

# The Homelessness Crisis and the Role of the Church

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## Abstract

In the United States, the homelessness situation has developed into what is commonly called a crisis. An array of helpful and unhelpful responses has been proposed, and public opinion on the homeless varies. Apathy or inaction on the part of the church is not an option, since concerns for the poor and displaced permeate Scripture. This article considers the complex factors related to homelessness and the theology of Scripture on the subject, evaluating approaches and offering meaningful and effective responses in light of the role of the church in the world. The intersection of ecclesiology and a practical response to the crisis will be examined to elucidate better a specifically Christian approach.

## Keywords

*Homelessness, homelessness crisis, ecclesiology, biblical theology, poverty, church action*

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## Introduction

**H**omelessness is perhaps the most visible form of poverty in the United States. It is nearly impossible to walk through any major city and not pass by a homeless person. Particularly hard-hit areas are seeing the phenomenon of “tent cities,” where large groups of homeless people gather publicly in

makeshift shelters. Due to significant increases in the number of people facing homelessness in recent decades and the insufficiency of many efforts to combat it, the issue is commonly referred to as a crisis.<sup>1</sup> In fact, one writer recently suggested that if the opioid crisis was the problem of the last five years, homelessness is the problem of the next five years.<sup>2</sup> While many interventions have been implemented to ameliorate the crisis, the majority of people believe that America is doing a poor job addressing the problem.<sup>3</sup> And, as one author puts it, “homelessness is not a new social problem. It represents the culmination of many social problems which have not been adequately dealt with over the years by federal, state, local housing and social welfare policies.”<sup>4</sup>

This article proposes that the homelessness crisis cannot be solved without the significant contribution of an active church. Headway can be made against it by governments and secular organizations, but the homeless cannot be fully helped without complex, interconnected aid networks that require the commitment and action of the people of God. Homelessness is also a “public problem.”<sup>5</sup> It is therefore the role of public theology to develop a formulated, reasonable, biblically faithful, and compassionate response. Tackling the homelessness crisis is an issue of public theology because it involves the ways in which the church interacts and dialogues with her larger community and society to bring about the public good, applying redemption not only to the people of God but to all people and societal structures. In the words of Nichole Flores, “public theology today demands a response to the threats posed to the most vulnerable members of our

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<sup>1</sup> For recent examples of references to the problem as a crisis, see Christopher Rufo, “What’s Really Driving the Homelessness Crisis,” *Daily Signal* (February 24, 2020), <https://www.dailysignal.com/2020/02/24/whats-really-driving-the-homelessness-crisis>; LeeAnn Shan and Matt Sandler, “Addressing the Homelessness Crisis in New York City: Increasing Accessibility for Persons with Severe and Persistent Mental Illness,” *Columbia Social Work Review* 14.1 (2016): 50–58, <https://doi.org/10.7916/cswr.v14i1.1856>. While homelessness is a global problem, this article focuses primarily on the homelessness crisis in the United States. Even so, the applications and suggestions made are designed to be applicable in various contexts, although churches internationally often exist under entirely different social and political systems.

<sup>2</sup> Erica Pandey, “America’s Homelessness Crisis Isn’t Going Away,” *Axios* (January 22, 2020), <https://www.axios.com/homelessness-crisis-american-cities-mayors-7fc17353-342b-40d7-a945-8dce5174dc75.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Gallup, Inc., and Fannie Mae, “Homelessness in America: Americans’ Perceptions, Attitudes and Knowledge,” *General Population Survey and City Surveys* (Washington, DC: Gallup, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Jon Erickson, ed., *Housing the Homeless* (Livingston, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 336.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

society.”<sup>6</sup> The homeless very much fit this description. Public theology thus involves a participation “in the incarnational character of the church.”<sup>7</sup> We argue that Christian theology and a Christian view of homelessness is a matter of public theology in that Christian theology can shed fresh light on this difficult and endemic issue and can contribute to the public conversation and the development of more just, compassionate, efficient, and effective interventions, policies, and sustainable change for the homeless.

### **I. *The State of the Current Homelessness Crisis***

Homelessness is generally spoken of in two categories: “absolute homelessness,” the condition of people “without physical shelter who sleep outdoors, in vehicles, abandoned buildings or other places not intended for human habitation,” and “relative homelessness,” the condition of “those who have a physical shelter, but one that does not meet basic standards of health and safety.”<sup>8</sup> For our purposes, we will primarily examine those experiencing “absolute homelessness,” not those who are housing insecure or those with unstable circumstances. When used here, “homeless” refers to “people in the ‘streets’ who, in seeking shelter, have no alternative but to obtain it from a private or public agency.”<sup>9</sup> Plainly, an acceptable definition of *homelessness* is a condition where, on a given night, an individual has no place to sleep apart from public places or temporary facilities.

Because of the instability and unpredictability inherent in the problem, it is difficult to estimate how many people are homeless in the United States, and therefore the magnitude and causes of the problem are debated. As of 2018, the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimated that 2.5 to 3.5 million Americans sleep in shelters, transitional housing, or public spaces each year.<sup>10</sup> According to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, as of January 2019, 17 of every 10,000

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<sup>6</sup> Nichole Flores, “What Is the Role of a Public Theologian Today?,” *America* (June 12, 2019), <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2019/07/12/what-role-public-theologian-today>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Hwang, “Homelessness and Health,” *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 164.2 (2001): 229. Such “standards” refer to “protection from the elements, access to safe water and sanitation, security of tenure, personal safety and affordability.”

<sup>9</sup> Erickson, *Housing the Homeless*, 127.

<sup>10</sup> National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, “Homelessness in America: Overview of Data and Causes,” [https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Homeless\\_Stats\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Homeless_Stats_Fact_Sheet.pdf).

people were experiencing homelessness.<sup>11</sup> That is, on a given day in 2019, it was estimated that more than 500,000 people went without shelter. The number of homeless people increased by 3% from 2018 to 2019, the third straight year of national-level increases.<sup>12</sup> In Los Angeles alone, from January 2019 to January 2020 there was a 12.7% increase in those living on the streets, vehicles, or shelters.<sup>13</sup>

The homeless population comprises groups that typically do not have much in common: single older transient males, deinstitutionalized mental health care patients, youth runaways, foreclosed or evicted persons or families, mentally or physically disabled persons with low incomes, abused women, victims of natural or humanmade disaster, undocumented immigrants, and victims of addiction or alcoholism.<sup>14</sup> Individual males are the most common demographic, and Black Americans, multiracial Americans and Latinx persons are statistically far more likely to be homeless than white Americans.<sup>15</sup> The homeless tend to have worse health than other people, and “disease severity can be remarkably high because of factors such as extreme poverty, delays in seeking care, nonadherence to therapy, cognitive impairment and the adverse health effects of homelessness itself.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite major expansions of meal programs in recent years, food insecurity, hunger, and nutritional problems persist among the homeless.<sup>17</sup> Recent national studies of users of soup kitchens and shelters found that the “average homeless person ate less than two meals per day and frequently did not eat for entire days.”<sup>18</sup> On average, more than a third of homeless people report having no friends, and more than 30% report having no

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<sup>11</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness, “The State of Homelessness: 2020 Edition,” <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-2020>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Scott, “Homelessness in Los Angeles County Rises Sharply,” *NPR: All Things Considered*, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/12/875888864/homelessness-in-los-angeles-county-rises-sharply>. California is estimated to have over 150,000 homeless, trailed by New York with just under 100,000.

<sup>14</sup> Erickson, *Housing the Homeless*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness, “The State of Homelessness: 2020 Edition.” African Americans represent 40% of the homeless despite representing only 13% of the overall population.

<sup>16</sup> Hwang, “Homelessness and Health,” 230. About 40% have no health insurance, and middle-aged homeless people typically have health problems associated with those decades older.

<sup>17</sup> Barrett Lee, Kimberly Tyler, and James Wright, “The New Homelessness Revisited,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 36 (2010): 506.

<sup>18</sup> Anne Shlay and Peter Rossi, “Social Science Research and Contemporary Studies of Homelessness,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 18.1 (1992): 139.

contact with family members.<sup>19</sup> The disruption of social bonds among the homeless can be especially devastating as these social bonds and roles can give homeless people a sense of meaning and provide connection, which is a fundamental human necessity.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, studies suggest that 30%–40% of homeless adults deal with mental illness.<sup>21</sup> Chronic and infectious disease, traumatic injury, homicide, and suicide rank among the most common causes of death, which may also be hastened by substance abuse and the difficulties of insecure living.<sup>22</sup> More than half of homeless people report being victims of crime, primarily theft but also physical and sexual assault.<sup>23</sup> The sheer difficulty of homeless life has led some to even characterize the experience of homelessness as traumatic, likening the homeless experience to “trauma victims’ sense of being without sanctuary in a world filled with malevolent forces ... [which] is often compounded by actual failures of social support networks and by the social withdrawal of those on whom the victims have relied for support.”<sup>24</sup>

While in previous generations the general public opinion of the homeless was negative, this has shifted toward viewing them as victims in need of help.<sup>25</sup> For example, since the mid-twentieth century there has been a progression in speaking of homelessness that has moved from “sin talk” before the 1960s to “system talk” through the 1980s into the “sick talk” of today.<sup>26</sup> Such public attitudes toward the homeless are quite important, as “positive attitudes are necessary to provide appropriate care.”<sup>27</sup> While most are in favor of providing assistance to the homeless, research suggests that people also generally see the homeless as dangerous, more prone to criminality, and untrustworthy.<sup>28</sup> The public also attributes rates of mental illness and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Goodman, Leonard Saxe, and Mary Harvey, “Homelessness as Psychological Trauma: Broadening Perspectives,” *American Psychologist* 46.11 (1991): 1220.

<sup>21</sup> Barrett, Tyler, and Wright, “The New Homelessness Revisited,” 506.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Suicide accounts for 25% of deaths among homeless people, compared to less than 1% generally.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Goodman, Saxe, and Harvey, “Homelessness as Psychological Trauma,” 1220.

<sup>25</sup> For a study of these changes, see Amy Donley, “The Perception of Homeless People: Important Factors in Determining Perceptions of the Homeless as Dangerous” (PhD diss., University of Central Florida, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Peter Somerville, “Understanding Homelessness,” *Housing, Theory and Society* 30.4 (2013): 391. In other words, causation ideas moved from culpability to systemic failure to mental health-related incapacity.

<sup>27</sup> David Buchanan, Louis Rohr, Laura Kehoe, Susan Glick, and Sharad Jain, “Changing Attitudes Toward Homeless People,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 19.5 (2004): 566.

<sup>28</sup> Lindsay Dhanani, “How Religiosity Affects Perceptions of the Homeless,” *Pegasus Review* 4.2 (2009): 1.

substance abuse to the homeless at higher levels than they actually occur.<sup>29</sup> When it comes to improving such views, however, any kind of exposure to the homeless (observing them, serving them, etc.) has been shown to erode stereotypes and foster more positive views among the public.<sup>30</sup> Some cities currently have laws targeting the homeless that can affect public perceptions; in Las Vegas, sharing food with the homeless or destitute is a crime punishable by a \$1,000 fine or up to six months in jail.<sup>31</sup> Similar laws in other cities have been struck down, as in Boise, Idaho, where a court recently ruled that the city could not criminalize sleeping outdoors “on the false pretense that [the homeless] had a choice in the matter.”<sup>32</sup>

Homelessness was generally not viewed as a crisis until the 1980s. During and just prior to that decade, the homeless population skyrocketed due in part to the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric facilities and to cuts in housing and social services.<sup>33</sup> These cuts were “in part a consequence of the transfer of federal dollars to a huge military buildup ... and consequent large budget deficits.”<sup>34</sup> This was realized to be a problem, and by the end of that decade legislative initiatives such as the 1987 McKinney Act allocated money to address the problem. An additional contributing factor has been economic change, as between 1960 and 2017 median household income increased 29% in the United States but median home price increased 121%.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the second half of the twentieth century saw a decline in the number of housing units that low-income people and those in need of assistance could afford, leading to increased demand and diminished supply. Additional contributing factors may have included changes in eligibility for welfare programs or disability insurance and a reduction in the percentage of intact families.<sup>36</sup> Prior to the 1980s, the majority of homeless people were alcoholic white males, but in recent years homeless people are much younger and become homeless as a result of a wide variety of factors.

The causes and risk factors of homelessness today are numerous and varied. One clear contributor in the hardest-hit areas is the high cost of

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<sup>29</sup> John Belcher and Bruce DeForge, “Social Stigma and Homelessness: The Limits of Social Change,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 22.8 (2012): 929–46.

<sup>30</sup> Barrett, Tyler, and Wright, “The New Homelessness Revisited,” 511.

<sup>31</sup> Randal Archibold, “Las Vegas Makes It Illegal to Feed Homeless in Parks,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/28/us/28homeless>.

<sup>32</sup> Sara Rankin, “Punishing Homelessness,” *New Criminal Law Review* 22.1 (2019): 116–17.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Donohoe, *Public Health and Social Justice*, vol. 31 (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2012), 78.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Pandey, “America’s Homelessness Crisis Isn’t Going Away.”

<sup>36</sup> Erickson, *Housing the Homeless*, xxiv.



housing.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, providers of services to the homeless simply do not have enough resources. Over the last five years, the number of temporary housing beds in America actually decreased by 9%.<sup>38</sup> Insufficient income or unemployment are of course contributors, along with mental illness and substance abuse.<sup>39</sup> For women, domestic abuse is also a significant factor that can lead to homelessness.<sup>40</sup> Policy shifts (in the provision of welfare or mental health services, for example), drug abuse epidemics, lack of preparation of the incarcerated to return to outside life, personal tragedy (such as a divorce or death in the family), or a catastrophe (such as medical bankruptcy or eviction) are all common causes of entering into homelessness.<sup>41</sup> Because of its multifaceted nature and complexity, thinking about causation “requires greater sensitivity to homeless dynamics and to the micro and macro influences that shape pathways not only into but through and out of homelessness.”<sup>42</sup>

Because initiatives on behalf of the homeless need to work to stop it before it starts, an awareness of the various risk factors of homelessness can help address the problem’s causes. Structural risk factors include poverty, insufficient employment, highly competitive or poor economic conditions (such as those brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic), low wages, loss of public benefits and assistance, high housing costs and low availability (in large cities these are significant risk factors), family instability or divorce, deinstitutionalization, health care costs, and discrimination (especially toward women and ethnic minorities).<sup>43</sup> Personal risk factors include a lack of social support, experience with foster care or incarceration, family conflict and violence, sexual or physical abuse, mental illness, substance abuse, and military service.<sup>44</sup> Churches need to be aware of and take into account all of these risk factors as they consider how to help the homeless and prevent those at risk from becoming homeless. Additionally, to grasp how best to respond, it is necessary to understand what has been done and is being done to combat this crisis—both what works and what does not.

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<sup>37</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness, “The State of Homelessness: 2020 Edition.”

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, “Homelessness in America: Overview of Data and Causes,” [https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Homeless\\_Stats\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](https://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Homeless_Stats_Fact_Sheet.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Barrett, Tyler, and Wright, “The New Homelessness Revisited,” 510.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 511.

<sup>43</sup> Roger Nooe and David Patterson, “The Ecology of Homelessness,” *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment* 20.2 (2010): 108–12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 113–20.

## **II. Contemporary Interventions on Behalf of the Homeless and Their Limits**

Many efforts have been undertaken in recent decades to house the homeless. Even so, some efforts have been more effective than others, and some argue that the system supposedly combatting homelessness in the United States is “unregulated, unlicensed, underfunded, and ultimately unsuccessful.”<sup>45</sup> In terms of the limits to or problems with homelessness aid, one problem is that much of the money allocated to the cause of homelessness is misused or not used and can even end up harming the people it is meant to help.<sup>46</sup> Forms of charity that can become harmful in this way are those which only provide immediate assistance or provide finances without transitional support or a long-term structure for how the funds will be used effectively. For example, Robert Lupton notes that after Haiti’s devastating 2010 earthquake, \$8 billion in aid was given the country and much was misused, leading to the nation becoming 25% poorer after the aid was given.<sup>47</sup> Lupton argues that “top-down charity seldom works. Governments can give millions ... churches can mobilize their volunteers. But in the end what takes place in the community, on the street, in the home, is what will ultimately determine the sustainability of any development.”<sup>48</sup> This certainly applies to the hundreds of millions in aid that is allocated annually for the homelessness crisis. More than half of the American respondents to recent surveys have said that they would be willing to pay more taxes to fund programs to help the homeless, with 70%–80% saying that they would personally volunteer their time to help with organizations fighting homelessness.<sup>49</sup> Any endeavors to help, however, cannot be made solely of good intentions. They must be effective, either primary prevention that can stop someone from being homeless or secondary prevention designed to end it quickly, and they must be efficient, targeting well and not letting people slide through the cracks.

Additionally, some state and local governments have responded to homelessness with increased police regulation, forcing the homeless to

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<sup>45</sup> Dennis Culhane, “The Cost of Homelessness: A Perspective from the United States,” *European Journal of Homelessness* 2.1 (2008): 111.

<sup>46</sup> Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1994), 5.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 56.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>49</sup> Gallup, Inc., and Fannie Mae, “Homelessness in America,” 7.



leave public places and penalizing activities such as sleeping, sitting, or begging in public areas.<sup>50</sup> This is, of course, an unsustainable recourse, providing no real solutions or forward avenues for those in an otherwise desperate situation. Similarly, legislation has been produced that excludes low-income people from certain areas through ordinances that require minimum acreage for housebuilding or prohibit multiple-unit dwellings. This leads to discouraging low-cost housing developments, shelter, and support programs, which “perpetuate the ghettoization of poverty.”<sup>51</sup> Such responses are examples of “ultimately unsuccessful” responses to homelessness in recent years.

In terms of the levels of aid currently employed, the most common is the emergency shelter. Shelters play an essential role for the homeless in providing them a safe space and function to prevent “the descent into chronic homelessness.”<sup>52</sup> However, even with increased funding in recent years, there are simply not enough shelters for the people who need them.<sup>53</sup> In recent decades, the pattern of intervention was typically to provide emergency shelter and then transitional programs or facilities, to aid in finding employment and stability, and finally to aid in acquiring permanent housing. However, this pattern has changed as more advocates are calling for “housing first” models and intervention strategies, which begin by providing a permanent residence and then introduce transitional assistance.<sup>54</sup> The rationale behind this shift is the antithesis of the idea that “homeless people are somehow broken and must be repaired before they can be trusted to succeed in permanent housing.”<sup>55</sup> In the last few years, hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent in California alone to fund measures against homelessness that are mostly based on a “housing first” philosophy.<sup>56</sup> Recently, some cities have also established “safe zones” for the homeless, which limit them to a certain area to avoid problems caused

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<sup>50</sup> Maria Foscarinis, “Downward Spiral: Homelessness and Its Criminalization,” *Yale Law and Policy Review* 14 (1996): 49.

<sup>51</sup> Jim Tull, “Homelessness: An Overview,” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 8.1 (1992): 39.

<sup>52</sup> Deden Rukmana, “Gender Differences in the Residential Origins of the Homeless: Identification of Areas with High Risk of Homelessness,” *Planning Practice and Research* 25.1 (2010): 98.

<sup>53</sup> Foscarinis, “Downward Spiral,” 2.

<sup>54</sup> For examples of this view, which advocates providing housing first before any other forms of assistance, see United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, “Solutions.”

<sup>55</sup> Barrett, Tyler, and Wright, “The New Homelessness Revisited,” 514.

<sup>56</sup> Randall Kuhn, Jessica Richards, Sarah Roth, and Kimberly Clair, “Homelessness and Public Health in Los Angeles,” *UCLA: Campus-wide Homelessness Initiative* (2020), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2gn3x56s>.

by large congregations but likewise attempt to avoid the consequences of criminalizing their presence.<sup>57</sup>

The main problem is that most resources for homelessness deal with emergency situations or immediate needs and fail to address both the deeper factors that perpetuate homelessness and the risk factors that lead to it in the first place. That is, many interventions currently in place deal well with immediate needs but are not effective in long-term prevention or rehabilitation. Therefore, effective interventions with the homeless have to offer a wide range of supports across a broad time frame. A recent study found that there was effective and lasting change in the lives of homeless people after nine months of involvement with a transitional assistance program.<sup>58</sup> In this study, the effective program had a holistic approach that included counseling and support for addiction, relapse prevention, and training in managing anger and other mental health issues. It also taught life skills such as literacy and financial management, job skills such as interview preparation, and family reunification skills (for parents and spouses). It also provided food assistance as well as case management services to make sure clients were supported in different areas.<sup>59</sup>

Such an approach has been endorsed by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, which suggests that effective interventions both provide direct, affordable, subsidized housing first and connect people to support services in the community such as healthcare assistance and job training.<sup>60</sup> The best interventions are those that involve the community working together, where there are low barriers or minimal requirements for assistance, and where finances are allocated responsibly to accountable, local organizations that follow an agreed-upon methodology. Unfortunately, while affordable housing is clearly a major issue in this crisis, little has been done in recent years to expand housing options. Some have suggested that future initiatives will have to include support for negotiation with landlords; rental assistance programs; small loans for housing-related expenses, furniture provision, repairs, and other short-term necessities; and help with the development of financial management skills (e.g., building better credit).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Foscarinis, “Downward Spiral,” 49.

<sup>58</sup> Douglas Luffborough, “Faith and Homelessness: Examining the Influence of the Faith-Based Component of a Transitional Housing Program on the Attitudes and Behaviors of Homeless Men” (PhD diss., University of San Diego, 2017), vii.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 18–20.

<sup>60</sup> United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, “Solutions.”

<sup>61</sup> Martha Burt, “What Will It Take to End Homelessness?,” *Urban Institute Brief*, 2001, <http://webarchive.urban.org/publications/310305.html>, p. 5. As will be discussed below, this is a clear area where the church can help.

Additionally, more work needs to be done with homeless people's mental health issues and to take into account the teaching of job and life skills.<sup>62</sup>

Many have also pointed out how data shows that faith-based programs are especially helpful for the homeless as they incorporate social elements of belonging and interaction, and such programs' spiritual aspects give the homeless "hope, confidence, and an anchor point within their lives. The counseling-type services offered by many churches [are] experienced as a form of cathartic inner healing."<sup>63</sup> This again points to the importance of a holistic, community-coordinated approach. Recent studies have shown that a significant factor in positive outcomes for the homeless was for them to have a sense that they had a strong support system and had the ability to overcome obstacles in life, which churches can provide.<sup>64</sup> Because such a holistic approach (including spiritual aid, which should not be neglected) is necessary and because so many approaches have fallen short, Christians can play an integral role in providing much-needed assistance. However, to know how to help, we first need to establish a biblical view of homelessness.

### **III. A Biblical Christian Perspective on Homelessness**

A word equivalent to "homeless" occurs explicitly only a few times in Scripture, with most other applicable references being to the poor or destitute. Perhaps the most direct reference is Isaiah 58:7, where God is speaking to the people about what he considers to be a true fast versus a false fast that is purely a human religious practice. This true fast is comprised of action consecrated to the Lord; it is to be a way of living that seeks to right injustice, combat oppression, and help those in need. Part of this fast is "that you would bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isa 58:7).<sup>65</sup> This is a reference not only to the poor but specifically to the poor who have no dwelling place, and it is paired along with injunctions to "share your bread with the hungry" and "when you see the naked, clothe him." Leviticus 25:25 may also be in view here: "When a brother becomes poor, you shall support him and take him in." To do such things, in the eyes of the Lord, is true justice and not lip service or religious performance. As Alec Motyer puts it, such a way of fasting in the eyes of God is to "be used to correct

<sup>62</sup> Sanna Thompson, *Homelessness, Poverty, and Unemployment* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2012), 33.

<sup>63</sup> Megan Ravenhill, *The Culture of Homelessness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 173.

<sup>64</sup> Luffborough, "Faith and Homelessness," 86.

<sup>65</sup> The MT reads *wa'anayim merudhim tabi' bayith*, literally meaning "and the poor cast out ones you will bring to (your) house."

every way in which social structures or wrongdoers within society destroy or diminish the proper liberty of others. ... Work on the structures of society must be matched by personal care for the individual.”<sup>66</sup> The reason why failing to concern oneself with this is a “false fast” is because, in the words of John Oswalt, “what good is it to deny oneself when those around one are going hungry?”<sup>67</sup>

To consider it radical or unwise to take a homeless person into one’s home may be more of an indictment of contemporary believers and their view of the homeless than it is reflective of responsible exegesis or a right handling of Scripture. Regardless of the contention about how Isaiah 58:7 should be specifically applied today, it is evident God is concerned about shelter being provided for the homeless, and with believers personally caring about this need and expending effort to bring it about in order to rightly honor him. It is also worth noting that there is no exception clause in the passage for the homeless who are perceived as unworthy, incapable, or at fault. The passage simply calls for believers to personally concern themselves with providing shelter for those without it as a way of righting what is wrong in God’s sight. Therefore, if being consistent with Scripture is the goal, inaction or apathy in the face of homelessness is unacceptable. A biblical perspective acknowledges that there is something inherent and God-given in people that desires and needs a home,<sup>68</sup> and Christians can be the ones who fight the hardest for the homeless to have one.

Aside from the most specific references, believers must remember the many applicable passages that deal generally with the plight and treatment of the poor (as all homeless people are). For example, verses like Leviticus 14:21 and 23:22 show that even from the time of Moses provisions were made in the law so that the poor could participate despite their circumstances; those who harvested were told to give of that harvest to those who had nothing. Similarly, in Deuteronomy 15:7–11 God commands the people to view and act toward the poor in a kind, generous, and open-handed way. In other places such as Psalm 12:5 and 34:6, God is said to act on behalf of the poor and hear their prayers, with Psalm 112:9 noting that a righteous person gives to the poor. Conversely, Proverbs 14:31 warns that to oppress the poor is to insult God, and Proverbs 21:13 states that God will not listen

<sup>66</sup> Alec Motyer, *Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 408–9.

<sup>67</sup> John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 504.

<sup>68</sup> I define “home” as “an essential schema of relational order that brings meaning to experience in a space that allows a person to connect with the world and with others from the basis of security and safety.” For a similar concept of home, see Kimberly Dovey, “Home and Homelessness,” in *Home Environments* (Boston, MA: Springer, 1985), 41.

to the one who does not listen to the poor. Jeremiah 22:16 even states that to do good to the poor and needy is the very essence of what it means to know God. In Matthew 25:25–46, Jesus equates treatment of the poor with treatment of himself and says that this treatment is the basis on which judgment or blessing will come at the end. In the early church, Galatians 2:10 describes that even from the Jerusalem council, remembering the poor was of special importance. Romans 15:26 shows as well that taking contributions for the poor was a common practice. James 2:2–15 also reminds the church that one's attitude toward the poor must be backed up with practical action on their behalf.

A biblical Christian view of homelessness recognizes that the homeless have spiritual needs and the church should provide for these. In recent studies done with the homeless related to their spirituality and perception of Christianity, “there is little comprehension that the Christian story is good news for them.”<sup>69</sup> For some homeless people, this can be the case because they feel helpless in their circumstances. For example, Jonathan Kozol relates the story of one homeless woman's feelings of helplessness related to God. After seeing a cross on the wall of the shelter she is staying in, he asks her,

“Do you pray?” “I don't pray! Pray for what? I been prayin' all my life and I'm still here. When I came to this hotel I still believed in God. I said: ‘Maybe God can help us to survive.’ I lost my faith. My homes. And everything. Ain't nobody—no God, no Jesus—gonna help us in no way. God forgive me. I'm emotional ... I'm scared to sleep. If I eat, I eat one meal a day. My stomach won't allow me. I have ulcers. I stay in this room. I hide.”<sup>70</sup>

A theology of homelessness recognizes that many in such a state are desperate; they need the love, grace, and hope of the gospel. But they also need those having been changed by that gospel to act in practical ways in solidarity with them to help change their circumstances. As David Nixon puts it, “a theology of homelessness will be a new telling of the story which hopes to provide resonance for those who are rebuilding their lives, and to confront the myths and prejudices which attack them as they do so.”<sup>71</sup>

A biblical Christian view of homelessness sees it not just as an abstraction but as actual people who need God's help and our help. Christian

<sup>69</sup> David Nixon, *Stories from the Street: A Theology of Homelessness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 148.

<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Kozol, *Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 2011), 67.

<sup>71</sup> Nixon, *Stories from the Street*, 149.

approaches based on this conviction, that one needs to personally know the homeless poor and to create a relationship and build trust in order to help them, can be particularly effective. As Bryant Myers writes,

our point of departure for a Christian understanding of poverty is to remember that the poor are people with names, people to whom God has given gifts, and people with whom and among whom God has been working before we even arrived.<sup>72</sup>

A Christian view also understands that structural sin and evil (and not just personal sin and evil) play a role in the homelessness crisis and recognizes how these are situated in a particular society, economy, and political atmosphere.<sup>73</sup> To be faithful to Scripture and to Jesus, who served the poor and understood what it means to be homeless, the church must commit to caring deeply about the homeless and leveraging resources on their behalf at both the personal and structural levels, providing and/or supporting holistic interventions that both address the factors that brought about people's homelessness and work effectively to lead them out of it. We now turn to an exploration of various practical ways that churches can begin to do this or improve what they are already doing.

#### **IV. Suggestions for the Church in Responding to the Homelessness Crisis**

The church has a pivotal role to play in overcoming this crisis, and the impact that has already been made by churches cannot be overstated. For example, one recent article notes that in eleven major cities, ministries provide 60% of homeless shelters and save taxpayers more than \$100 million.<sup>74</sup> In order for churches to be effective in such efforts, it is vital for them to invest in holistic approaches. That is, churches should create or support interventions that not only provide housing but also create a safety net to support the homeless through their transition. For able churches, this could mean investing in the creation of their own shelter, transition, or rehabilitation programs. For those that are not able, this could mean leveraging finances toward local organizations that are doing this faithfully and connecting at-risk or

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<sup>72</sup> Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 106.

<sup>73</sup> Nixon, *Stories from the Street*, 148.

<sup>74</sup> Kate Shellnut, "Why a Christian Approach to Fighting Homelessness Pays Off," *Christianity Today* (March 6, 2017), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/march/christian-approach-fighting-homelessness-pays-off-baylor.html>.



currently homeless people to those resources. In areas where churches may not be able to make or further develop such connections or where there is a lack of resources, more direct or individual approaches can be taken. For example, churches can leverage finances to subsidize a transitioning person's rent or outstanding debts, and church members can provide food and furniture or help prepare the person's home for them by cleaning or decorating or providing clothes from their own supply.

Even though the church can play a pivotal role in homelessness prevention, the church cannot do it alone. Perhaps the best thing that churches can do is to be as connected to the wider community as possible—to other churches, organizations working with the homeless, mental health and case management services, halfway houses and rehabilitation programs, and organizations that provide or connect the unemployed with potential job opportunities and suitable housing options. The most effective work for the homeless will be that which has the support and resources of the entire community, which can work together to ensure that those in need do not fall through the cracks. Practically, churches should make connections with these sorts of organizations in their broader communities, developing cooperative relationships that can serve as a safety net for those attempting to come out of homelessness. In the event someone experiences homelessness, churches can be ready to connect them with every possible resource.

For many churches, leaders must first instill in the people the conviction that this issue is important for Christians to care about in the first place. Because simply saying that it is important is not enough, pastors and leaders can give opportunities for church members to work directly with the homeless through volunteering at a soup kitchen, offering a free shuttle bus service, or something similar wherein they would be able to interact with the homeless face to face. This direct engagement with the needs of the poor brings about an awareness and desire in people to actually work to alleviate their burdens rather than just talking about why that alleviation is essential. As Gary Temple puts it, “you cannot expect street people to change in response to knowing you if you are not changing in response to knowing them.”<sup>75</sup> This must also entail that believers pray for the homeless. It is difficult to argue that one cares for the homeless if one does not spend time praying for them.

An active approach also necessitates that churches be willing to lobby policymakers for increased funding for housing, physical and mental healthcare, fair wages, and case management services. Such macro-level

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<sup>75</sup> Gary Temple, *52 Ways to Help the Homeless* (Nashville: Nelson, 1991), 13.

interventions are necessary because of the reality of the systemic societal contributors to homelessness.<sup>76</sup> Even so, churches must keep in mind that the goal is “to elevate and not debase by relief,” and so ensuring the best allocation of that funding is essential.<sup>77</sup> It is true that some homeless people have been hurt more than they have been helped by badly allocated charity. Thus, the church must keep in mind the need for holistic interventions as the most vital kind of help involves “a change in worldview, not just a temporary adjustment of worldly conditions.”<sup>78</sup> Immediate and temporary help is often necessary, but this is often provided in place of the much more important hands and feet on the streets among the homeless and involved in their lives and rehabilitation. To return again to Jesus’s example, it is worth noting that he “neither abandoned the needy nor fed them immediately—instead, he taught them.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, the church must be committed to action that empowers the homeless and does not lead to their dependency, which will only hurt them in the end. In Lupton’s words, “compassionate service” is to “never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves.”<sup>80</sup> The risk of so doing is high in short-term, immediate interventions, so interventions should instead be long term, holistic, and community based. In a word, the best way for the church to serve the homeless is first to holistically care and be committed for the long-term, second to be well-connected to the community and its resources, and third to be prepared to be a resource in ways that only the church can.

## Conclusion

Why the church should be concerned with the homelessness crisis is an issue of ecclesiology. A Scripturally informed ecclesiology leads to the conclusion that the church should be involved in the world. Such involvement should not only bring about a knowledge of God and Christ through the spreading of the gospel but also bring about positive changes in communities at the

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<sup>76</sup> Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 108. Lupton uses a helpful illustration for why addressing systemic social issues is necessary. We cannot simply say, “feed a man a fish and he’ll eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he’ll eat for a lifetime” when, in Lupton’s words, “there are no fish in the lake because the lake is polluted and overfished.” In this case, one must “figure out how to get control of the lake: stop the pollutants, issue fishing licenses, put wildlife-management policies in place. ... Gaining control of the lake is a community issue.” For more on ways to work against systemic social contributors to poverty, see Laura Stivers, *Disrupting Homelessness: Alternative Christian Approaches* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, 30.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>80</sup> Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 8.

local level, working against suffering and brokenness to bring about God's will and kingdom in the here and now. This call of the church is part of what makes apathy toward the homelessness crisis not an option and compassionate and direct action on behalf of the homeless essential for the church today—the church global and local, Protestant and Catholic.

While there is not agreement on the particulars of ecclesiology and the role of the church in all areas of its engagement with the outer culture, a basic consensus on the importance of ministry to the poor and homeless can be a point of agreement. For example, Protestants can concur with Pope Francis, who said,

Charity and justice must be an essential and central dimension of what it means to be a follower of Christ. This self-understanding advances that liberating the poor from their pain and suffering ... is a way of identifying with Christ. The Church shines brightest when she becomes a light not unto herself, but to the world.<sup>81</sup>

Similarly, Catholics can concur with Protestants who not only seek evangelism and conversion but believe that God's transformation is holistic and that the church is to be involved in the often long and dirty process of not only speaking what is good to the poor but providing for them.<sup>82</sup>

When it comes to the role of the church in the homelessness crisis, we could echo Martin Luther King Jr., who said, "I submit that nothing will be done until people of goodwill put their bodies and their souls in motion. And it will be the kind of soul force brought into being as a result of this confrontation that I believe will make the difference."<sup>83</sup> The church has an essential role to play in fighting and overcoming this crisis, and I contend that without the church, it will not be overcome. But it will require the difficult, dirty, time-consuming work of those who are, by God's grace and for his glory, willing to lay down their differences, be united as the church, and spend themselves for the sake of the least, the last, and the lost.

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<sup>81</sup> Stan Chu Ilo, "The Church of the Poor: Towards an Ecclesiology of Vulnerable Mission," *Ecclesiology* 10.2 (2014): 230.

<sup>82</sup> James J. Stamoolis, "An Evangelical Position on Ecclesiology and Mission," *International Review of Mission* 90.358 (2001): 310–12.

<sup>83</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," (Speech, Washington, DC, March 31, 1968), <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/publications/knock-midnight-inspiration-great-sermons-reverend-martin-luther-king-jr-10>.



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