

# Guest Opinion | Dr. Jill Shook: Churches Have Made Affordable Housing Happen, Let's Continue That Tradition

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Published in Pasadena Now on Wednesday, July 8, 2020 | 9:02 am



With the worst pandemic since the Great Influenza of 1918, and the worst economy since the Great Depression, we are facing an unprecedented housing crisis — one that could last for many years. To address this crisis, we need bold and innovative solutions, and fortunately the churches have been on the forefront of many important changes, including here in Pasadena. As the author/editor of a book called “Making Housing and Community Happen: Faith-Based Affordable Housing Models,” I have been impressed by how churches have transformed lives, and communities, through affordable housing.

Among the many innovative ways that churches have addressed the affordable housing crisis, the Nehemiah Housing Strategy stands out: in the 1980s 60 churches in New York built 5,000 two-family homes, which helped to turn around the desperately blighted economies of Brooklyn and South Bronx. What was utterly amazing was that none of the first-time low-income families who purchased these homes went into foreclosure during the Great Recession. This chapter

changed my life. I began to see the exponential power of collective decision making and policy change.

Churches throughout California have built affordable housing on their excess land. This inspired two state bills, SB 899 and AB 1851, that are now in line to expand the use of underutilized congregational land. One group in San Diego has emerged called YIGBY (“Yes in God’s backyard”). They have helped San Diego to adjust parking requirements on church land, opening the doors for more affordable housing development.

As the executive director of Making Housing and Community Happen, a nonprofit here in Pasadena, we formed a team of experts, eager to serve those most in need. See: <https://www.makinghousinghappen.org/congregational-land> We are aware today of the urgency, with the anticipated 45% increase in those experiencing homelessness due to the COVID-19 crisis, according to a Colombia University study. <https://www.latimes.com/homeless-housing/story/2020-05-14/coronavirus-unemployment-homeless-study-increase-45-percent>

One of the biggest barriers to building affordable housing is finding appropriate sites. At the same time, today some churches are struggling. They lack the funds needed to fix older buildings and lack enough parishioners to fill oversized parking lots. Churches want to be good stewards of their excess land and see how a partnership with a high-quality affordable housing developer could be a match made in heaven. Our committee now has 26 churches throughout the Los Angeles area interested in partnering with us to meet this critical need, with seven of those churches in Pasadena.

But there is a problem. Most church land in our city is not properly zoned for affordable housing. Out of the 137 churches in the city, there are only 12 churches that have the proper zoning, and most of them are historic churches in Downtown Pasadena, which are undevelopable due to historic preservation. So, our committee got busy imagining how zoning could be fixed so that churches feeling called to do this could make affordable housing happen.

As we began imagining a policy that would honor the character of our city, we became aware of the proposed state bills that would allow for churches to build affordable housing on church land, in ways that could be a more dramatic change than what Pasadena may want. With that in mind, we continued our efforts so that our city could have opportunities to craft its own rules consistent with our city’s needs and values. If we wait until we decide on specific plans, the state may feel we are engaged in a delaying tactic and we may lose this opportunity. Carefully considering the historic character and needs of our city, we have proposed a much more nuanced overlay zone — ahead of state law — that would allow Pasadena to have more local control.

We started doing research with detailed maps to imagine how affordable housing would look, with enough units to make the project pencil out, with roof lines matching the neighborhood, then stair-stepping up. Our proposal would kick in

when a congregation would make at least 50% of the units affordable. This mix would help to make the project feasible and provide a healthy mixed-income model.

We have not kept our light under a bushel but have been very public with our ideas. In fact, our May monthly housing justice session was on the overlay zone ideas. This was on Facebook, YouTube and open for anyone to attend.

We are thrilled that the Planning Commission will consider an overlay zone proposal this Wednesday, July 8, at 3pm. Bringing this to the public's attention now, early in the process, provides adequate transparency and an opportunity for the people of Pasadena to weigh in.

There are many advantages to this overlay zone proposal. Changing the zoning is uncertain and can cost thousands of dollars and can take months to complete. An overall solution — like an overlay zone — allows churches to move quickly to build housing and help the people living on our streets. With more certainty, an overlay zone will also attract high quality developers. Because there are churches interested throughout the city, affordable housing would be spread throughout the city, something many of our City Council members and staff have been calling for for years.

After 20 years of doing housing justice work in Pasadena I have seen too many good ideas killed with studies and more studies that too often serve only to delay rather than facilitate much needed changes. If we do not act with deliberate speed, we could see a “flood” of homeless people on our streets, according to Anne Miskey, CEO of Union Station. <https://www.pasadenanow.com/main/local-housing-homeless-activists-fear-pandemic-will-increase-homelessness/>

We all need to reflect on what matters most. What kind of city do we want? One that pushes out people of color because of a lack of affordable housing? Due to gentrification, 24% of African Americans have left our city in the past 10 years, according to a 2011 article in the L.A. Times. Do we want a city that puts more elderly folks on the street? Twenty-seven percent of our recently homeless population are seniors, many who have lived in Pasadena 20 to 30 years. Do we want a city that ties the hands of churches wishing to supply sorely needed affordable housing? Jesus often asked the question, “What do you want?” This is not an easy question, but I believe we can answer as we open our hearts and reflect on what really matters.

Churches throughout Pasadena are eager to help address the affordable/homeless housing crisis we are currently facing. Please allow churches to follow the divine mandate and “give shelter to the homeless” (Isaiah 58:7).