

Addressing Homelessness:  
Resources for the churches of the  
Canadian Baptists of Western Canada

## A Theology of Home-fullness

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We can approach theological reflection on a specific issue or need negatively or positively. For instance, we could write a theology of racism or a theology of racial equality, a theology of social injustice or a theology of social justice, or, in the terms of this paper, a theology of homelessness or a theology of home-fullness.

Christians live in a tension between a theological heritage that has celebrated the homeless Messiah of the gospels and the itinerant “foreigners and nomads here on earth” in (Hebrews 11:13) and a spiritual heritage which emphasizes home and place in a theology: “My people will live in safety, quietly at home; they will be at rest” (Isaiah 32:18).

In a theology in which life – and thus home – here on earth is seen only as a temporary abode on route to one’s true home in heaven, an earthly home is not necessarily all that important: after all real life is yet to come.<sup>1</sup> Homelessness is a universal experience until we are united with Christ in eternity. The challenge for dealing with people who are physically homeless is one of providing for and managing their basic needs until their true, eternal destiny is fulfilled.

In a theology which emphasizes a God-given value of home – here on earth as well as in eternity – however, home in this present world is a critical concept.<sup>2</sup> In this theology, Jesus’ incarnation becomes central, as Jesus affirms the worth of all people and of life on this earth, and in the age to come. It is the indwelling God within creation who creates home for sojourners of all descriptions, providing a true orientation within creation and with one another. The challenge of homelessness becomes a larger enterprise – one of seeking to create transformational change in which those who are physically homeless can experience physical, social, and spiritual home-fullness here on earth, as well as in the future.

A theological reflection on “home” has to consider who home is for: people. A basic theological understanding of humanity acknowledges that:

1. All people are created in the image of God.
2. All people are part of the physical creation and must meet basic physical needs – including shelter.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Richard Sennet, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1990), and Timothy Gorringer, *A Theology of the Built Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Laura Stivers, *Disrupting Homelessness: Alternative Christian Approaches* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), and Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

3. All people have an eternal future.
4. All people have basic rights.<sup>3</sup>

From this starting point, home can be understood as the place – physically, socially, and spiritually – where people “live and breathe and have their being.” This has several aspects:

1. **Home as housing.** Typically we think of those who are “homeless” as those without a permanent, safe, and appropriate physical residence. Within Scripture this sense of home is also common. In Micah 2, evildoers are rebuked because “They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud people of their homes...” In the New Testament, the church met in homes and home-based hospitality was essential to discipleship, community and the spread of the gospel (Acts 18:26). While occasional itinerants, like John the Baptist, have no fixed address, these are exceptions. The norm in the Bible is that people have a home – a residence – that is safe, appropriate, and reasonable for their circumstances. The eternal future we look forward to includes this sense of residence (John 14:1-4, Revelation 21-22). To the extent we really do mean “May your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” we are called to work towards safe, affordable, appropriate housing for all.<sup>4</sup>
2. **Home as community:** “Homelessness” can be viewed as a phenomenon which describes not only those without permanent lodging, but also a turbulent culture in which many never discover “home.” People need more than just walls and a roof. In a biblical understanding, home is also about community and belonging. Home can include family (Genesis 30-31, Luke 15:11-24). Home can be the network of relationships in which a person belongs. When Jesus healed people, he typically sent them “home” – perhaps this was a physical location, but the implication is much broader than that as the healed person inevitably spread the good news among his family and friends (Luke 5:24-25, 8:39). Home can also be church community, a community of disciples: we are a community where we are “all for one and one for all.” In John 19:27, Jesus says to John, “Here is your mother” and from

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<sup>3</sup> Pope John XXIII helpfully summarized these as the rights to life and a worthy manner of living (which includes appropriate, affordable and accessible housing): to respect as persons without discrimination on any basis; to pursue and express the truth; to be informed and educated; to worship God freely; to choose a state in life; to have gainful employment, decent labour conditions, and just compensation for work; to organize, meet, and associate with others; to participate in public affairs and to contribute to the common good. (cited in Thomas Groome, *Educating for Life: A Spiritual Vision for Every Teacher and Parent* [Allen, TX: Thomas More, 1998]).

<sup>4</sup> “... Every act of love, every deed done in Christ and by the Spirit, every work of true creativity – doing justice, making peace, healing families, resisting temptation, seeking and winning true freedom (and we might, ensuring housing) – is an earthly event in a long history of things that *implement* Jesus’ own resurrection and *anticipate* the final new creation and act as signposts of hope, pointing back to the first and on to the second.” (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* [New York: HarperCollins, 2008]).

that time on,” this disciple took her into his *home*”: a beautiful example of Christian community in action

3. **Home as a place of belonging and security.** In Psalm 78:55, Asaph writes, “He drove out the nations before them; he gave them their inheritance by lot. He settled the tribes of Israel into their homes.” The sense is that the people of Israel have come home – the place they belong – and they shall be safe and secure. When Naomi’s husband and sons die, she tells her daughters-in-law, “Go back to your mothers’ homes ...” Home is the one place that has to accept you and care for you.

“Our sojourn into a violent and hurting world,” writes Charles Marsh, “is shaped by the memory of Christ who was born in a stable because there was no room for him at the inn.”<sup>5</sup> Christian churches have, historically, been leaders in caring for those who are homeless and seeking to transform society into meaningful communities, where home – in the sense of residence, community, belonging and security – are created.

Willis Jenkins challenges churches to become “creative homemakers” in the midst of the world’s “shoddy homemaking.”<sup>6</sup> He argues that the church has a fundamental role to describe in word – and, most profoundly – to model in action, God’s vision of home as a place of grace, belonging, and hope. More than simply housing the homeless, Jenkins is proposing that the church actively seek to model the Kingdom of God by transforming society to be more and more like the ideal community modelled in Scripture.

A theology of home-fullness moves us to consider how we, too, can create home – in a broad, biblical sense – in our own communities. The Lord’s Prayer is all about praying that God’s Kingdom would come and His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven – that means more than just feeding the poor and providing a mat on the floor of a shelter. It means seeking to radically transform society so that each person – created in the image of God – experiences home as God intended them to – a safe place, a place to belong, a community of love, and (yes!) an appropriate, affordable residence.

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*Bruce Martin’s theological reflection on home-fullness was written in response to a request from the CBWC’s Justice and Mercy Network. Although his paper reflects his personal theological reflections and is not official CBWC policy, the CBWC is grateful for this reflection and affirms its content as a resource to promote theological reflection and discussion.*

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> Willis Jenkins, “Neighbourhood Ethics: Christianity, Urbanism, and Homelessness” *Anglican Theological Review*, 91:4 (Fall 2009), p 539-558.

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## Study Questions

### For

## A Theology of Home-fullness

Does this idea of a “theology of home-fullness” give us a deeper understanding of dealing with the issue of homelessness?

Where is “home” for you? What are the elements that make a place home?

Do you have other kinds of “homes” in your life? If so, what/where are they?

Are there biblical examples of home or a sense of belonging that resonate with you?

In a practical sense, would transforming society so that everyone experiences a home as God intended: a safe place, a place to belong, a community of love and an appropriate, affordable residence have a significant impact in our towns and cities (health-care, security, justice system etc.)?

Knowing that heaven is our true home, what beliefs do we have about heaven that we could make real in our present world?

Can you think of any good models of community or home-fullness that you could learn from in your personal life, church or community?

In what way(s) can the Christian community be a “home-maker” for others? What is your role in this?

Do you have any suggestions for how we can become creative home-makers?

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## FAQ on Homelessness

### What is Homelessness?

Homelessness is the lack permanent, safe shelter that is adequate to the needs of an individual or family.

Homelessness means having no home or permanent place to live. However it also includes a wide range of social and economic factors that negatively affect the well-being and health of an individual or family. Homelessness can be:

- absolute – living on the street or in emergency shelters or places unfit for humans (a very narrow definition)
- hidden/concealed – living temporarily with friends, in a car, ‘couch-surfing’
- vulnerably housed – living in substandard housing that is unsafe or insufficient conditions

Homelessness can be chronic or long-term, cyclical or temporary. There is a huge overlap between these physical and temporal types of homelessness.

### Who Are the Homeless?

Anyone can become homeless. Most Canadians are one paycheque away from not being able to pay their rent or mortgage. Those most vulnerable to homelessness include:

- Women and their children fleeing domestic violence
- Youth, especially those who have been shuttled from family to family in foster care
- Aboriginal people
- People with addictions to drugs, alcohol or gambling
- People with low paying jobs that cannot meet market rental rates
- People who are unemployed or underemployed
- Newly released prison inmates who have a hard time re-entering society and/or finding work
- Injured and traumatized war veterans
- Individuals who have been sexually abused

### Why Do People Become Homeless?

Some people become homeless because they:

- Unexpectedly lose their job and cannot pay their bills
- Have a chronic or long-term illness that prevents them from working
- Lack people in their lives who can nurture and support them
- Have addictions to drugs, alcohol or gambling that 1) divert financial resources to support the costs of feeding the addiction and 2) cause physical and cognitive problems that make self-care difficult.
- Are victims of domestic violence.
- Lack sufficient education to be employable.
- Lack life skills that help them cope with stress, job hunting, paying bills etc.

### **How many are homeless?**

- In 2008, there were an estimated 157,000 homeless in Canada
- 32,000 people are chronically homeless and have lived on the street for more than 1 year.
- The average life expectancy of a person who is chronically homeless is 39.
- Tax payers spend at least \$1.3 billion annually to provide services to people who are homeless

\*Source: Charity Intelligence Canada, [www.charityintelligence.ca](http://www.charityintelligence.ca))

### **Why Don't People who are Homeless Get Jobs and Support Themselves?**

May people assume that homeless people are lazy slackers. For most people who are homeless, this is not the case.

- In times of high unemployment, such as since 2008, finding a job is difficult.
- Without a regular or permanent address, it is often difficult to get hired. Unusual addresses, like a PO Box or a church make employers suspicious. Some job applicants put false addresses down on applications but when they are caught, potential employers feel they are untrustworthy and won't hire them.
- Many people without homes do have jobs – about 1/3 to 1/2 of all people who are homeless -- but they don't earn enough to afford housing, especially in expensive cities like Vancouver or Calgary. They might work at minimum or low wages, be able to find only part-time work that doesn't provide enough income. Many of the working homeless also have debts or financial obligations such as alimony or child support and therefore don't have enough left over to afford housing.
- Good personal grooming and maintaining an acceptable standard of cleanliness is difficult for people who have no permanent place to live. Keeping clothing clean and

ironed is almost impossible. This makes it difficult to make a good impression in a job interview.

- Unemployed job applicants have a harder time getting hired than people who currently have jobs. Employers feel better hiring people who are already working because this shows that someone else values that person's work.
- Few people living on the street have cell phones, making it difficult for potential employers to contact them to invite them for a job interview or to tell them they are hired.
- Feelings of low self-esteem, self-doubt, guilt and self-hatred for being in the situation they are in makes it difficult for many people who are homeless to have the confidence they need to apply for work.
- Many people who are homeless have difficulty getting access to a computer and printer to print out their resumes to submit to potential employers. Many do not have the computer and literacy skills necessary to create, format and print a resume.

### **Don't Food Banks, Soup Kitchens and Shelters Just Let People Who Are Homeless Continue Their Dependent Lifestyle?**

Soup kitchens are actually the first line of defence against homelessness. Food is essential to life. A person who is chronically hungry has more difficulty thinking clearly or taking actions to support self-sufficiency. Time spent looking for food is time that cannot be spent finding shelter, looking for work or getting other supports needed for self-sufficiency.

### **If people who are homeless are so badly off, why do many of them have pets or cell phones?**

About 10% of people who are homeless have pets, but in some places about ¼ of people who are homeless have pets. (Source: [www.petsofthehomeless.org](http://www.petsofthehomeless.org))

Pets provide people who are homeless with the companionship they usually lack from people. Pets also help people living on the street stay warm at night or during cold weather.

Although some people on the streets might have pets to get extra sympathy, usually having a pet makes life a little more challenging since many shelters do not accept pets.

Pay as you go cell phones are a cheap and useful way for people who are homeless to be contacted by potential employers and to stay in touch with friends and family. Having a cell phone makes it easier to have a support network that will move a person who is homeless towards self-sufficiency.

## What can we do?

Some solutions include:

- Support housing first policies in your community that provide long-term shelter first and then address the factors contributing to a person's homelessness
- Support a national housing strategy
- Low-barrier shelters that do not create eligibility conditions for access
- Shelters and supportive housing located where they can be easily accessed
- Access to food to meet basic needs.
- Access to health care to improve well-being
- Purpose-built housing
- Zoning changes to allow more secondary suites
- Tenancy laws that reduce loss of secure housing
- Increase supply of non-market housing
- Shared commitment of municipal, federal and provincial to goals and strategies around housing and homelessness
- Support faith-based and community groups to end homelessness

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## Fact Sheet: Homelessness

**General Facts:** (Source: Charity Intelligence Canada, [www.charityintelligence.ca](http://www.charityintelligence.ca) )

- In 2008, there were an estimated 157,000 homeless in Canada
- 32,000 people are chronically homeless and have lived on the street for more than 1 year.
- The average life expectancy of a person who is chronically homeless is 39.
- Tax payers spend at least \$1.3 billion annually to provide services to people who are homeless
- There are about 17,000 emergency shelter beds across Canada

**Specific Municipalities:** (Source: [www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca) )

### Winnipeg 2009

- Street Homeless: 1000-2000 estimate
- Nights of Shelter use in December 2008: 15,253

### Regina 2010

- Number of shelters: 19
- Number of Shelter beds available: 369
- Sheltered Homeless: 2689

### Saskatoon 2010

- Sheltered Homeless: 216
- Street Homeless: 44

### Edmonton 2010

- Total Homeless: 2421
- Housed since 2009: 1000+

### Calgary 2012

- Sheltered Homeless: 2975
- In jail or hospital: 151
- Street Homeless: 64
- Total Homeless: 3190

### Red Deer 2012

- Sheltered Homeless: 95
- Street Homeless: 184
- Total: 278

### Vancouver 2012

- Sheltered Homeless: 1296
- Street Homeless: 306
- Total: 1602

### Victoria 2011

- Sheltered Homeless: 1343 in 63 facilities
- Moved from Homelessness to Housing: 535

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## 65+ Ways to Support People who are Homeless

### Volunteer

1. Volunteer with an organization experienced in supporting people who are homeless, like local shelters, food banks, street ministries, battered women's shelters, employment services and health services.
  - a. Volunteer your professional talents – whether you are a lawyer, a doctor, a carpenter, a writer, a janitor, a clerk, you are needed.
  - b. Offer your assistance to people who need support paying their bills, cleaning, budgeting etc to assist them to gain life skills for self-sufficiency.
  - c. Volunteer as a tutor for children living with their families in shelters or transitional housing.
  - d. Volunteer your hobbies – whether you garden, cook, sew, fix bikes, take photos or enjoy sports you can make a difference by sharing these skills with others through offering practical help or by teaching your skills.
2. Volunteer with sports teams, Scouts, Guides, Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers, Big Sisters and other organizations that support the self-esteem and skills development of children and youth.
3. Become a foster parent to at-risk youth to reduce their likelihood of becoming homeless.
4. Volunteer in sports or music programs for marginalized youth.
5. Believe that individual actions make a difference.

### Pray

6. Pray regularly for those who are homeless and the people on the front-line who serve them in churches, non-government organizations and government programs.
7. Pray for policy makers and law-makers who make decisions affecting the homeless and people at risk of homelessness.
8. Ask God to open your heart and to bring you personal opportunities to share His love with those who are homeless.

### Give

9. Give money to nonprofits that serve the homeless.
10. Give recyclable bottles and containers to a person who is homeless instead of recycling them yourself.
11. Give food or bus tickets to people who are homeless when asked for money.
12. Buy extra food to share when you are at a restaurant.

13. Give groceries and non-perishable food items to your local food bank.
14. Give household goods like blankets, sheets and pillows to housing organizations or shelters.
15. Give toys to family shelters and organizations that distribute toys to homeless children.
16. Buy 'Street News', a newspaper that helps the homeless help themselves by earmarking a small amount of money from sales for rent.
17. Organize food and clothing drives and give what you collect to shelters, soup kitchens, food banks and other frontline organizations.
18. Donate new or slightly used clothing like mittens, socks, underwear, toques, scarves etc to frontline agencies that can distribute them to people who are homeless.
19. Create lists of needed items by contacting nonprofits regularly and asking them what they need, and then connect them with organizations interested or able to meet those needs.
20. Provide funds for rent, mortgage payments and utilities.
21. Donate bus passes to shelters, soup kitchens and food banks.
22. Donate pre-paid phone cards to shelters or people you meet on the street so they can apply for jobs and maintain contact with friends and family.
23. Donate food cards from grocery stores to shelters and food banks.
24. Give unused personal care items like toothpaste, toothbrushes, combs, wipes, makeup, soap and shampoo.
25. Donate musical instruments or bicycles you no longer use to shelters.
26. Give your time.

## Learn

27. Understand the causes of homelessness.
28. Learn who the homeless are and their unique reasons for becoming homeless.  
Don't assume everyone is the same or has the same reasons for being homeless.
29. Study the Bible to see what it has to say about poverty and those who cannot care for themselves.
30. Educate your children about homelessness and poverty.
31. Challenge cultural assumptions and stereotypes about people who are homeless as being lazy, into the street lifestyle, not wanting to work, violent, morally or socially inferior etc.
32. Learn more about the physical and psychological impacts of addictions and abuse and how these factors can influence homelessness.
33. Meet with volunteers and staff who work with people who are homeless to understand their perspectives and methods of offering support, and to offer encouragement.

34. Support initiatives to reduce the stigma of mental illness.
35. Recognize that homelessness is not the root problem but is a symptom of other problems in society, such as poverty, addiction, untreated mental illnesses, high costs of housing etc.
36. Check your attitudes and beliefs about homelessness and people who are homeless.

### **Engage**

37. Offer respect by treating people who are homeless with dignity and courtesy – treating others the way you would like to be treated.
38. Share the love of Christ in word and deed.
39. Be kind. Don't ignore the homeless when you see them. Smiles, eye contact and kind words encourage and give hope.
40. Pray for people who are homeless, and the volunteers and staff of organizations that provide services or offer support.
41. Make a list of shelters & their addresses. Carry it with you to give out to people who are homeless.
42. Take your children to play with children at homeless shelters.
43. Employ the homeless to do jobs around your home, such as gardening, renovations or cleaning.
44. Befriend a person who is homeless that you see frequently to help restore the person's emotional support structure normally provided by friends and family.
45. Direct people who are homeless to intermediary agencies that can help them find the non-profit and government assistance available.

### **Organize**

46. Support Housing First policies in your community to get people the shelter they need first so they can deal with issues like mental health, addictions later.
47. Support the establishment of low-barrier shelters that allow people who are homeless to keep their pets and shopping carts.
48. Encourage the media to run stories on homelessness and to regularly publish lists of the services available.
49. Teach others about homelessness by writing letters, contacting your MP or MLA, sharing what you've learned with your friends and co-workers.
50. Organize a fundraiser through your company, sports team, social group or church to raise money to donate to a non-profit serving the homeless.
51. Stand up for the civil rights of people who are homeless, such as ensuring they can register to vote, or ensuring city bylaws do not discriminate against the homeless.

52. Become an advocate for people who are homeless to help them access services and to help establish services that fill service gaps.
53. Contact your MP and MLA informing them of your support for affordable housing. Visit their offices, write a letter or email, or phone them.
54. Tell government officials at all levels of your support for a National Homelessness Strategy.
55. Attend demonstrations that peacefully call attention to the plight of people who are homeless or poor.
56. Participate in annual 'homeless counts' to provide information on how many people in your community are homeless on the streets, sleeping temporarily in someone else's home or at risk of homelessness.
57. Advocate for higher minimum wages and higher welfare allowances to reduce the gap between income and the cost of housing.
58. Advocate for and support non-profit or government initiatives to build affordable housing.
59. Encourage municipal governments to allow secondary suites to increase the amount of affordable housing in your community.
60. Participate in conferences and town hall meetings about homelessness and poverty.
61. Support programs and policies that provide greater support to people with mental illness.
62. Support programs that address addictions.

## **Build**

63. Build affordable housing by volunteering with your local chapter of Habitat for Humanity.
64. Start a soup kitchen in your church or community centre.
65. Support shower programs in your local community centre or start one at your church.
66. Provide transitional housing for people in danger of losing their housing so they can stay in the homes they already have and not become homeless.
67. Write to developers to encourage them to build affordable housing.
68. Support municipal, provincial and federal affordable housing programs.
69. Start a community garden to provide fresh food to shelters, food banks and ministries that provide food to people who are homeless.

## Reading Resources on Homelessness

### Websites

[www.endhomelessnessnow.ca/blog/](http://www.endhomelessnessnow.ca/blog/) Vancouver's faith-based End Homelessness Action Group

[www.cityinfofocus.ca](http://www.cityinfofocus.ca) Multi-denominational Vancouver organization to encourage Christian leadership on the issue of homelessness.

[www.homeless.org.au](http://www.homeless.org.au) Homeless Directory. Compilation of resources on homelessness.

[www.homelesshub.ca](http://www.homelesshub.ca) Information from homelessness networks across Canada.

<http://calgaryhomeless.com/> Calgary Homeless Foundation website.

<http://www.theseed.ca/> Mustard Seed, providing shelter and services in Calgary and Edmonton

### Books

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