

Rich and poor: housing, affordability and the social divide

Who is my neighbour? Faith, housing and the local community

Opening prayer

Introduction

This session is about the social divide between rich and poor, which is intensified by the housing crisis. We will hear from some of our neighbours in London Citizens – Reverend David and Reverend Andy, Methodist ministers, and Henry, a church member from the Brixton & Streatham Methodist Circuit – about the impact of housing on their community. We will reflect on some of Jesus’ teaching about rich and poor and consider how to act.

Feedback

If you were involved in the previous session, what action have you taken on the issues raised? What has the response been?

Rounds

When have you seen people from different social backgrounds in the same place? How does this affect our interactions?

Context

The London Citizens listening campaign identified that the housing crisis is now so severe that many people are now being forced to move out of the capital altogether - away from homes, jobs and communities. From the children who commute 90 minutes to get to school, to the schools who can't keep staff for more than a few years, this change will affect not just individuals but the shape and character of the city as a whole. On April 28th 2016, we will be asking the future Mayor of London to act on this issue. You can find out more in the London Citizens Housing Manifesto 2016.

Housing polarises wealth. Housing inequality splits us into winners and losers, divided more by the luck of when and where we are born and who our parents are than by individual effort. Homeowners see their wealth rising, while renters see their rents rising. House of Commons Library analysis this year revealed that the poorest 30 per cent of London own just one per cent of the city's wealth while richest 10 per cent own 54 per cent (Evening Standard). The termination of a private tenancy is now the single biggest cause of homelessness.

Crisis, the homelessness charity, says:

7,581 people slept rough at some point in London during 2014/15. This is an increase of 16 per cent on the previous year's total of 6,508 but this is more than double the number six years ago.

5,107 people were new rough sleepers, 1,595 people were sleeping rough for two or more years, and 879 have returned to rough sleeping after a gap of a year or more.

86 per cent were male, 69 per cent were white.

Scripture

Luke 16:19-31 (NRSV)

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but



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now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.” He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.””

Going deeper

History usually records the names of those who are rich and powerful. Even in the Bible there are many people whose deeds are recorded but their names are not mentioned. Why does Jesus, in this parable, choose to name Lazarus but not the rich man? What is the significance of this?

Listening to our neighbours

Students from Saint Gabriel’s College, a Church of England Secondary School in Lambeth, visited fellow members of London Citizens to find out how the housing crisis affects their neighbours. The students filmed and interviewed community leaders to find out how housing affects their institution and what their faith has to say about the housing crisis.

Watch the video: Rich and poor: the social divide

Share your reaction to the video with the person next to you.

Questions for discussion

1. In the parable, rich and poor lived next door to each other but lived separate lives. In London, the poor are being forced further away so that rich and poor will no longer be living next door to each other. What impact will this have on our a) our parishes b) our communities?
2. Lazarus survived by begging at the gate of the rich man. Today, there are thousands of people in London in a similar position. What barriers might stop us responding to this need?
3. The causes of housing need are complex, but they are not just about individuals making poor choices. The market and the state have a role in housing provision. When they do not serve that role, we have an opportunity to work for justice. What laws or systems do you see that are unjust and lead to housing need? For example, the definition of affordable housing is 80 per cent of market value. Is this right and fair? What difference would it make if housing was priced according to average incomes in the area?

Decide on an action to take this week, either individually or as a group, for example:

1. Find out more about the proposals developed by London Citizens for genuinely affordable housing: **Living Rent** and **Community Land Trusts**. Ask people in your community whether they think this could benefit them.
2. Arrange for your neighbours to go on a community walk. Is there land which has received planning permission to build but is still waiting for development to happen? Are there homes which are being left empty and just used as an investment? What could you ask your local councillor (or the councillor responsible for housing) to work with you to deliver?
3. Meet your council’s cabinet member for housing and share some of the stories you have gathered throughout this series. How can you and your councillor deliver better housing for your community? What is your councillor doing to deliver more affordable homes and rents? Could you find space in your borough for a community land trust?
4. Find out about an action your church can take to support the most vulnerable. For example, you could support a project for rough sleepers or help to find accommodation for refugee resettlement.

You may find the following resources useful:



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- London Citizens Housing Manifesto 2016: citizensuk.org/housing_manifesto_2016
- Finding housing for refugee resettlement: refugees-welcome.org.uk/calling-landlords
- The Robes Project (Night Shelter): robes.org.uk
- Green pastures: (social enterprise partnering with churches to invest in property and house the homeless): greenpastures.net

Closing Prayer

Further resources are available at: theology-centre.org.uk. Follow the conversation and share photos of your discussions and actions on Twitter: #whoismyneighbour @citizensuk @theologycentre



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