

Journey to Housing is a Spiritual One

*Remarks by Brice Balmer to the ISARC Religious Leaders' Forum, Queen's Park, Nov. 5/09
Director, Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition*

Introduction

The journey to provide affordable, safe housing is a spiritual process as is the work with other persons marginalized in our communities. Though some volunteers and leaders become discouraged and cynical, many see the image of God, justice, and creativity in their relationships and the work that is done together for community benefit. Spiritual journeys that travel with people who experience injustice, marginalization, and oppression are often dangerous. It is important that these relationships and this work be done in community, so that people walk together, sharing strength, vision, and hope.

My presentation is a story and a set of circumstances, which can only be changed by participation from everyone: residents, governments, faith communities, businesses, landlords, tenants, and civic organizations. The journey is in Waterloo Region's rural community, but could be other Ontario rural areas. Urban areas are usually the focus for affordable housing.

My questions are:

- *Can we open our imagination to new ways of addressing homelessness and unsafe housing?*
- *Can we think of stages of family life or particular circumstances where people need affordable housing? Campaign 2000 stated that most families became poor as a result of illness and/or separation of parents.*
- *Can we keep or enhance the dignity of the people who become tenants or need affordable housing?*
- *Can we work for justice with them in other issues that affect their lives?*

The issue of the low German speaking, rural families was presented at a meeting of Menno Home, a non-profit affordable housing developer in Waterloo Region, which has heard of the needs of these rural families from outreach workers in the townships. In the presentation I saw the tremendous needs and know that current policies and programs need to be adapted to begin to address the situations of large families on low incomes. Embedded in my theology is that all people are made with dignity and will contribute to the life of the community. However barriers are erected – or not taken down – and people are disempowered. These parents of larger families could not provide the social determinants of health for themselves and their children.

Low German speaking, large, rural families

Over the past forty years, many Canadians who moved to Mexico in the early 1900's returned. They left because Canada was imposing too many conditions on schools. These Canadians were Old Colony Mennonites, who wished to keep the German language. Mexico offered more freedom for them and their schools. They retained their dignity and religious practices.

Mexico's rural communities are no longer sustainable. Prices for agricultural goods are low and there have been draughts. Many of these low German speaking families have decided to return and can prove Canadian citizenship through parents or grandparents. Unfortunately, they have low education levels and their skills are agriculture, carpentry and mechanical. They have large families and few if any assets when they return. Their culture is very paternalistic and hierarchical with the bishop, church leaders, and then fathers/ men having power. They wish to live in rural areas.

These people are very industrious. Within a very short time after their arrival, the men find jobs, but the compensation is usually \$12 - 15/ hour. Even though the men work 45-48 hours per week; this income is inadequate to provide food, housing and very necessary transportation. Many of the women are willing to work, but need to learn English. ESL classes have been held in churches and community centres for many years – mostly women attend these classes, which also have childcare. Now evening ESL classes have begun for men and women with good attendance. These families want to improve their lives for parents and children.

Because many are so industrious – good Protestant work ethic – they move to better housing and even purchase their own homes within 10-20 years. But the current housing is unsafe and/or unaffordable. Health workers have found mold, drafts, inadequate furnaces, poor insulation, etc., which cause illness in the children.

Transportation is a problem since adults and older youth need to get to work and cannot walk from their addresses on the farm. Having a car or truck is costly, even if it's an older vehicle. Children leave school as soon as possible and begin working. All but 10% of the income from the employed children comes back to the family to supply necessities. It's interesting to note that Ontario does not enforce the driver's license restrictions for those who leave school before 18 on these rural families. Girls work in restaurants, groceries, small businesses, and service industries. Girls and women have formed a house cleaning business in Guelph and Waterloo Region.

They find housing in the rural areas but it is often in poor condition. Many houses – and they prefer single-family homes in rural areas, not even small towns – do not have adequate insulation; furnaces are old and take huge amounts of oil; some houses have mold. The community health centres have noticed that some children are ill from the housing environment.

Community health workers and CAP-C (Community Action Program for Children – federal) staff are deeply troubled by the health condition caused by poor housing.

These families occupy approximately 100 units of substandard housing in Waterloo and Wellington regions. There are another 100 units, which meet standards but the rent is too high, so the family has trouble purchasing food, clothing, and other essentials. There are 500-700 people living in substandard and/or unaffordable housing. Similar stories could be reported in Aylmer, Niagara, and Leamington areas, in all rural Ontario communities.

I have known about the influx of the Canadier into rural areas for many years but was not aware of the problems of larger rural families needing safe and affordable housing. Menno Homes brought this to the attention of our church members during the past year.

This situation parallels many situations where affordable housing is needed:

- The families cannot afford safe, appropriate housing for a particular period in their lives. Most do not need housing supports long term; they are industrious and children find jobs when they are youths. There would be some widows or adults with disability where long-term housing may be appropriate and necessary.
- There are resources within this community, which need to be tapped. Some have carpentry and other building skills. They also have tight bonds as members of churches and family groups. Yet they can be isolated. The affordable housing for which they qualify is in the cities and they need to live in rural areas, both for jobs and environmental comfort.
- They lack Canadian networks to find solutions to their housing problems.
- Landlords have these residences on their farms (or second & third farms), may want them for their children in the future, are not interested in renovating, and might bulldoze some poorer houses, using the land for other purposes.
- Tenants feel vulnerable and do not wish to confront or even ask the landlords for housing improvements. Tenants even instruct community health centre and CAP-C workers not to talk with landlords.
- These families wish to live in rural areas – even small towns are only partially acceptable. Are there particular housing forms which some tenant groups need or prefer? Perhaps some want housing for extended families, even the clan. Other groups may wish to have housing where they can care for parents and other older people because they do not wish to have them go to nursing homes. Perhaps some want to have their business on the first floor and living quarters on upper floors?
- There is not enough money in regional, provincial, and federal programs to provide for 200 families – especially large families needing 4 and 5 bedrooms. Will our communities even need these rural units in 10 years? Will families who are acculturated – where women are educated – become families with 1, 2 or 3 children in the next generation?

- The problem is not only housing, but also income security, education, health care, transportation, and many other issues. Many of these issues are systemic. But the critical issue is that the dignity of people is reduced because of inadequate resources.
- Finally, this group of people is very resilient. They have a community bond and are also very industrious. One of my concerns relating this story is that participants in this forum would think less of this rural people. They have left Mexico so they could have a better life. They love their children. They have values and dreams. They are resilient and need to change more and faster than they ever imagined as they work to fit into our highly educated, technological society, even in the rural areas.

While this situation is familiar to those of us in Waterloo Region, there are similar groups of people – some of whom have affordable housing needs – where we can think of different solutions. Perhaps some of them have particular concerns, which provide safety, even increase affordability, and yet our housing models may reflect only Western culture.

My work only touches the edges of rural affordable housing. I have dug into this issue out of concern for people who do not have social determinants of health for parents and children. Parents being unable to provide essentials for their families is a concern of justice and dignity. The compassion and frustration of the rural health workers link to my own spiritual journey. How do we tolerate these situations? How can faith groups and governments not use their resource for the most marginalized? Why is this poverty not a priority for our province and country?

Solution Sets

The initial meeting of Menno Home was upsetting. The need seemed overwhelming. I asked where might there be different solution sets.

The director of Menno Homes and I met with regional housing officials who knew the situation of the low German speaking, rural families. Menno Homes thought that Mennonite churches would have to finance any solution. The regional officials saw this as a wider community issue and assured Menno Homes that it qualified for federal-provincial monies to develop 4 to 8 units of rural or small town housing. Not all rural, large families with inadequate housing are Mennonites; therefore, the housing is open to all families.

The Menno Home proposal for 8 units was accepted. Four are under construction with government and Mennonite church monies as well as financing through loans. The Menno Home Board talked with the low German Mennonite leaders. They secured carpenters and roofers who came to Wellesley Township and framed the units on Labour Day weekend. They will come again. These workers were billeted by members of local congregations. The low German-

speaking families provided meals and snacks. The future tenants and their families wish to paint the units. Tenant families have been consulted on design, colour schemes, and other issues. In some ways, this is a modified Habitat for Humanity process with involvement of the community and families who will benefit as tenants. This involvement creates the dignity for tenants as well as develops relationships with volunteers, Menno Home Board, church members, and other tenants.

Menno Home is talking with some of the landlords about using WRAP funding to remodel / renovate the houses. I had hoped that we would have a contractor/ developer who would work for a year under voluntary service to assist landlords with the WRAP forms and other issues. With WRAP, there is the condition of keeping the unit at an affordable rent (Rent Geared to Income – RGI) for a significant number of years.

There may be a call to Habitat for Humanity to build or remodel homes, which can be owned.

Menno Homes and Mennonite Central Committee have established several evening ESL classes for parents and children. An important ingredient will be the family's ability to earn additional income. Literacy and numeracy are important factors – it's not only housing.

Local congregations are advocating for more outreach workers for these 200 families. How can we provide better health and nutrition education? Can the mothers know how to deal with health issues in the colder and more seasonal Canadian environment? Can more of the children be registered for JK, SK and pre-schools?

A profound justice concern is government regulation:

- Why are rural youth, who drop out of school, exempt from prohibition against earning a driver's license? Governments need to be sensitive to culture and religion, but perhaps there needs to be further analysis. Would these youth benefit from finishing high school? I believe their culture is resilient enough to adapt.
- There is some home schooling among this population. There is very little supervision from the province. These children again are dropping behind. How do we regulate home schooling? Are there no standards for student achievement?
- A caveat, which has been mentioned by some workers, is that some families hide what is happening in the family. Some will resist changes in passive aggressive ways. How can the region and province as well as the larger Mennonite community work with the leaders, so that change comes appropriately and for the best interest of the families and children? How do outreach health care workers have wisdom and support to deal with issues among some dysfunctional families?

There is much more that can and will be done. Housing is the entrée into a cluster of issues, which need to be addressed. Large, rural families are adapting; our region and society also needs to adapt. Can we open our vision to new solutions so all will be safely and appropriately housed?

Conclusion

Hearing the cry of the outreach workers at the Menno Home meeting led me further in my spiritual journey. In addition to supporting Menno Home and keeping some contact with the outreach workers, I saw the need to focus one aspect of the ISARC 2010 Social Audit on rural poverty. There were unique issues and listening was required.

As I walk in unity with others, there is an energy that comes even in the midst of sadness, failure, and frustration. I know of several people who found their involvement in affordable housing projects has given them new purpose and a centre for their vocation in retirement. Other people report the joy of working on affordable housing projects – both urban and rural. Finally there are the families who now have safe and affordable housing and see that they can adequately provide the essentials of life. Their hope and dignity keep projects moving forward.

The results of our struggle to provide enough affordable and safe housing are inadequate to meet the needs. Families still suffer. Funds are currently not available. But giving up is not the solution. As we grow together spiritually through these projects, we experience the creativity and energy for the next steps: providing housing, researching needs and programs, or seeking justice through advocacy. We move ahead supporting one another. We grow spiritually. The community is enriched.

Brice Balmer

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