

## **Estates and Regeneration – Bishop Laurie Green**

**With comments made by members of the Barking Episcopal Area Regeneration Group at a meeting held on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2014 at St. Alban's Church on the Becontree Estate, Barking & Dagenham in Chelmsford Diocese**

Housing estates are distinctive from other forms of urban ministry and require different skills. In the Old Testament there is a thrust about history and a thrust about the land and it's helpful to look at both of these topics in relation to estates.

The history of estates is important. Estates were part of the welfare state system and the aim was quality homes for everyone. Unfortunately, the drive to build quality was overtaken by pleas for quantity – with system-built homes and lots of concrete. This created the 1960s landscape. 1979 was a big year for housing estates as by this date half the population lived in Council property. People from all backgrounds lived in Council Estates. 1979 was also the year when equality of incomes was at its best. Then Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister and there was Right to Buy, globalisation, sacralisation of the marketplace and an emphasis on private ownership. Large reductions were offered to people to buy their Council house with the aim of breaking up the Labour Party voting domains. Stock was transferred out of Council ownership and the Council couldn't use the money to build new Council properties. There was a clever rebranding and the name "social housing" came in. 1989 saw the demise of socialist language with which the Working Class could analyse. There was an emphasis on "choice". Fewer homes were available and consequently these are allocated on the basis of need, not the original aim of homes for all. Social housing became housing for the poor and needy. There were also divisions between those who had bought and improved their property and those who had bought but couldn't keep up, also those who couldn't afford to buy. As properties were rented out there was a rise in private landlords. Private rents increased.

Picking up the theme of the land, we see that the poor are pushed into a particular space. The hard-to-let estates are demonised. The Bible does not demonise the poor. There is now talk of "Benefit scroungers" and people who live on "Benefit Street" are "Chavs" and thieves. There is a concentration of poverty in a geographical space. The Becontree Estate didn't grow organically, it was planned and it has a name. It's not a patchwork like an inner-city area. The estate is often contained, often with just 1 road in and out. It's often isolated and often drab. As the industrial base of the country was ripped out and money went instead to the financial markets, the people on estates became de-skilled because there were no jobs. The Unions tried to stop this happening but they were attacked so there was nothing to give them a sense of solidarity.

Globalisation, financial deregulation and technological advances produced years of plenty. The Government moved from state provision to being the broker of partnerships. There were Regeneration initiatives, such as Heseltine's inner-city programme and the London Docklands Development Corporation. New housing got built at this time. There was the "wow" factor of big city development. In a white paper in 2000, Labour said 42% of housing stock is substandard and Local Authorities must bring them up to standard. But there was no money so control was handed to arms length management organisations. PFI was introduced. There was a huge increase in Consultants. Are homes for human beings or for profit? The Bible has a lot to say about this.

Becky Tunstall has done a study of hard-to-let estates over 20 years. She asked the question, "Are they better after regeneration?" She found that the estates are better, but it's not the same people. The poor have been moved out to sink estates. On the regenerated estate the density has been reduced and rents have gone up.

The crash of 2007/08 was all to do with housing. The housing bubble was a financial problem for the world. The Conservative Coalition government came into power and wanted large numbers of homes built and was prepared to fund these until the Spending Review cut the

budget by one third – but still the target for housebuilding remained. Cuts were made in funding for Housing Associations so they now raise funds by increasing rents, building to sell and by deals where stock is sold and leased back with interest being paid. There is a great deal of risk, which could result in another crash for the housing associations..

What does the Church say? Blessed are you poor Luke. (not blessed are the poor). The poor have Biblical insight. The crucifixion and resurrection need to be taken together. Jesus gives his body away. What does it mean for the Church to put the poor in the centre? Too often the Church expects middle class styles in areas which are not. There are tiny congregations – the enduring faithful. These people are a presence – yeast. What does it mean to have faith? There's often more faith in working class areas in terms of keeping going every day. We learn to pray more honestly. Lamentations is important – tell God what the problem is, why is it going on so long? At the end it doesn't say it's going to be OK. At the same time the poor can teach us about the Biblical phrase "Rejoice in the Lord always" – this is why "Eastenders" is not true to life, what's missing is the fun! There is a great deal of injustice and we can learn the importance of "koinonia" – "solidarity" not "fellowship" – in developing strategies to fight the injustice. We need to find new forms of church speaking the language of the pub on the Estate (those that are left), rather than middle-class areas. The Magnificat gives a voice to the poor – this is possible in new forms of church. The Gospel empowers people. Christ is the Victor. This gives us the freedom to try things and get things wrong – he is the victor, not us. "Do this in memory" – memory is important because it turns space into treasured places, like the St. Alban's building on the Becontree Estate.

Housing estates are distinctive places and they therefore need distinctive skills. Many theological Colleges don't know what the skills are. There is a need to create resources (like a Baptism liturgy) that are relevant for ordinary people, like those living on Estates.

Comments:

- o The recent riots that started with a shooting in Tottenham were actually caused by people feeling they lacked empowerment. Young people join gangs for the same reason – they feel gangs give them respect and security.
- o It's important to listen to people, this is empowering.
- o Estates were built inwards because it was thought that this would help to build community, but it can lead to isolation.
- o Maintenance of Estates is a big issue. The architect and builders of new housing hand over the housing and then leave with no thought for future maintenance.
- o Homes are being built, but in high price areas they can be an investment. There can be an interest in a continuing housing shortage because this keeps the prices high.
- o Community Land Trusts are a way to provide homes at genuinely affordable prices.
- o Priests working in tough situations, like Estates, need to be well resourced and looked after. It's helpful if they have a street presence or they could be vulnerable. They need prayerful support. They need to know that God is with them. Most of the things they do will fail, so they need God's sustaining to keep going. Parachuting in mission priests needs to be re-thought. It is possible to learn the skills that are needed in these areas. It's important to be prepared to learn from others.
- o The Church needs to have a burden for the poor. There is a lot the Church needs to learn from the Housing Estate.

*Since this time Bishop Laurie has published a new book with SCM which takes forward much of the research of which he shared just a little at this meeting and which develops it into a very challenging theology. **Blessed are the Poor? Urban Poverty and the Church. 2015.** <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Blessed-are-Poor-Poverty-Church/dp/033405365X>*