

Justice (1): Accommodation

Scripture

Lev 19.13-16; Deu 24.17f; Ps 12.5; Isa 5.7f; Jer 6.13f; Eze 16.48f; Amo 8.4-6; Mic 7.2f; Mt 5.42-48; Lk 16.19-31; Rom 12.9-13; Gal 6.9f; Jam 2.14-17; Rev 21.3f.

Graih

1): Danny and Sarah lived in one of the worst boarding houses. The walls of their one room were black with damp. Even their clothes smelt musty. The communal shower and toilet had no light, no seat, no locks. The sink in their room was broken. They had nowhere to wash their clothes. They had nowhere to cook. They also had nothing written down about their tenancy, nothing to say what they were entitled to or whether the landlord needed to give them notice before evicting them.

In such an environment Danny and Sarah's mental and physical health deteriorated. Their problems, which were complex enough before they moved in, got worse. The help of the few services involved was futile in the face of such devastating surroundings.

Both Danny and Sarah were on benefits. The landlord, knowing the maximum amount of rent that benefits would pay, charged them that maximum. The public purse enriched the landlord while Danny and Sarah were left to rot.

2): When Graih first started many of the people we saw were sleeping rough in squats or public toilets. We provided a lot of basic emergency accommodation in those early years, ensuring people had at least somewhere warm and dry to sleep. We still provide emergency accommodation when needed.

Over the years the situation has changed. After the credit crunch the building trade took a downturn and there was an exodus of labour from the island. Basic accommodation became easier to find at the same time as Graih became more experienced at helping people into it. Now it is the exception rather than the rule that people stay with us and we work intensively with those who do to find more permanent accommodation.

Yet that accommodation is destructive. Boarding houses on the island occupy a legislative void and there are no minimum standards. Problems like Danny and Sarah's are endemic. Often landlords refuse to turn heating on to save money. Abusive practices like withholding deposits, overcharging rent and eviction without notice are common. There are some good landlords, but many who just want to make as much money as possible. Tenants, unsure of their rights, often inarticulate and lacking the stability to advocate for themselves, are scared to complain as they might lose their accommodation or get a bad reputation.

Graih has spoken to many politicians and civil servants over the years. We see vulnerable people pushed to the bottom and then exploited for private gain. Such exploitation exacerbates often complex problems and leads to further strain on the health and criminal justice systems. Even on economic grounds the status quo is costly. The government wring their hands and do nothing.

In 2014, after many years of planning, a Landlord Registration Bill was brought before Tynwald. This would create a register of landlords and enforceable minimum standards, both environmental (the accommodation on offer) and in terms of business practice (written tenancy agreements, for example). In response, local landlords formed an association that lobbied hard against the Bill. Tynwald voted to send it to a committee to consider. In early 2015 Tynwald, following the recommendations of the committee, voted to completely re-draft the Bill, in effect destroying it and putting the process back to the start.

The status quo continues.

Questions

1. What is your reaction to Graih's experience of boarding house accommodation on the island? Is the situation unjust?
2. If justice is basic and central to God's people and God's kingdom, why have local churches not spoken out about this? What might change that?
3. Scripture has strong words for those with riches and power. What is the responsibility of both the church and individual Christians to local injustice?
4. The 'social' or 'political' are often seen as irrelevant to the church, or at least secondary. Do you agree with this? Why?
5. Would legislation help the likes of Danny and Sarah? What broader responses might be needed to people in such situations?
6. Are you aware of other areas of hidden injustice on the island? How should the church respond?

Ideas for further action

1. Write to your MHK(s) or invite them to your group to discuss standards of accommodation on the island.
2. Invite those who live in boarding houses to talk to you about their experiences.
3. Consider how you might help those in boarding houses. By sharing your facilities? Your home? Your church purchasing property? Be creative.
4. Consider how to make local justice a priority in the church.

Prayer

Father, thank you for your special concern for the poor and needy. Thank you that your kingdom is one of peace and justice. Help us to share your compassion and concern.

Jesus, thank you for the anger you showed at injustice. Give us the courage to follow you in confronting and overthrowing oppression.

Spirit, bring creativity to our efforts to live justly. Help our response to go deeper than laws, that we may share our food, homes and selves with those in need.

Amen.