

# making room for families

*Being a good neighbour is a Christian imperative and Alan Johnson suggests that our neighbourliness today needs to take on the housing crisis in our country.*

Alan Johnson

After telling the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus asked his questioner: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The man replied: "The one who had mercy." And to this Jesus instructed him: "Go and do likewise."

In this instruction Jesus has intertwined the ideas of neighbour with those of mercy and justice and so has given us a clear direction on the regard we should have for our neighbours and fellow citizens.

Mother Theresa said that "We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty. We must start in our own homes to remedy this kind of poverty."

She is of course fundamentally right in that poverty is a consequence of indifference and literally of the poor not being loved.

## how can we bring change?

But as citizens, neighbours and Christians we often feel quite powerless to do anything meaningful about the social injustices we see in our own country and elsewhere in the world. We can become knowledgeable and aware of injustices and share some of the good fortune we enjoy through works of charity. But these responses seem to do little to change the political and economic structures which create and perpetuate these injustices.

Many of us yearn to be able to contribute to significant and substantial social change but feel that we lack the means to make this contribution. This lack of means might be a feeling that we don't have the necessary skills or sufficient resources and the relevant

opportunities to make a difference. This might be true for us as individuals but is probably not so as a collective. As American cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

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Such an idea requires us as Christians to act more faithfully. Not only to believe that when we gather in his name Jesus will be with us but also believe that through such communion we can achieve exceptional things.

And we need to achieve exceptional things in order to address the growing problems of homelessness and injustice around housing here in New Zealand. The housing problem is not one but several and the causes as well as the solutions are multiple.

## auckland and christchurch

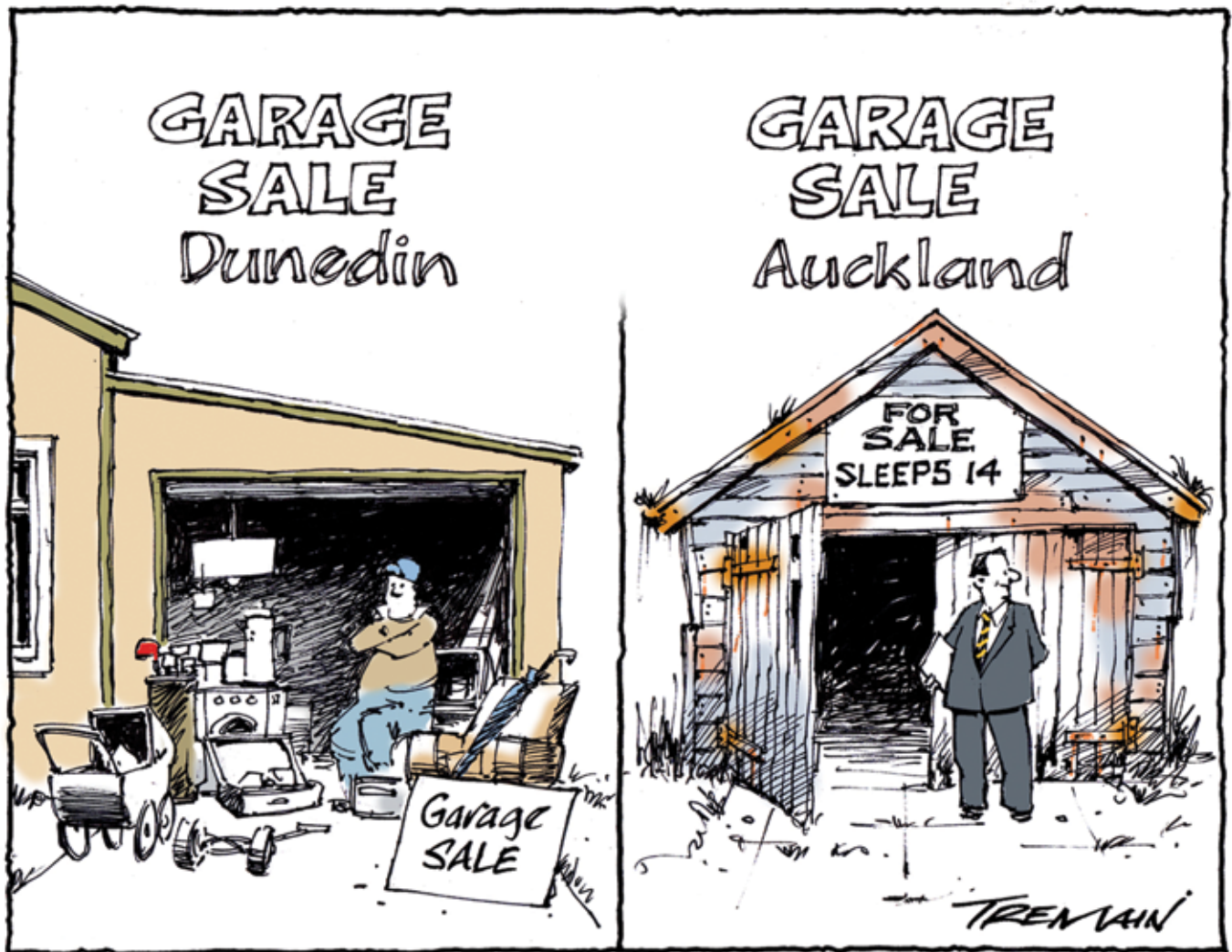
For example we have a chronic and by all accounts worsening shortage of affordable housing in Auckland where population growth is outstripping house building. This in turn is forcing up house prices and rents. During 2014 Auckland's population grew by around 36,000 people yet

there were only 8,000 houses built when perhaps as many as 12,000 should have been built. The shortfall in new house building required to keep pace with population growth in Auckland over the past five years probably exceeds 12,000 — far more than the 8,000 to 9,000 homes destroyed in the Christchurch earthquakes. As a consequence house prices have continued to rise. It now requires 12 years at the average wage to purchase the median priced house in Auckland whereas 10 years ago it was fewer than nine years.

The Christchurch rebuild is quickly replacing the number of houses lost in the earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. The problem is that because of rising house building costs, as well as the local economic boom which is driven by the rebuild, the cost of new and existing housing has risen sharply. The median house price in Canterbury has risen from \$310,000 immediately prior to the earthquakes, to \$430,000 at the end of 2014 and from 6 years of the average wage to 7.5 years. These rises have squeezed thousands of modest income families living in the east of Christchurch — the suburbs suffering the worst damage. Very little is said about their on-going plight and that of low-income tenants who have faced rent increases of around 25 per cent since the earthquakes.

## better quality housing needed

Outside of Auckland and Christchurch the housing shortage is not as serious although there will always be families and individuals struggling to find adequate and affordable housing at any time. The broader housing problem nationally



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is that of quality and in particular the fact that much of our housing is cold, damp and poorly maintained. This is especially so of rental housing which is more likely to be occupied by low-income households and by households with children.

A further injustice is that taxpayers are paying for much of this poor quality, unhealthy housing. Each year the Government spends \$1.3 billion on housing subsidies through the Accommodation Supplement and a further \$700 million to pay for state housing provided through Housing New Zealand. Much of this housing is cold, damp and unhealthy as we saw in a recent coroner's report which identified poor housing as a contributing cause in the death of a South Auckland baby Emma-Lita Bourne. Her family lived in a state house.

Emma-Lita's death is a consequence of the indifference which this and previous Governments

have shown in ensuring that all New Zealanders have access to decent quality affordable housing. But we elect these Governments and most of us are comfortably housed so accept the lame efforts offered by Government of a few million dollars here or there in token efforts when billions of dollars are required.

### being christian neighbours

The Christian narrative begins with a homeless child — Joseph, Mary and Jesus found no room in the living spaces in Bethlehem — so it is perhaps not difficult to argue that homelessness and especially the homelessness of children is a central concern for Christians. We can respond with neighbourliness — by being more aware, or by contributing dollars and time to children's charities. Alternatively we can become more involved perhaps by aligning the resources of our Church

communities to those small but active groups across New Zealand which are offering emergency housing and affordable rental and ownership housing to low income families. We can lobby the government and support initiatives that promote action for affordable housing.

Such involvement means that we move closer to the poor and the poorly housed and get to understand more of their stories and of the injustices behind these stories. This pathway will, I am sure, give us new insights and lead us to further actions which may challenge and hopefully change the quite unjust structures which lie beneath our current housing crisis. ■

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