they commit to trying to talk to before the next session.

Pray for one another, and for these conversations, in a time of silence ending with The Grace or your own prayer.

STORIES

St Francis & St Barnabas, Wigan

This Church of England parish is made up of several social housing estates. Unemployment is high, and drug and alcohol abuse related-issues are common. There are high rates of rent arrears and evictions in the parish, and housing issues are heavily entwined with the benefits system.

Many of those supported come into contact with the church through the daily drop-in, which is based in the church hall and hosts a range of community organisations, including a church-run Foodbank, Debt Advice and Addaction (a substance misuse service). The Vicar (the Revd Denise Hayes) tells how she and others involved in this work started helping people who were in rent arrears and facing eviction, by assisting with reading and writing letters, making phone calls, and accompanying individuals to court cases and hearings.

Tina was moved from a hostel and placed in a three-bedroom house in the parish. Unable to afford her rent and bedroom tax, she had got into arrears to the point that she was served an eviction notice. Denise's presence alongside Tina as an advocate in meetings with council officers and at her court hearing enabled the case to be taken more seriously. Tina was awarded a Discretionary Housing Payment, enabling her to remain in the property.

The church is now planning a nine-bedroom supported accommodation block on its land for those recovering from addiction. This will sit within a purpose-built hub of services including a community café, offices for debt and benefits advice and other services, a crèche, and laundry and shower rooms. For Denise, this was a response to hearing about a local man who had come to the drop-in and subsequently committed suicide; she felt that "if he could have had the kind of 24/7 support we're building now, he could be alive today."

From Building Communities: Local church responses to the housing crisis by *Miriam Brittenden and Tom Sefton with Alice Braybrook*

St Bonaventure's RC School, Forest Gate

By conducting a listening campaign, students at St Bonaventure discovered how many of their number had to travel huge distances or leave the school because they had to be re-housed, sometimes out of the borough. There were also many other stories about evictions and the poor quality of housing. In response to this, eight committed students came together to reflect and take action. They decided to focus on the mental health and educational effects of housing issues. They went to a mental health fair in a nearby school to share their findings, have met with their local councillor, and are writing up all their findings as a formal report. Most recently, the team - now in Year 9 - led negotiations with the Mayoral candidates in the borough of Newham at the local community assembly around housing issues.

From Realities are Greater than Ideas: Evangelisation, Catholicism and Community Organising *by Dunstan Rodrigues with Angus Ritchie and Anna Rowlands*

WEEK THREE: JUDGING (1)

Opening Prayer (5 mins): This is an opportunity to lift up the course – and the life of your church and neighbourhood – before God in prayer.

Read verses of Psalm 9.

1 I will give thanks to you, Lord, with my whole heart;
I will tell of all your marvellous works.
2 I will be glad and rejoice in you;
I will make music to your name, O Most High.
3 When my enemies are driven back,
they stumble and perish at your presence
4 For you have maintained my right and my cause;
you sat on your throne giving righteous judgement.
9 The Lord will be a refuge for the oppressed,
a refuge in the time of trouble.
10 And those who know your name will put their trust in you,
for you, Lord, have never failed those who seek you.

Keep a minute's silence, inviting people to ponder what words particularly strike them, and what experiences and images they bring to mind.

Re-read the Scripture

Say the Opening Prayer (from Common Worship):

> God, who taught the hearts of your faithful people
> by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit:
> grant us by the same Spirit
> to have a right judgment in all things
> and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort;
> through the merits of Christ Jesus our Saviour.
> Amen.

Opening discussion (15 mins):

In Week One, we thought about the "see-judge-act" model, and we have spent two weeks seeing and listening. Now we want to move to judgment. As our Psalm reminded us, God is a "refuge for the oppressed" and sits on his throne "giving righteous judgment." In this session, we will be bringing what we have seen and heard in our neighbourhood into dialogue with what the Bible has to say about homes and land.

Ask the group to share their experience of doing one-to-ones, initially in twos and threes, and then as a whole group.

- What was positive and negative about the experience?
- What would enable people to do one-to-ones more effectively?
- What have the participants learnt about housing in their neighbourhood?

Theological reflection and discussion (30 mins):

This week we are thinking about Christian understandings of "home". As a starter activity, encourage everyone in the group to answer the question: *what is home to you?*

The Bible has a great deal to say about earthly homes.

> Whatever our social or economic status, human beings hunger for a place to belong. This is not new, but that hunger is experienced in a particularly profound way in our own age – as cities, technologies, industries and communities change with startling rapidity. Belonging and meaning are bound up in the language of 'home' as well as 'place.' To long for home is part of what it means to be human, and so it is no surprise that a key Biblical image of redemption is that of finding our true home (Sarah Hutt, *From Houses to Homes*).

The Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Housing has identified five aspects of a Christian understanding of "home":

SUSTAINABLE:
We need to think of ourselves as **stewards**, not rulers, of the natural world and of the properties we own or let out for rent.

SECURE:
Home should be a place of **privacy** where people feel safe. It also needs to be **affordable**, providing security against volatile market forces.

STABLE:
Housing needs to provide stability, enabling people to be **rooted** in places and helping the ongoing process of **formation** into mature human beings.

HOSPITABLE:
Homes should contain and create spaces where people can give and receive hospitality, thus facilitating shared **community** life.

BEAUTIFUL:
Houses and communities should be places we **delight** to come home to, a harmony between the natural environment and human technology.

Split into five small groups, each considering a set of reflections on these five aspects of "home." Read and discuss them together, and be ready to present their insights back to the wider group in your own words - relating their message to the listening and reflecting you are already doing on this issue.

Video and discussion (20 mins)

Watch the video stories of Paul and Holly.

- What do these stories have to say about both loss of and building community?
- What impact did Holly having to move from her home and community have upon her and her family?
- What was it about the church's intervention that made a difference to Holly?

Making a plan (10 mins)

By doing "one to ones," we begin a process of listening and discerning. Plan some action between now and the next session to engage more of your congregation and community in this process. Here are a couple of ideas for doing this – the group may have its own creative suggestions too...

- Have a map of your neighbourhood in your church building, and/or at a service or meeting. Give people some slips of paper ("Post It" notes work well for this task) and ask them to write down any concerns they have about housing. Ask people to stick the note on the part of the map they have referred to. Pray for these areas.
- If physical gathering is impossible, such a map could be shared by email or post, or on a Zoom call if group members have connectivity.
- Ask if you could speak at a Sunday service as a group around the theme of housing, sharing your listening and drawing on the materials for theological reflection and for listening in this course.

PASSAGES FOR DISCUSSION

SUSTAINABLE:

We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us... Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*).

In the Hebrew Bible, the Israelites must receive the Promised Land as a gift if they are to remain in it. In the wilderness they are acutely aware of their precariousness - they have no choice but to rely on the Giver who supplies them with manna when they expected only lack. But when they enter the Promised Land, they forget the Giver, they try to "grasp" the land by managing and controlling it, and end up losing it. Jesus does the opposite: He becomes homeless in order to bring us home. (Sarah Hutt, *From Houses to Homes*)

Housing has to pay attention to the protection and **sustainability** of the earth, so that the built environment is in harmony with the natural environment. We need to think of ourselves as **stewards**, not rulers of the natural world and of the properties we own or let out for rent. Housing needs to aim to safeguard and not to do violence to the earth God has given. (Rt Revd Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington)

SECURE:

In a broken and damaged world, the cry for justice reaches the ears of God, so that specific intervention to bring **justice** is required, rather than allowing things to take their (un)natural course. Housing needs to be safe space, offering shelter and security against damage and destruction, the insecurity of unstable residence. It needs to provide security against volatile market forces which create unfeasible owning or renting scenarios that lead to precarious lives. It needs to ensure housing is properly **affordable**. The extent that residents feel safe, know they are safe, and actually are safe is a measure of their security. (Rt Revd Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington)

The Catholic Church teaches that the State's powers should be organized so as to ensure "the provision of essential services to all, some of which are at the same time human rights: food, housing, work, education and access to culture, transportation, basic health care, the freedom of communication and expression and the protection of religious freedom." Where this basic level of provision is not present, the image of God is indeed being desecrated. (*Abide in Me: Catholic Social Thought and Action on Housing Challenges in England and Wales, 2018-30*).

STABLE:

Houses cannot simply be understood as interchangeable values on an economic balance sheet, they are homes in neighbourhoods with distinct character and distinctive stories. Describing them purely in economic terms does not capture their true nature. Today, as in Biblical times, there must be limits on the power of the market to make it the servant, not the master, of human relationships. (Sarah Hutt, *From Houses to Homes*)

The Incarnation intensifies an emphasis on place which is central to the Old Testament – in which the Lord calls a particular group of people, the Israelites, to be a blessing to all nations... For houses to become homes, they need to be embedded in history and in relationships... Only then will our housing do justice to the dignity and nature of human beings – created in the image of God, and placed within a sacramental world. (*Abide in Me: Catholic Social Thought and Action on Housing Challenges in England and Wales, 2018-30*)

Housing needs to provide stability, the kind that enables people to be **rooted** in places, able to stay in the same place for as long as they choose. Place and space matter. Being constantly uprooted from home denies us the capacity to belong to a place and to its communal life, to develop long-term relationships that can bring support during difficult times and that help the process of **formation** into mature human beings. (Rt Revd Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington)

HOSPITABLE:

Housing needs to create community. It needs to create hospitable spaces in which people can come together and divisions overcome. Homes should be places where generous hospitality to guests can be exercised, rather that the NIMBY mentality that excludes difference. Housing developments need to pay attention to the extent to which they reinforce the divisions between people, isolating them into individual enclaves, or create genuine community space This is essential for the flourishing of individuals, the health of family groups and the formation of communities. (Rt Revd Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington)

In *Familiaris Consortio*, St John Paul II reminds us of the vital role of the family as a "school of love." "Christian families, recognizing with faith all human beings as children of the same heavenly Father, will respond generously to the children of other families, giving them support and love, not as outsiders but as members of the one family of God's children. Christian parents will thus be able to spread their love beyond the bonds of flesh and blood, nourishing the links that are rooted in the spirit and that develop through concrete service to the children of other families, who are often without even the barest necessities."

BEAUTIFUL:

The New Jerusalem [which] comes down from heaven… is a place of staggering beauty: "It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal." (Rev 21.11). The renewed creation still retains the physicality of the first, but it has been healed, matured into a place where God is finally at home with the creation in a place that brings delight and wonder. Housing that reflects this story will include elements of real beauty. Houses should be places we delight to come home to, as a sign of our coming (future) home. (Rt Revd Graham Tomlin, Bishop of Kensington)

Silence impels us toward an unknown land that is God, and this land becomes our homeland. Through silence, we return to our heavenly origin… Modern civilisation does not know how to be quiet … [its] noise surrounds us and assaults us. The noise of our ceaselessly active cities, the noise of automobiles, airplanes, machines outside and inside our houses. (Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise*).

The settings in which people live their lives… influence the way we think, feel and act. In our rooms, our homes, our workplaces and neighbourhoods, we use our environment as a way of expressing our identity. We make every effort to adapt to our environment, but when it is disorderly, chaotic or saturated with noise and ugliness, such overstimulation makes it difficult to find ourselves integrated and happy. (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*)

WEEK FOUR: JUDGING (2)

Opening Prayer (5 mins): This is an opportunity to lift up the course – and the life of your church and neighbourhood – before God in prayer.

Read Psalm 119.105-112

105 Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.
106 I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous ordinances.
107 I am severely afflicted;
give me life, O Lord, according to your word.
108 Accept my offerings of praise, O Lord,
and teach me your ordinances.
109 I hold my life in my hand continually,
but I do not forget your law.
110 The wicked have laid a snare for me,
but I do not stray from your precepts.
111 Your decrees are my heritage for ever;
they are the joy of my heart.
112 I incline my heart to perform your statutes
for ever, to the end.

Keep a minute's silence, inviting people to ponder what words particularly strike them, and what experiences and images they bring to mind.

Re-read the Scripture

Say the Opening Prayer (from *Common Worship*):

Lord Christ,
we sit at your feet,
teach us your living way;
for you are our Word and Wisdom,
one God with the Father and the Holy Spirit,
now and for ever. Amen.

This week, we will be continuing to bring our listening into dialogue with the Word of God, and will be thinking particularly about what the Bible has to say about "home."

Opening discussion (15 mins):

First, we will be sharing our reflections on the action we have taken since the previous meeting.

- How was the wider church engaged in the issue of housing?
- What did we learn?

If there hasn't yet been an opportunity to engage the wider church (in the way suggested in the last session), it is vital to plan for such an event. This is central to moving from words to practical action.

Encourage each member of the group to identify one or two people with whom to have "one to one" conversations. These could be people who engaged particularly with last week's activity – or people who could help to make such an activity happen, if it hasn't yet occurred.

Theological reflection and discussion (35 mins):

Throughout the Scriptures, we see that God is intimately concerned with location and with belonging – with our neighbourhoods and how we treat the land.

A consistent theme of Scripture is that **the market is a servant not a master**. Jesus teaches that we cannot be the servant of both God and Mammon – and so, in Archbishop Justin's words, we need to "dethrone Mammon." As he said in 2015, in a sermon preached at St George-in-the-East, London:

> In 2006/07, it was clear that the forces of finance, not just the economy, but the forces of finance had become the dominant power in our society. And so when money, as it always does, and finance, as it always does, having promised that it will look after us ever so well, turns out to be a cruel slave master, and particularly for the poorest in society, a slave master of the upmost cruelty that binds people in chains, that takes away their hopes, takes away their homes, takes away their families, damages them at the most profound levels, it was a shock that we have not seen for many, many years, right back to the 1930s.

We cannot talk about housing without talking about money and land: who owns it, who profits from it and who controls it. Problems in the land market are at the roots of the housing crisis today, with the price of land accounting for anywhere between 40 and 70% of the cost of a house (depending on the location). The way we deal in land shapes how we build houses, communities and relationships with each other. In today's economy, land is owned, bought, sold and speculated on. Yet Jesus says all of the law hangs on the commandment to love God and neighbour (Matthew 22 36-40).

The market, like everything else, must become the servant of this aim and not master it. Houses are not just numbers on a manifesto or a balance sheet, they are homes in neighbourhoods with distinct character and worth

Spend ten minutes in pairs or small groups, each discussing one of the passages in the appendix, and what they have to say about land and belonging – then coming back together to report on what you have found.

Discuss as a whole group:

- What are the good things about the market having a place in our housing system? When is it creative and positive?
- When does the market become an idol, and need to be "dethroned"? Can you see ways in which it is a cause of some of the problems you have discovered in your listening process?

Stories and discussion (25 mins)

Watch the video from St George-in-the-East, then discuss these questions:

- Why as Christians, should we tackle housing issues?
- Do you think of housing as something connected to your faith or separate from it?
- Do you think people in your church think of housing (and homelessness?) as something connected to faith or separate from it? What implications does this have for the life of your church?
- In what ways did St George-in-the-East "see" and "judge" - reflecting on the situation they were seeing around them, according to the standards of the Gospel?

In one piece of good news since these videos were made, the Mayor of London has announced a £2 million funding grant for the development of the Community Land Trust in Cable Street! It is worth remembering that it all started with simple one-to-one listening, a community meeting, and then a handful of people praying and walking....

Time of prayer (10 mins)

Ask the group to spend some time, silently or out loud, holding before God the housing issues in their neighbourhood – and the one or two people they are planning to have one to ones with in the week ahead.

End the by saying **The Grace** together.

APPENDIX - PASSAGES FOR DISCUSSION

Walter Brueggemann, The Land

It is likely that our theological problem in the church is that our gospel is a story believed, shaped and transmitted by the dispossessed; and we are now a church of possessions for whom the rhetoric of the dispossessed is offensive and their promise is irrelevant. And we are left to see if it is possible for us again to embrace solidarity with the dispossessed. The essential restlessness of our world is the voice of the dispossessed demanding a share of the land. And that restlessness is a precise echo of the Biblical voice of the poor (cf. Exodus 2:23- 25, 1 Kings 12:4). The indignant voice of the prophets announces Yahweh's alliance with the poor against the landed. In our time the voices of the dispossessed seem only threatening and boisterous, but biblical faith is the reminder to us that those boisterous voices may well be the voice of God himself allied always with the dispossessed against the landed.

Sarah Hutt, *From Houses to Homes*

What does it mean to accept land as a gift, and not to hold it with a faithless grasp? Ancient Israel was a very different context to contemporary London, but in both places, the way land is managed has profound effects on our relationships. Today, land is often simply treated as another commodity – a "factor of production" like capital or labour, units of which are taken to be interchangeable, with a value which can be expressed financially. If such an understanding is uncontested, the market is left to dictate the shape of our communities. In ancient Israel, precisely because place mattered, the 'market' had limits. This was evident in the Mosaic laws, given to the Israelites as they entered the Promised Land. The land could not be bought and sold on a permanent basis but was given to the Israelites as an inheritance. Every fiftieth year (Jubilee) the land was to be returned to its family. One piece of land was not equivalent to another – the turf has stories, symbolism and history which must be honoured.

In our very different context, the practical application of this Biblical vision may need to be rather different. But the vision itself is very clear: houses cannot simply be understood as interchangeable values on an economic balance sheet, they are homes in neighbourhoods with distinct character and distinctive stories. Describing them purely in economic terms does not capture their true nature. Today, as in Biblical times, there must be limits on the power of the market to make it the servant, not the master, of human relationships.

Pope Francis, sermon to homeless people in Washington DC:

The Bible is very clear about this: there was no room for Mary and Joseph. I can imagine Joseph, with his wife about to have a child, with no shelter, no home, no place to stay. The Son of God came into this world as a homeless person. The Son of God knew what it was to start life without a roof over his head. We can imagine what Joseph must have been thinking. How is it that the Son of God has no home? Why are we homeless, why don't we have housing? These are questions which many of you may ask daily.

Like Saint Joseph, you may ask: Why are we homeless, without a place to live? These are questions which all of us might well ask. Why do these, our brothers and sisters, have no place to live? Why are these brothers and sisters of ours homeless? We can find no social or moral justification, no justification whatsoever, for lack of housing. There are many unjust situations, but we know that God is suffering with us, experiencing them at our side. He does not abandon us. We know that Jesus wanted to show solidarity with every person. He wanted everyone to experience His companionship, His help, His love. He identified with all those who suffer, who weep, who suffer any kind of injustice. He tells us this clearly: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35). Jesus keeps knocking on our doors, the doors of our lives. He doesn't do this by magic, with special effects, with flashing lights and fireworks. Jesus keeps knocking on our door in the faces of our brothers and sisters, in the faces of our neighbours, in the faces of those at our side.

WEEK FIVE: ACTING

Opening Prayer (5 mins): This is an opportunity to lift up the course, and the life of your church and neighbourhood, before God in prayer.

Read Psalm 127

1 Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.
2 Unless the Lord keeps the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.
3 It is in vain that you hasten to rise up early and go so late to rest, eating the bread of toil, for he gives his beloved sleep.
4 Children are a heritage from the Lord and the fruit of the womb is his gift.
5 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth.
6 Happy are those who have their quiver full of them: they shall not be put to shame when they dispute with their enemies in the gate.

Keep a minute's silence, inviting people to ponder what words particularly strike them, and what experiences and images they bring to mind.

Re-read the Psalm

Say the Opening Prayer (from *Common Worship*):

Lord, you are ever watchful
and bless us with your gifts;
as you provide for all our needs,
so help us to build only what pleases you;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Opening discussion (20 mins):

Look back over the first four weeks of the course, and the ground covered – both in the sessions and in the activities undertaken between sessions:

- In sessions one and two, we focussed on **seeing our neighbourhood with God's eyes** – engaging with the stories of characters in the Gospels who are not "seen" by the wider society but whom Jesus tells us are precious in the eyes of God. This led on to practical action – a "prayer walk" of the neighbourhood, and "one to one" conversations within and beyond the church congregation.
- In sessions three and four, we focussed on **hearing God's judgment** – reflecting on what the Bible has to say about God's care for the poorest, and the kinds of homes and communities he wants to build with and for his children. Hopefully, this has led on to wider conversations in the church community.
- In this final session, we focus on **acting as God's co-workers** – taking realistic and practical steps to work for the good of our area.

In pairs, and then in plenary, discuss

- What have we learnt – both from these meetings, and from the listening we have done in between?
- What has surprised us?
- What questions has it left us with?
- Is there something we now want to do?

People may find it hard to imagine a thing they could do – so here are some thoughts:

- It could be a larger "community walk" to identify land (or a disused building) in the neighbourhood which could be developed as affordable housing, or used temporarily for "pop up" housing for homeless people.
- It could be that the church itself can develop the use of its land or buildings.
- It could be a wider listening process, to identify issues in existing housing (e.g. unjust evictions, or, a failure by landlords to keep properties well maintained).
- It could be that there is practical support which could be offered to people who are homeless or in housing need – again, this may emerge out of a wider listening process.

Beginning in prayer (20 mins)

One of the hardest things about the period of lockdown has been (or was) the inability to gather for worship.

St Teresa of Ávila famously wrote that "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body."

But Teresa was above all a woman of prayer: she knew that we can only embody Christ's love to others if we have first allowed him into our hearts – allowed his Spirit to draw us into his mystical Body, through Baptism, and fed us in Word and Sacrament.

In pairs, read this passage on the relationship between prayer and action:

> Christianity asserts that God has invited us, not merely to imitate His life but also to share it. In Christ, we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1.4). This is true of the worship and the life of every congregation. In worship, we are incorporated into the Body of Christ, and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8.14-17). In doing so, we join in their offering of love and glory to the Father. Our worship does not address a far-off deity: when we worship, we are caught up in God's life.
>
> The same is true of our common life. Our love for each other does not merely imitate God's love: when we love one another, we are sharing in the life of God. This is only possible when worship and practice are held together. Worship without mutual care is a parody of true communion (Isaiah 58.6-12; 1 Corinthians 11.17-26; James 2.14-17). By the same token, a church which promotes mutual care but neglects worship is doomed to failure. Without receiving from God, we have nothing distinctive to give. If we do not begin by being fed, we will be acting in our own power, not responding to the gift of life and love poured out in Jesus Christ.
>
> (Caitlin Burbridge, Angus Ritchie & Andy Walton, *Just Church: Local congregations transforming their neighbourhoods*)

In those pairs, discuss these questions – and then feed back in plenary:

- How is our life of prayer and worship connected to our desire to act for a better world?
- How will we collectively keep in prayer and ongoing discernment any action we intend to take after this course?

Beginning with people (20 mins)

Some of the stories in this course may seem intimidating as well as inspiring! We may think, "We couldn't possibly have such an impact on our neighbourhood." But each story is about something God did, through human hands. As our Psalm reminded us, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain."

If you had said to the congregation at St George-in-the-East in 2015 that within three years they would have won a campaign for forty affordable homes on waste land near the church – and would now be organising for more on other pieces of land – no-one would have believed you! The work was only possible because they began in prayer, and because they spent a lot of time listening to their neighbours and building a bigger team.

Divide the group into different pairs, and read the following passage:

> Because communion is at the heart of God, it must also be at the heart of the church's life. Too often,

> a multitude of tasks draws us away from nurturing these face-to-face relationships. The practice of community organising prioritises the "one-to-one" – a face-to-face meeting, focused on sharing the stories and the hopes of the both participants. "One-to-ones" come before any programme of action. The experience of churches involved in community organising is that relationship-building is not only of intrinsic value, it also generates the most powerful and effective action. (From *Just Church*)

In those pairs, discuss these questions – and then feed back in plenary

- How has the outreach we have already done – "one to ones" and through the map exercise – engaged new people and identified (new) leaders?
- How do we engage more people, as we move towards making a plan and taking practical action?
- How do we make sure that those who need the change most are at the heart of this process of planning and acting?

It can be tempting to move too quickly to action, with a small group of activists. But patient listening can help to build a sustainable team that achieves more. It is also vital that those who experience the greatest challenges on housing are at the heart of any efforts to make things better.

Make a plan – and feed it back (20 mins)

Agree what the next steps will be, and who will take them. They need to be realistic (within the time and resources of the community) and specific (in what is to be done, by whom, and by when, and how regularly a group will gather to report back on progress, and plan the next steps).

You could capture this, perhaps on a flipchart, with some simple headings (What? By Whom? When?).

Also agree who will write a short email, feeding back what you have discovered and what you are going to do. These should be sent to **housing@theology-centre.org**

Prayer (5 mins)

Finish the course with a time of open prayer, asking God's blessing on your work. You could finish with this prayer, and then say the Grace together:

> Go before us, Lord, in all we do
> with your most gracious favour,
> and guide us with your continual help,
> that in all our works
> begun, continued and ended in you,
> we may glorify your holy name,
> and finally by your mercy receive everlasting life;
> through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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