

GETTING STARTED

WHY THE CHURCH SHOULD PREVENT HOMELESSNESS, NOT JUST REACT TO IT



Churches have responded to homelessness for decades. We're well known for it – in fact, the majority of homelessness organisations have their roots somewhere in the church, even if they now identify as secular organisations. Local churches – and other faith groups – across the country are a key part of the country's response to homelessness and rough sleeping, more so than almost any other area of mission, perhaps save food banks. Even the Government have recognised this: a couple of years ago they appointed a Faith and Community Adviser within their Rough Sleeping Initiative team for the first time, and they've since expanded this work to employ another adviser. In short, homelessness should remain a focus for churches – we're called to do it and our passion and ability in this area are widely recognised.

However, since the first coronavirus lockdown, the homelessness landscape in this country has shifted dramatically. First, all communal night shelters were closed. Charities, churches and the Government rallied together to provide hotel rooms for 29,000 people who were homeless. Government advice is that communal accommodation should only be open if it's a last resort, so many organisations have moved to single-room accommodation, often at a single site.

This is an ideal time to reassess how we respond to homelessness. The needs of homeless people have changed, with a reduction in rough sleeping. Meanwhile, one of our main forms of response has become trickier.

From street outreach to soup kitchens and night shelters, historically our responses to homelessness have focused on reacting to the homelessness we already see, not necessarily addressing the root causes. This is understandable. Churches are eager to respond to those most in need – prevention seems less urgent. These models are tried and

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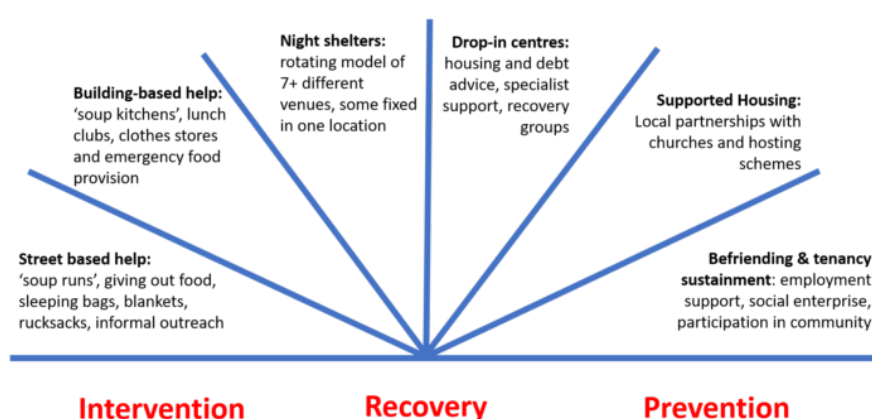


tested, and the national charity Housing Justice provides support to mitigate risks. With each church generally only hosting for one night a week in night shelters, it can be a manageable entry point.

However, churches have already started to reconsider this approach. They've argued that we should be moving towards a preventative model and away from crisis response. The current crisis may provide the impetus to accelerate this change of direction.

What does this mean in practice? Jon Kuhrt, one of the Faith and Community Advisers at the Ministry of Housing, Church and Local Government, uses this diagram to categorise different forms of homelessness response:

Spectrum of faith & community activity with homeless people



Used with the permission of MHCLG.

The Archbishop of Canterbury's Housing Commission's work has been focused on encouraging churches to move from the left-hand side of the spectrum towards the right-hand side: to prevent homelessness, not just react to it. The suggested approaches in these resources are all towards the right of this diagram. In the rest of this document, we'll explain why we have focused on these areas, from a practical and theological perspective.

PRACTICAL REASONS FOR PREVENTION

It's better that someone doesn't become homeless in the first place. This may seem obvious, but it's important. Homelessness is not always preventable, but where it is, we should dedicate ourselves to stopping people from facing the trauma of being without a home.

It reduces the need for crisis support. The result of prevention may not be obvious straight away – it may take years for its success to affect the numbers who need to turn to crisis support, and many other factors are at play. However, every person who is prevented from becoming homeless is one less person who need to be given a bed in a night shelter or provided with food. This is particularly noticeable with people who have previously experienced homelessness. Where they are treated purely through intervention-based responses, they can often fall back into homelessness. However, charities and churches have found that providing befriending and other respite support can

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end these 'cycles of homelessness'. This is crucial from a person perspective, but it's also a helpful use of resources – the sooner issues are dealt with, the easier it is to address them, leaving more time and money to help more people more effectively.

It makes it easier to work holistically. Homelessness is often thanks to problems coalescing. Street-based support in particular makes it difficult to deal with all of these, whereas delivering similar support from indoor venues can make it easier to collaborate with commissioned services and health specialists, for example, who can drop in and provide multiple services at once. Even indoor night shelters or food support can ignore these wider problems because they're often transactional in nature. We need to work holistically.

It provides dignity. Preventative approaches provide agency, working with someone to solve their issues rather than leaving people to rely on others. Again, even moving intervention indoors helps to move towards dignity, but going further helps.

It makes safety easier. There's always risk involved in any mission, and that's particularly the case with homelessness response. The more crisis-based the response, broadly speaking, the more risk. From food safety to issues with people's health, there are more potential issues which will arise from crisis response to homelessness. Crisis responses can also encourage people to remain in dangerous situations as they feel it's the only way that they'll receive help. By working to provide respite and prevention, the safety of volunteers and those you're helping is improved.

It exposes volunteers to the reality of people's lives. Intervention-based responses often don't give an accurate impression of the lives of people who are homeless nor of how homelessness happens. As churches it's really important that we understand why people end up in homelessness, so that we don't other those involved. Prevention helps with that.

THE BIBLE CALLS US TO DO THIS

In our Christian Scriptures, we find a strong mandate for empowerment and preventative approaches, and a call to rebalance our response away from crisis intervention towards addressing the deeper causes of homelessness.

Empowerment: In the gospels, Jesus's response to people in need was often to ask something along the lines of 'What do you want me to do for you?' (Mark 10:51). When they were healed, rather than taking credit for the miracle, he explained to people that 'Your faith has healed you' (Mark 5:34).

Similarly, in Galatians 6 we find two seemingly contradictory messages: verse 2 says 'Carry each other's burdens' yet the same chapter also contains: 'For each one should carry their own load.' We should help people with their difficult burdens, but in a way which enables them to carry their own load, otherwise we keep homeless people in patterns of dependency and a lack of agency.

Homeless people, their needs, their desires and their abilities, should be at the heart of our response. Where possible, we should enable them to take positive steps themselves, and where that's not possible, we should be guided by their desires: it's their journey.

Grace and truth: We need to show *grace* – kindness, acceptance and mercy – to those facing homelessness – but we also need to show *truth*. John's gospel describes Jesus as full of grace and truth together (John 1:18). We are challenged to follow this same pattern. Without this combination of grace-ful action and honest truth-telling, we can inadvertently encourage people to remain on the streets unnecessarily. We need to be honest about what is holding

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people back, even if that may be their own impulses and habits. Preventative responses to homelessness are based on treating the causes of homelessness rather than the symptoms, and options like befriending can lead to long-term relationships which can offer this blend of grace and truth.

The widow's offering and hiddenness: The immediacy, excitement and visibility of street outreach to the homeless is attractive. It meets an obvious need, the local community can see the work and it gives a sense of achievement from helping someone. However, the most visible action isn't always the most effective. Effective mission can be well hidden, for example in developing longer-term relationships of trust and walking with someone over a period of time. This isn't immediately visible – indeed, it's sometimes not measurable. However, the story of the widow's mite in Luke 21 teaches us not to judge the effect of our actions by how high profile they are. The widow's quiet offering showed that the most valuable service we offer is not always the most visible or spectacular.

HOW CAN WE BE PREVENTATIVE?

If we're trying to prevent homelessness, we need to understand what causes homelessness. We often remember the lack of resources – and this shouldn't be neglected – but there's more to it than that.

Relationship is key. There's more to homelessness than not having a house. Particularly when people are moved into accommodation after being homeless, loneliness and isolation are key reasons why people end up losing or leaving accommodation. Make sure people have the resources they need, but also help them to connect to them to befrienders, neighbours and their wider community.

Churches are communities. State-run services are unlikely to provide community. Churches are ready-made communities, and they can reach out to people in a way that others can't. Think about how you can intentionally expand your community to include those at risk of homelessness.

Give people a reason to rebuild their lives. Homelessness can be both a cause and result of loss of confidence. Helping people find a positive identity and understand how to use their skills can set them up emotionally and practically for long-term independent living. For more help on this, check out Groundswell's resources produced by people with lived experience of homelessness. They emphasise '[getting together and getting busy](#)'. This makes volunteers crucial, as they can help make change for the long-term rather than providing short-term relief (see Groundswell's '[Escape Plan](#)').

If it doesn't challenge you, it doesn't change you. As with grace and truth, we're called to provide both support and challenge. We shouldn't be encouraging negative behaviour, yet sometimes churches can fall into that trap. We should be neither harsh nor naïve – there's a sweet spot which moulds kindness and challenge. That means showing unconditional compassion and giving people another chance, while challenging and empowering them in a just way.