

Article

'Housing' as Christian Social Practice in African Cities: Centering the Urban Majority Theologically

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Abstract: Decent, affordable housing and secure housing tenure remain elusive for Africa's urban majority. The urban majority is expected to live in self-help housing, reflected in the fact that 62% of African urban dwellers live in urban informal settlements. The inability to access safe, decent, and secure housing, and the reality that Africa's urban majority is perpetually precarious, have a severe impact on Africa's urban households and the well-being of individuals, families, and neighborhoods. This article articulates housing as a critical and urgent Christian social practice in African cities—an extension of the church's pastoral and missional concern. It considers housing both as a product and a process: people need housing to live secure lives; yet, the process of housing is as critical as the outcome. It then proposes housing, as a Christian social practice, being engaged in (i) supporting precarious households; (ii) preventing homelessness; (iii) creating housing; (iv) supporting rights-based land and housing movements; and (v) centering housing pastorally–liturgically. The article grounds itself in Jean-Marc Ela's insistence on God's presence 'in the hut of a mother whose granary is empty' and in Letty Russell's 'household of freedom'.

Keywords: African urbanisation; housing; precarious households; preventing homelessness; rights-based land; housing movements



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The urban majority in African cities often remains marginalized—socio-politically, economically, and theologically. This majority lives in urban slums, informal settlements, and various other forms of housing precariousness. Dominant urban planning and design practices have failed the urban majority, and unless they are politically and theologically centered, we cannot envision any form of viable African urban future.

Today, 62% of African urban dwellers live in informal housing (Parnell and Pieterse 2014). Kecia Rust (2019) says this is 'in part a consequence of income, but more significantly one of an inefficient housing ecosystem in which neither price nor scale is achieved'.

The housing gap in African cities today is more than 51 million, whilst 40,000 new people move into African cities every month (Habitat for Humanity 2022). This is not just a question of housing, though. Gavin (2020) writes:

The looming menace of major housing shortfalls in many African cities threatens urban health and safety. Infectious diseases are especially hard to contain in densely populated, informal settlements where residents may not have access to clean water, sanitation, adequate ventilation, and emergency health care when they become sick.

The housing crisis is also a public health crisis, and 'the prospect of persistent health crises in Africa's growing cities is a serious challenge for the future' (Gavin 2020). At the same time, it is a challenge of water, sanitation, economic livelihoods, and social stability. Adding to that, Gavin (2020) highlights the challenges of climate change and rising sea levels for Africa's coastal cities' as a considerable concern in 'planning for future housing needs'.

Whereas one can focus on housing and informal settlement upgrading in a technical sense or as a requirement for economic growth, Uduku et al. (2022) consider 'housing as

central to protecting human rights and to improving the well-being of low-income urban citizens'. They consider housing holistically as a basic human right, as a social good that should play an integral part 'in holistic sustainable urban development processes, and in enhancing well-being, particularly for the poor and lower-middle-income residents of Africa's rapidly growing cities' (Uduku et al. 2022).

Sustainable Development Goal 11 speaks of sustainable cities and communities, which are perpetually unattainable if the housing challenge of African cities is not overcome. It is curious that access to decent housing is not an explicit, stand-alone SDG but that it is clumped under SDG 11. Addressing housing decisively could help to address any number of the other SDGs.

Reading SDG 11 together with The New Urban Agenda of Habitat III (2016), with its primary goal of addressing spatial inequalities, and The African Union Commission's (n.d.) Agenda 2063, make one realize that the work of African politicians, change-makers, and housing agents is quite clear yet daunting—to *build sustainable cities and communities that will overcome spatial inequalities and ensure decent, affordable housing to all their inhabitants*. I submit that this is also a profoundly theological mandate—it is about all God's people, God's Earth, and the shalom of God's cities.

In adopting Agenda 2063, The African Union has outlined 20 specific goals, each with its own priorities (The African Union Commission n.d.). The very first goal is to ensure a 'high standard of living, quality of life and well-being of citizens'. This goal is accompanied by four priorities, one being 'modern, affordable and liveable habitats and quality basic services'. Considering the current state of Africa's urban dwellers, attaining this priority by 2063 seems daunting, yet, could there be a collective imagination for realizing it? This goal and priority give expression to the vision of SDG 11, which is to 'make cities and human settlements safe, resilient and sustainable'.

Yet, this remains a critical challenge and question in most urban contexts on the continent. How do we imagine such 'safe, resilient and sustainable' urban settlements in a current context where 62% of urban dwellings are informal? Should one do away with informal settlements or ensure their gradual, in situ upgrading and full legal integration into the city? These are localized debates and policy considerations across the continent.

Recent shifts in urban policy recognize that urban informal settlements cannot simply be wished away but should be integrated as part of solutions for city-making. Marie Huchzermeyer (2011) offered one of the most convincing discourses in this regard in her work, *Cities with slums*. She argues that most dominant policies on informal settlements in Africa consider 'cities without slums'. Instead, she argues for cities that will consider informal settlements as part of the solution for African urban futures, which would then require legal rights for urban dwellers residing in such settlements, and for mechanisms to support informal settlement upgrading and infrastructure development, where people are. In some cases, this should be discouraged when the risks of flooding and other natural factors mitigate against sensible integration. But viable alternatives should then be offered to slum or informal settlement dwellers.

The challenge is for urban development and regeneration—whether of slums, informal settlements, or inner city areas—that will prevent social displacement as much as possible and rather work towards more innovative and radical forms of social inclusion.

The way in which the urban poor often locates themselves within the vicinity of socio-economic opportunity should provide clues as to the future of African cities. Instead of displacing such settlements, the proximity of the urban poor to socio-economic opportunity should be legitimized and formalized. Where the urban poor locate themselves, instead of being criminalized, might need to be taken as cues for how cities should be designed.

Instead of the capitalist city reproducing itself repeatedly as an 'inequalities-generating machine' (Soja 2000, p. 107; Harvey 1978), displacing the 'waste of capital' (Bauman 2004, p. 67)—which are those seen as not contributing formally to the economic well-being of the city—forms of housing must be found that could subvert dominant patterns of city-making.

Unless we become innovative and open to new urban forms in the future, Africa's urban revolution might be one not of promise but of peril.

1. Housing in African Cities as a Theological Challenge: Between God's Presence in 'Huts with Empty Granaries' and God's 'Household of Freedom'

If the urban majority is marginalized from urban planning and design processes, and if 62% of Africa's urban dwellers live informally, and if there is a backlog of 51 million housing units on the continent, it seems critical not only to center the urban majority politically but also theologically.

Practicing a preferential option for the poor in African cities will be to acknowledge the challenges of the urban majority who live precariously on a daily basis. And once acknowledged, it would require theologians, ecclesial leaders, and people of faith to immerse ourselves completely into urban poor contexts; to listen, analyze and gain depths of understanding; to grapple with Africa's urban housing challenges; to discover the institutions and movements seeking to make a change and those that seem to provide obstacles; and, then, to discern a theological agenda in response.

A theological disconnect from the urban majority also means a theological disconnect from their housing concerns. Yet, housing encompasses and addresses all that we are concerned with in terms of conditions for human dignity, freedom, and flourishing. Without decent housing, people will struggle to put down roots and live well.

Theological education in the leading African institutions is often removed from the realities of urban slums and informal settlements, engaging in a theological discourse that is, if not overtly anti-urban, not contributing to concrete and measurable urban interventions that are liberative or reconstructionist. Instead, our theological education often contributes to a perpetuation of the status quo and a continuation of imperial theologies that keep the comfortable comfortable and the afflicted afflicted.

If James Cone (1977) wrote,

To sing about freedom and to pray for its coming, is not enough. Freedom must be actualized in history by oppressed peoples who accept the intellectual challenge to analyze the world for the purpose of changing it,

This call certainly applies to those who find themselves without land and housing rights and complementary access to basic necessities for dignified living in sub-standard urban settlements across the continent.

Our theological education might pontificate about the meaning of freedom from a systematic theological or ethical perspective and might develop moving liturgies that speak of justice for the poor. But, unless those who are most affected rise up to resist their perpetual exclusion from the city, and unless those who engage in the theological formation of students and future ecclesial leaders find concrete ways to be in solidarity with the urban majority, freedom will remain a delusion, and praying for it like a wish shared with the fairy godmother.

Elsewhere, I explored the idea of theological education in African cities, cultivating an imaginary of flourishing African cities (De Beer 2022).

Instead of viewing flourishing as a product of development or growth, here it is proposed as an active process with signposts along the way, assessing the well-being of people, places and communities, and furthering a sense of communal well-being and radically reduced levels of precarity, through mediating access to multiple freedoms and sources of power, in a liberationist sense.

Equipping future theologians and ministers, and the church at large, to engage issues of housing security in precarious urban spaces across the continent will contribute to mediating 'access to multiple freedoms and sources of power'.

Housing as a Christian social practice is not only a call to the church getting itself engaged in the construction of housing, or the prevention of homelessness, but it is also, and maybe especially, the church finding ways to be in creative solidarity with people's

organizations and movements that organize and build campaigns to ensure decent housing for all is achieved.

The lack of holistic missional immersion in urban slums and informal settlements, which includes concerning itself with the very housing conditions of those we claim to care for pastorally, is often the result of theological education that failed or of other-worldly theological paradigms that are unable to mediate God's inclusive household on Earth. Failed theological education leaves precarious communities to their own devices instead of demonstrating solidarity expressed in social, housing, and other forms of justice.

Considering the far east of the Mamelodi township in my city, thousands of people live on land they have occupied over the past 20–25 years, initially without title deeds or access to any amenities. Over time, some of the settlements in this region have been formalized, and infrastructure was invested. Others have found themselves removed from the city center as far back as 2002,¹ and, 20 years later, the promises that were made by politicians then were still not fulfilled. Moreover, these communities belong to the geographical fringes of the city, completely contrary to spatial redress and perpetuating the apartheid city form.

The churches that were planted in these settlements were mostly Pentecostal, Charismatic, or African-initiated churches. Well-resourced mainstream denominations struggle to create a presence in new settlements² and often find it impossible to adapt or survive in changing urban neighborhoods. Yet, these churches often possess the best physical infrastructure, resourceful members, and financial capacity to contribute tangibly to local urban transformation.³ Their absence or departure denies local communities the gifts they have been bestowed with. Pentecostal, Charismatic, and African Initiated Churches, whilst being faithfully present, are often a-political and generally do not consider housing a spiritual concern. In informal settlements, they also tend to be resource-poor. Supporting such faithfully present churches and considering developing more holistic ministry models—with an understanding of good news as safe, secure, and affordable dwellings for people to live in—should become an objective of theological schools across the continent. It is, namely, an expression of our pastoral concern for the people and places of the city.

1.1. *Theology from 'Huts with Empty Granaries'*

Jean-Marc Éla (Iheanacho 2021) lamented the church for holding on to an expression of faith that was apathetic towards the challenges of African people, particularly those living in poor, rural communities. Having located himself in proximity to rural villagers, where his theology was shaped, he used the metaphor of huts with empty granaries, recognizing the challenge of food security and self-sufficiency. Translated into African cities, the same could be lamented, namely, the church's general absence from the greatest challenges that urban dwellers face, going hungry in small, wet shacks whilst within walking distance to magnificent shopping malls.

It is precisely in such places—where 'ordinary Africans . . . bear the brunt of misrule and underdevelopment' (Guyer 2020)—that we should practice theology, and 'where authentic liberation ought to begin'. Éla (1988) speaks of the 'insufficiencies and limits' of the African church, having been 'reduced to purely religious activities, having no impact on social, economic, political and cultural realities' (Éla 2019, p. 91).

Iheanacho (2021), in reflecting on Éla's metaphor of the 'hut and empty granaries', insists that 'an active faith must translate into the rejection of any system—whether political, economic, religious, cultural or social—that might produce empty granaries'. Whereas Éla focused on the question of hunger and food security in this image, he calls for an emphasis, also on precarious housing. Active faith will reject any system that produces and sustains forms of housing that mete out inhumane conditions and exploit the poor.

The question Éla really poses, according to Iheanacho (2021), is 'how would it be possible to ensure that those who dine and commune with the Lord Jesus Christ in the eucharist meal, are not left to die in the deadly harvesting hand of famine because the granaries in their village huts were empty'. Applied to Africa's urban housing challenge, one could rephrase the question, asking, 'How is it possible to ensure that those who dine

and commune with the Lord Jesus Christ in the eucharist meal are not left to die without housing, or to become deadly ill as a result of sub-standard housing?’ But, should we also ask, ‘How would it be possible to ensure that those who dine and commune with the Lord Jesus Christ in the eucharist meal are not left untouched by the dire conditions their un-housed sisters and brothers face on a daily basis?’ Both Africa’s poor Christians and elite believers need to engage with the challenge of housing, conscientized by their faith, empowered by the eucharist, and emboldened by their mutual solidarity.

Iheanacho (2021) argues, in reflecting upon Éla, that ‘theologies in the African context... must put at the center of focus the human conditions of the African peoples’. These conditions include their cry for simple, decent housing, with secure tenure, in proximity to the city’s resources. Iheanacho (2021) continues to say that ‘the daily lives of poor and exploited Africans must remain imperative both for the church and theologians. The latter group is called to theologize from the concreteness of the African condition, one that both impoverishes and leaves millions of Africans in despair’. Or, as Éla (2019, pp. 180, 182) held, ‘Theology becomes relevant in the African context if it remains within earshot and if it emerges from the villages and shanty-towns of Africa where people eke out a living’ (Iheanacho 2021).

For Éla (1996, pp. 132, 137), the greatest challenge of African Christianity was on ‘how to bridge the gap between the Christian faith and liberation of the poor’, since it was ‘not possible to speak of the Christian faith without speaking of liberation’ (Iheanacho 2021). The pastoral ministry of the church should not be found only in ‘palliatives’ but in ‘tangible actions’ of liberation that will change the conditions of the poor.

For an urban theology connected to African urban realities, the housing plight of the urban poor needs to be centered not through palliatives but through tangible, liberating actions of resistance, reconstruction, and reclamation.

1.2. Household of Freedom

Feminist theologian Letty Russell (1987), in *Household of freedom: Authority in feminist theology*, explores a subversion of dominant, historical models of authority in the church and offers a compelling, alternative vision for considering God’s kingdom, no longer being a slave of the empire but a household of freedom.

She contrasts the Greek *oikos* (household) and *polis* (city), in which the *oikos* was considered to be the individual household, whilst *polis* was the bigger realm where systems were shaped and policies made. She, however, speaks of this as a false dualism and suggests that both *oikos* and *polis* ‘are linked together in God’s *oikos* or world house’ (Russell 1987, p. 25). No longer should *polis* subdue *oikos*, but we should take as our starting point a theological understanding of *oikonomia*, ‘or householding of the whole earth’ understanding ‘authority in both the private and the public realms as a participation in God’s householding and partnering activity’ (Russell 1987, p. 26). Much of the church has been co-opted by the dictates of the market and the whims of empire to the extent that we are hardly able to extract ourselves from it. The private household (*oikos*) is subdued by the dictates of the *polis*. We have been overcome by a household of bondage whilst we are called to practice a household of freedom.

The task of the church in African cities, as participants in God’s householding and partnering activity, would include a critical socio-ecclesial analysis to see where and how the household of bondage is at work in the sphere of African urban housing and where glimpses of freedom can be traced. Without a broader, radically inclusive vision of the *polis* in Africa as an expression of God’s *oikos*, greed and bad power will continue to deny the urban majority their full right to the city.

Russell (1987, pp. 63–67) then speaks of ‘house revolutionaries’ who, like Jesus, is hell-bent on exorcising temple and public spaces from greed and exclusion. Theirs was not to cancel the ‘house of authority’ but to build a new household in which the love and freedom of God will reign whilst subverting or trying to transform the household of

authority. The household of freedom is also eschatological as it imagines the city how it should be.

The journey between the household of bondage and the household of freedom seems to remain a journey. On this journey, concrete signs of dismantling the household of bondage and ushering in signs of God's new household are required. This should be explored not only in abstract spiritual terms but in the realities of urban housing and livelihoods all across Africa. The dictates of the *polis* should not be allowed to impact detrimentally on the *oikos* or to prevent large numbers of African urban dwellers from ever occupying dwellings that are safe, secure, healthy, and affordable. Urban households of freedom in African cities will include access to safe, secure, and affordable housing that is healthy and well-located. This will allow even resource-poor communities to participate in flourishing urban life.

1.3. Land and Housing as Central Categories in Constructing African Urban Theologies

The obstacle to embracing housing as a Christian social practice is often a theological one. Not only is there a dearth of theologies that engage constructively-creatively with African cities (De Beer 2023), but very few theologians on the continent have helped us to outline constructive theologies of land and housing beyond systematic theological or philosophical rhetoric that articulates the challenges of land. Even fewer theologians have busied themselves actively, in African cities, with urban land.

Embracing housing as a Christian social practice should stem from well-articulated, critical, and constructive African urban theologies that center on the urban majority living in urban slums, informal settlements, and other forms of precarious housing. This should then go beyond an analysis of their precarious conditions to carve out—in collaboration with a range of disciplines, activists, practitioners, and urban dwellers—recommendations, practices, and processes that will see the church as an active partner in building safe and sustainable urban settlements on the African continent: indeed, practicing theology from 'huts with empty granaries' and 'shacks with empty shelves', whilst becoming 'house revolutionaries' modeling new households of urban freedom.

2. Embracing Housing as Christian Social Practice: A Pastoral and Missional Concern

First, what is asserted here is the importance of embracing housing as a Christian social practice—a form of diaconate that encompasses many other dimensions of the church's service; and a socio-political response that addresses human and communal well-being rather comprehensively. Sub-standard housing, insecure tenure, or homelessness all affect people's psychological, health, and educational well-being.

Housing is not just about creating products, but the processes of creating housing are as important in acknowledging the agency of urban dwellers and in fostering community ownership, partnership, and sustainability.

With reference to informal settlement upgrading, Georgiadou and Loggia (2021, p. 92) write the following:

upgrading is not just housing delivery but also consideration and development of the social fabric, such as access to job opportunities, health facilities, schools and public transport.

The process of housing provision should ideally form part of a more holistic community development approach that includes all the other elements of healthy and sustainable human settlements. Georgiadou and Loggia (2021, p. 92) argue that local governments (eThekweni municipality in her case study) focus on being a 'housing provider, rather than being an enabler'. A housing provider delivers a housing product, often in isolation from enabling the other conditions for healthy human settlements. In this regard, the church can play an enormous role: to enable holistic conditions for well-being whilst engaging housing as part of such a comprehensive strategy.

Georgiadou and Loggia (2021, p. 89) then refer to the key principles for informal settlement upgrading that were articulated by the Housing Development Agency (HAD) (2015) in South Africa, which include the following:

- A city-wide approach inclusive of all informal settlements;
- Incremental improvements tailored to different neighborhoods;
- In situ upgrading versus relocation;
- Partnership-based interventions instead of state-driven alone;
- Participatory, community-driven, and solution-based with co-management from housing beneficiaries;
- Programmatic, contextual, and area-based;
- Statutorily and regulatorily flexible in working with instead of against informality.

City-wide ecumenical movements and local congregations, clusters of congregations, or faith-based organizations are uniquely positioned to support these key principles, not only as guidelines for housing development and informal settlement upgrading in South Africa but on the entire continent.

The church could facilitate partnerships and local community-driven participation, supporting existing or new initiatives through legal, technical, or financial resources and calling the government to account to resist displacement and ensure physical, social, and economic integration.

Second, locating housing as a Christian social practice should be achieved both inside the church and in various other publics. The church will do well to interrogate its own land and housing practices and relationship to property as it relates to the urban majority. It will also do well to consider its own resources in terms of land, human resources and experience, and histories in fostering ministries of housing. But since housing should not be seen as a commodity that can be bought by some but as a public good, it is important that the church also engages in public processes where housing futures and the struggles of local urban neighborhoods are contemplated. This could be in relationship with housing organizations, rights-based lawyers, local and provincial governments, urban think tanks, and local communities living precariously or lacking access to decent housing. It has to be acknowledged that contexts in cities across Africa differ vastly from each other, and local discernment of the most appropriate faith-based engagement with housing is, therefore, critical.

In an interview by Onyekachi [Wambu \(2021\)](#), Oumar Sylla, the African Regional Director for UN-Habitat, spoke of the overwhelming housing challenge facing African cities, stating the critical necessity for partnerships:

This is why we believe that partnership working is the way forward. This involves the four Ps—public, private and people partnership—where communities are able to invest in their housing system as well.

African communities and African people remain inherently religious. The role religious organizations in general and churches and faith-based organizations specifically can play in different publics, to affect the housing outcomes of the urban poor, and to advocate for housing justice, should not be underestimated.

Third, housing as Christian social practice could have different faces, depending on the context and on those who are involved. Whatever the face of our housing intervention, it should be deliberately nurtured to assert life and break cycles of death and exclusion.

I outline five possible focal areas, without suggesting it as exhaustive: (i) supporting precarious households; (ii) preventing homelessness; (iii) creating housing; (iv) supporting rights-based land and housing movements; and (v) centering housing pastorally—liturgically.

2.1. Supporting Precarious Households

This is an important pastoral imperative. In urban slums and informal settlements across the continent, people struggle to make ends meet. People often have tentative land rights, or the condition of their housing is such that it affects their health and well-being in considerable ways. A local church can start by attending to church members who live in particularly precarious housing conditions by considering upgrading the unit; providing

support in obtaining land rights; or providing crisis support in the case of flooding, fire, or related disaster.

Some local congregations might have all their members come from harsh housing conditions, in which case they would need to develop a sensitive process of discernment for how they will provide support that is fair and sustainable; how to mobilize local church-based movements in supporting people living precariously; or how to work with social movements, human rights organizations, and municipal authorities to ensure the protection of people's basic housing rights.

The Mamelodi Baptist Church in the City of Tshwane (Pretoria) provides crisis housing to flood victims of informal settlements in their proximity. The Elim Full Gospel Church, in the same city, provides housing support to university students who are homeless. These contexts are vastly different, yet the responses from churches are tailored to the unique situations.

2.2. Preventing Homelessness

One of the most critical interventions in which the local church could play a role is to prevent homelessness as best we can. This might mean supporting a family for a couple of months with rent money until such time that they are able to pay for themselves again. Or assisting them in finding a suitable alternative to their current housing. Or engaging landlords through negotiation and mediation to assess if there could be an alternative to eviction. In the case of illegal evictions, the church should consider supporting a tenant with legal action to prevent actions that will compromise their safety and dignity. The church could also open up spaces in their own properties or elsewhere as emergency or temporary shelters to prevent homelessness. During COVID-19, many churches across the world, but also in African cities, have opened their doors to people who are homeless to find safe shelter. In the City of Tshwane, at least 10 temporary shelters were opened by local churches and faith-based organizations during this time, and many other shelters and temporary facilities have been supported by local churches and individuals of faith.

Instead of engaging homelessness only as a ministry of relief, local churches and faith-based organizations who are already involved should consider reflecting more critically on their own actions to ask how ministries with homeless individuals could break cycles of poverty and end homelessness sustainably.

2.3. Creating Housing

In many contexts, the reality is that there are almost no proactive housing developments in urban poor neighborhoods. People rely on self-built housing in informal settlements, with or without land rights. Upgrading informal settlements often takes years to accomplish, and more often than not, the threat of eviction or displacement to make place for more 'attractive' economic ventures is real.

It therefore becomes a challenge for the church to consider not only supporting precarious families in their housing or preventing homelessness but also engaging in creating housing. Churches with middle-income members often have the expertise of housing and development professionals among members, earning a living from engaging in property businesses. Some churches also own land and property that are often not optimally utilized. Matching the housing need and church resources could become a powerful intervention in a city's housing landscape.

This could take the form of assisting informal settlement developers as they engage in in situ development of their own housing. It could take the form of building individual houses that will be owned by the beneficiaries, as was done for many years by Habitat for Humanity. It could also take the form of developing larger housing schemes, whether for rental or ownership, to assist people in accessing affordable, decent housing in proximity to social and other opportunities.

Examples of such housing interventions by churches or faith-based agencies are plentiful across the world but rather limited on the African continent. Smokey Mountain

is the amazing story of the community of 30,000 garbage dwellers, where the space was transformed into a sustainable human settlement without displacing the most vulnerable who called the place home. This is recorded by Father Ben Beltran, who accompanied this community for more than 30 years as their parish priest (cf. [Beltran 2012](#)). In Chicago, both [Bethel New Life](#) (n.d.) and the [Lawndale Christian Development Corporation](#) (n.d.) are faith-based institutions growing from local churches working to restore depressed neighborhoods through, among other interventions, affordable housing.

In the Cities of Tshwane, Johannesburg, and Cape Town, [Yeast City Housing](#) (2022) and [Madulammoho Housing Association](#) (2019) were created by faith-based organizations to develop and manage social housing in response to the housing cry of local urban populations. [Integrated Holistic Approach/Urban Development Project \(IHA/UDP\)](#) (n.d.) in Addis Ababa worked closely with slum dwellers in support of housing development and other basic services. And in Mathare Valley in Nairobi, the [Inspiration Centre](#) (2021), a Christian faith-based organization, realized that they could not address poverty without constructing housing, and therefore they included affordable housing as one of their ministries.

2.4. Supporting Rights-Based Land and Housing Movements

Yet, people's dignity and well-being are affected severely by political and economic practices that deny them a right to the city. If the church is serious about being good news in African cities, it should acquaint itself with discourses about a 'right to the city', 'spatial justice', and 'housing rights', in order to educate itself as a possible credible witness in cities that have become unbearable for the urban poor (cf. [De Beer 2016](#)).

Learning from and supporting rights-based land and housing movements has become a credible space of solidarity for the Christian church. Rights-based land and housing movements often take up the most critical housing issues in a city, speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, defending the rights of the poor and the stranger, and giving expression to Jesus's cry that 'I was a stranger, and you invited me in'. These movements, in my mind, often express the Jesus movement and the prophetic cries for justice much more authentically than the Christian church.

Therefore, the church needs to be conscientized by what such movements see, hear, and do and join forces with such movements to address housing exclusion. This could include local advocacy on behalf of one family, protecting the rights of whole communities or neighborhoods, or ensuring policies that are inclusive and affirmative of the city's most vulnerable populations.

The [Slum/Shack Dweller Association \(SDI\)](#) (2023) is a global social movement organized by slum and shack dwellers themselves, advocating for the rights of slum/shack dwellers and for the inclusive upgrading of such neighborhoods. Many members of this movement are people of faith, and sometimes local churches would work in solidarity with SDI. The Landless Movement ([MST 2023](#))—in short known as Sem Terra⁴—is a Brazilian landless movement that has a history of land occupation, both in rural Brazil and in central parts of Brazil's largest cities. They often had the support of progressive elements in the Roman Catholic church, particularly those shaped by Latin American liberation theologies, mobilizing the best of legal and urban planning expertise to offer concrete support to the struggles of landless people.

[Reclaim the City](#) (2023) in Cape Town is a good example of a locally organized people's movement, calling the city to prioritize people over profit and occupying two well-located urban sites owned by the state to make visible the cry of thousands for suitable, secure, and well-located housing. Organized as domestic workers, factory workers, veteran unionists, and local residents who lost their accommodation as a result of gentrification, Reclaim the City has engaged in innovative land activism that often captured the attention of people who would ordinarily not be drawn to such issues. A small group of progressive people of faith is standing in solidarity with Reclaim the City, and in Sea Point, one of the most

upmarket suburbs of the city, a local Methodist Church became the site from which the domestic workers have organized themselves.

2.5. Centering Housing Pastorally–Liturgically

Unless it flows from the center of worship and pastoral concern and is expressed as such, it will be difficult to sustain housing as a Christian social praxis, or housing as a Christian social practice will remain a marginal concern to be advanced by a fringe group of Christian housing activists. It needs to be asserted as a fundamental pastoral concern for how it affects individuals, families, and whole neighborhoods. It also needs to be asserted liturgically, and language put to it, in order to foster a Christian consciousness for urban housing as a valid and centralized mission concern.

Perhaps housing should be considered a profound act of worship if Isaiah's injunction in the 58th chapter is anything to go by. He asserts that true fasting, among other things, includes 'giving shelter to those who are un-housed' (verse 7) with a promise that those who engage in such fasting or spirituality will be given to 'rebuild the old ruins, to repair the walls and to restore streets with dwellings in them'. This is a clear connection between spirituality and the built environment, not just in a vague spiritual sense but in a materially concrete sense. Their spirituality will be expressed in dwellings for people to live in, safe and well.

The housing concerns of our city, the housing injustices and exclusions, and the housing promises and possibilities should be the content of our sermons, prayers, and confessions if we are to embrace our cities pastorally in holistic ways. That will help foster and sustain a Christian social practice adamant about decent and affordable housing for all of Africa's urban people.

3. Final Considerations and Recommendations

Housing as a category of concern and action should be embraced theologically and politically. This article is specifically interested in advancing housing as a Christian social practice in the cities of Africa. It boggles the mind that there are so few examples of solid, sustainable housing action driven by churches or faith-based agencies on the continent. That needs to change.

In order to change that, *immersion in deprived urban settlements* is a first priority. Only through first-hand experience of the housing conditions and contestations faced by the urban poor will we be sufficiently conscientized to embrace this agenda.

Our *theological curricula should integrate land, housing, and urban settlement development issues* if we are to be faithful to the cries of Africa's urban poor. If our theological education shies away from these contexts and seldom is located in such contexts, we will continue to equip theologians for a middle-class church that is far removed from the struggles of Africa's urban masses.

Since the practice of housing by definition gathers various disciplines, housing as a Christian social practice will be *inter- and trans-disciplinary* from the onset. It will involve theologians, diaconal and community development workers, urban planners and architects, quantity surveyors and engineers, potential housing beneficiaries, and community organizers.

Housing is also *uniquely political*, as the decision of where to build, for whom, and with which resources is always a political matter. As a Christian social practice, we cannot avoid engaging local political processes if we are serious about healthy urban settlements for the majority of the city's people. Urban housing is both a theological and political issue. It is also, at its core, a profoundly human issue that speaks to the (in)dignity of humankind.

Particularly in Protestant traditions, but also in many Charismatic and Pentecostal traditions, we have narrowed down an understanding of the pastorate to individual pastoral care and counseling. Instead, embracing housing as a Christian social practice should flow from *nurturing an urban pastorate that is concerned with all of urban life* and

that embraces the centrality of housing in whether people will experience dignity and well-being or not.

Our housing agenda and action will be taking many forms, varying between (i) pastoral-relief work, (ii) diaconal-systemic work, (iii) community and infrastructure development, (iv) political advocacy and conscientization, (v) and pastoral-liturgical work, depending on the context and its specific challenges.

Finally, understanding housing as a Christian social practice requires *local action and global connectedness*. As local churches and faith-based agents start to act locally, they will do well to also connect globally with those actors of faith that have made significant inroads in terms of practicing housing as an expression of their faith and justice commitment. Such global connectedness could inspire our own local initiatives, learn from the creative use of church and public land, benefit from the work performed by social movements and non-profits, and participate in global solidarity around issues of ending homelessness and ensuring affordable housing.

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Notes

- ¹ A community of about 2000 shack dwellers were moved from Marabastad to Mamelodi in 2002, with promises of land security, water and sanitation. Many of the promises were never fulfilled, even 21 years later.
- ² Reflected by a group of pastors from different churches, based in the Mamelodi Township of the City of Tshwane; research conversation held on 10 March 2023 on the Mamelodi campus of the University of Pretoria.
- ³ Whilst this might not be true of all urban congregations in African cities, the point here is that churches with European, and sometimes North American, roots (Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican), often own property—i.e., buildings and land—and have membership that sometimes comes from the urban elite, with capacity and skills to contribute to housing, as some among them already do so professionally, but from a profit perspective.
- ⁴ Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) is the full name for the Landless Movement in Brazil, traditionally started in response to rural landlessness, but later also developing a strong urban face, particularly in the occupation of high-rise buildings in cities like Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo.

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