

A HOUSING MISSION FOR CHRIST CHURCH: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What is the Housing Committee proposing that Christ Church do?

A: According to Affordable Housing Advocates, about 60,000 households in our community cannot afford decent housing as measured by federal housing affordability standards. Although they all are eligible on paper for housing assistance, about a third of them receive it.

According to annual counts conducted by local agencies, more than 7,000 people here experience homelessness for some period every year – and some advocates argue that the counts miss a lot of people.

Although there's some quibbling about counts, nobody who is familiar with our community's low-income housing needs believes the community has responded adequately to those needs.

We are proposing that the church consider an act of moral leadership: Launching a housing mission that will tackle a small part of the problem and -- more importantly -- will inspire others to join us in working for solutions to the low-income housing shortage.

Q: What would happen after that?

If the sense of the parish is that we should move forward, the committee proposes that the Vestry approve a partnership with National Church Residences to develop a housing project – with a well-articulated funding package – that Christ Church and others in the community can support. Another step would be fleshing out a non-profit board to work with NCR.

Q: What is NCR?

A: This Columbus-based organization was started by four Presbyterian churches in 1964 to develop housing for senior citizens. It has grown into a highly respected company that continues to develop senior housing but that also has moved into low income housing. It now has operations around the country.

To learn more about NCR, go to its web site at www.ncr.org. A senior NCR executive will be at a parish gathering May 2 to discuss housing.

Q: Why this mission and not something else?

A: We hear that question often. What bothers us about it is the “and not something else” part of it.

Although Christ Church can’t do everything, we believe it is capable of much. Certainly the church has deep financial resources, but its greatest resource by far is its treasure trove of human talent. This is a congregation that is capable of great feats.

In fact, another study committee is looking at a mission for at-risk children, and yet another one is investigating possibilities for a Native Americans mission. This church can – and should – always be thinking that broadly about developing meaningful missions that have significant impact.

As for the “why this mission” part of the question, we see housing as a critical component in the fight to reduce poverty and strengthen low-income families. Our research shows that the most efficient and significant benefit that society can provide to people in poverty is housing. Housing programs produce better health, better success in treatment programs, less incarceration and more employment.

Here is the testimony of Stephanie Dunlap, who until recently ran a work preparedness program at Literacy West: “What I do every day is help people earn a GED, prepare for job interviews and get their first full-time jobs – I do that when they are sleeping in their cars, or on friends’ couches or somewhere else. When they don’t have an address for mail delivery and don’t even know where they’ll be sleeping tonight.” Her agency’s success rate is about 65%. Think what it could be if clients had stable roofs over their heads.

Lack of housing, or constant worry about housing, tears families apart and fuels the vicious cycle of poverty. Our Plumb Line volunteers and 5000 Club volunteers see that every week.

Q: What is the Housing Committee, and who is on it?

A: The Housing Committee is a sub-committee of Mission and Outreach. It has reported regularly to Mission and Outreach and to the Vestry. The committee chair is Michael Bootes. Other members are David Eschenbach, Don Lenz, Steve Gerdson, Mark Mahoney, Mike Phillips, Dick Schmidt and Mark Sackett. Canon Joanna Leiserson is the committee’s staff liaison. Elizabeth Brown was very helpful in getting the committee started and in introducing its members to the top housing experts in the city. Mission and Outreach Chair Tom Kent has stayed in close touch with the committee’s work.

The committee started two years ago. Over time, it moved from an open-ended committee to a more focused task force consisting of the long-term members who had been involved in the research all along and who would be most able to make an informed, deliberative and clear recommendation.

Q: What kind of housing does the committee think the church should create?

A: The community leaders who wrote “Homeless to Homes” – a detailed assessment of housing needs in the Cincinnati area – recommended that more than 1,000 units of “permanent supportive housing” be developed. This is housing that sits on the continuum of care between emergency shelters and subsidized family housing. We think it is the biggest unmet housing need in our community -- and that’s where we recommend the church focus. (You can see the full report at <http://www.cincinnatioc.org/hth.aspx>)

Q: What is “permanent supportive housing?”

A: It’s called “permanent” because it’s not transitional, or temporary. People can live in it as long as they need or want to. It’s called “supportive” because housing management staff includes case workers who can help residents find help for problems that contribute to their poverty. Typically, it consists of small, clean, safe studio apartments for single people – although there are variations for families.

It’s called “supportive” because the building staff includes case workers who help residents with the issues that contribute to their poverty. The case workers do not typically run programs on site. They do make referrals, facilitate attendance in programs and monitor progress.

Q: How would such a project be financed, and where would the money come from? How much would it cost Christ Church?

A: Financing for building such projects is complex and involves a variety of federal and state sources – including tax credit financing. Private fund-raising is important, too. A pretty good rule of thumb is that a dollar of seed money from Christ Church should be able to bring in 10 more dollars from other sources.

The federal role in supplying housing vouchers to low-income people is an important part of how operating costs are met. And, of course, residents generally have some income and can contribute to revenue, as well.

The church spends a bit more than \$500,000 a year on mission and outreach, not counting its contributions to the diocese. Some of that funds the church’s own missions, but most of it is given away in small amounts to non-profits all over the city. This mission would be funded as part of that budget.

Clearly, a thought that underlies the committee's proposal is that the church should become more focused in its mission endeavors, seeking to do a few very important things very well for real impact in the community.

And by the way, the church's annual mission and outreach spending represents about 15% of its annual budget. Many Episcopal churches spend a higher percentage on outreach, and some strive for a much higher percentage.

Q: What is the legal liability to Christ Church?

A: We think an important strategy for protecting the church is to form a non-profit corporation that would develop housing programs. Its board would include Christ Church representatives but also leading citizens from many sectors of the community. We've sounded out a few very well-known community people and believe a top-quality board can be recruited.

This is a method with a long history. The church people who got together to form Children's Hospital took a similar approach.

The committee has registered a non-profit corporation, called Faith Housing Cincinnati. Work on tax-exempt status has not yet started.

Q: Who would be on the board of directors of the non-profit, and how much say would the church have?

A: We're proposing that the Vestry appoint the Christ Church representatives and that they make up at least a third of the board.

Keep in mind that the church would maintain control over its own purse strings. Any money spent on the housing mission would have to be approved by the Vestry, as well as being vetted by the Finance Committee.

Q: What's this rumor I've heard about a million-dollar housing fund taken from the endowment?

A: A lot of ideas got tossed around when we were trying to figure out how to finance a housing mission, and that was one. Let's put it this way: Someone ran it up the flagpole -- but nobody saluted.

Q: Missions come and missions go as volunteers get tired or move on. How could we expect that this one would have any staying power?

A: That's another reason why we believe a non-profit is essential. We also think the board's by-laws should include term limits. Board members get tired, too, if they stay on too long.

Q: I've also heard a rumor that some members of the committee would somehow profit from this project. What about it?

A: We've heard that one, too. It's not true.

Everyone who has participated in the committee has donated time with no expectation of any contractual involvement. In fact, some committee members who have given generously of their highly relevant skills have been required by their professional standards to take great care in avoiding any suggestion of conflict

Q: Why haven't you come to the church with a specific project proposal: place, name, size, budget, business plan, etc.?

A: Because we understand our limitations. A lot of business and professional skills are represented on the committee, but low-income housing is complex and requires very specific expertise. So what we are proposing to the church is that we partner with a highly respected developer of low-income housing – one that has its roots in the faith community. There are several of those, but we have been especially impressed by National Church Residences.

One thing we have learned is that Christ Church must be clear in advance about the limits of its financial participation before any potential partner will extend the effort to assemble the remaining pieces of a project's financing, development plan and operational plan. NCR understands our limits but appreciates everything else we bring to the table, including our ability to be moral leaders in the community.

Q: What will happen at this gathering? Is it an official meeting of the church corporation?

A: It's not an official meeting, but it is an important turning point. The Housing Committee, the Mission and Outreach Board and the Vestry all need to know if the parish is prepared to move forward into this challenging endeavor. People at the meeting will hear a brief presentation from the committee about what it's done so far. Then Michelle Norris, a vice president with NCR, will introduce herself and her organization and discuss how housing projects are created and managed. There will be a question and answer period facilitated by Canon John Johanssen. And then we have designed a simple exercise that will make it clear what people at the gathering think about moving forward.

The gathering will be at 11:30 am, after the 10 am service on May 2, in the Undercroft. It will last about one hour.

Q: I've heard that you have looked into specific projects like the Dennison Hotel, the Samuel Bell Home and the Anna Louise Inn. Where do those stand?

A: The Dennison is under option to the public-private development corporation 3CDC, which plans to redevelop it as permanent supportive housing. We talked to 3CDC about a potential partnership but concluded that it would be wrong for the church to participate because this project is intimately linked to the redevelopment of the low-income Metropole Apartments as a boutique hotel. We think Christ Church should help increase the number of low-income units in the urban core, not help decrease the number.

The Samuel Bell Home, the former Cincinnati Association for the Blind congregate living facility on Elm Street, has been proposed as the site of transitional housing for recently released felons. It's a political hot button, and we don't know how that will play out. The Bell home was designed to house people who need help, and we think it would be a shame if the community lost this asset for helping people. We're monitoring the situation.

The Anna Louise Inn needs millions of dollars worth of work to replace all its mechanical systems, repair water damage from a roof that leaked for years before it was repaired and open up the tiny living quarters to make a more welcoming home for the women who live there. Cincinnati Union Bethel has engaged Model Management to apply for federal funding and oversee renovations. It's possible that an appropriate way might emerge for the church to assist in preserving this grand old home for women of modest means. The committee has had ongoing conversations with CUB and will stay in contact.

Q: If this mission is going to be run by a separate board, isn't that just another form of outsourcing? How can Christ Church members be involved in reaching out to the spiritual and other needs of the residents?

A: We think it's essential that our members have opportunities to be involved. Christian Formation and Outreach come together when a church member touches the life of a person who needs help and fulfills Jesus' commandment: "If you love me, feed my sheep." It is our Gospel mandate, and it is our blessing, to do so.

And you know what? With plenty of representatives on the board and our seed money helping make things happen, we should have no problem coming up with ways to make sure our members can be intimately involved.