
THE INAUGURAL
F. OSWALD BARNETT
ORATION

HOUSING AND THE CHURCH

A VISION AND A CHALLENGE

by Associate Professor Renate Howe
Centre for Australian Studies
Deakin University

at the St Kilda Parish Mission

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Ecumenical Housing Inc

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A vision and a challenge

The Inaugural F. Oswald Barnett Oration

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F. OSWALD BARNETT



After a visit to a slum mission, F. Oswald Barnett, a public accountant and a member of the Methodist Church, became involved in the establishment of the Methodist Babies' Home in 1929. In 1934 Barnett formed a study group focused on housing reform, including slum demolition and the establishment of a state financed housing authority. The Barnett Study Group, which included in its membership, G.K. Tucker, founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, became the driving force behind a campaign which led to the establishment of the Housing Commission of Victoria in 1938, on which Barnett served as a Commissioner until 1948.

Then as now, there is need to campaign against housing poverty and for the renewal of the partnership between the state and the community that is necessary to ensure housing justice.

The F. Oswald Barnett Oration seeks to acknowledge the contribution Barnett made to eliminating poor housing conditions. It also seeks to remind contemporary society that the task is not yet complete - housing poverty remains a social problem of the highest significance. The oration provides an opportunity for the churches and others of goodwill to recognise the significance of the work of F. Oswald Barnett and to renew their commitment to housing justice which ensures appropriate, secure and affordable housing for all Australians.

This oration is jointly sponsored by Ecumenical Housing, (a commission of the Victorian Council of Churches) and Copelen Child and Family Services (formerly Methodist Babies' Home).

The development of the Ecumenical Housing Unit, a Commission of the Victorian Council of Churches and now an incorporated association, has meant a revival of interest in a Christian response to housing justice. This interest led inevitably to F. Oswald Barnett who in the 1930s and 1940s was one of Australia's most influential housing reformers. Today, housing policy has been appropriated as the domain of the technical professions - the architects, planners and engineers, with the social scientists and economists involved on the sidelines. The significance of Barnett, for those interested in developing a contemporary housing agenda, is that his critique of housing conditions and his effectiveness in achieving change was driven by a Christian commitment to a fair and just society. This first Barnett Oration is a step towards reclaiming housing policy from the technocrats and economists and developing a contemporary housing policy within a social justice framework.

Barnett's contribution to Church and society was so significant that it is hard to do justice to the range of his ideas and activities in this lecture. What I can achieve is an overview of the development of his ideas on social change and housing, the influence of theology and experience on these ideas and his achievements in implementation - in getting things done.

It is important to remember that Barnett's involvement in housing was a response to one of the worst periods in Australian urban history. The Depression of the 1930s and the lack of investment in housing and urban infrastructure had a catastrophic effect on cities, especially on the older, inner city housing of Melbourne and Sydney. The slow recovery from the Depression with high levels of unemployment and underemployment remaining throughout the 1930s exacerbated the decline, creating pockets of poor housing and extreme poverty.

Today's urban population in Australia is much better housed, while even in times of high unemployment the social security system protects from the poverty of Barnett's period. Yet Ecumenical Housing, like Barnett, has been challenged to confront housing issues by urban and social conditions. In confronting the increasing gap between rich and poor in Australian cities and the shortage of appropriate and affordable housing, there is much that Ecumenical Housing can learn from Barnett's involvement in an earlier era of housing crisis.

THE METHODIST BABIES' HOME

Barnett was 'born poor' in 1883 in Brunswick, one of Melbourne's new workers' suburbs. The Barnetts were Wesleyan Methodists and attended the large Methodist Church and Sunday School in Sydney Road. The influence of this active and vital congregation remained with Barnett throughout his life and was especially evident in his firm and thoughtful Christian belief, commitment to social reform and faith in the value of self-improvement. The family was battered by the 1890s depression and Barnett was affected by that personal experience and by the on-going social and economic critique. Barnett remained in contact with Brunswick through his family and the family of his wife, Elizabeth Hyett, and through friends from the Methodist Church, especially the Mutual Improvement Society and preaching bands of his youth; all provided support for many of his later activities and projects. ¶

Through determination and part-time study Barnett by the 1920s was a dapper accountant, happily married with a young family and living in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Yet the 'boy from Brunswick' was dissatisfied

with his comfortable life. After visiting the ragged schools and missions of the 'back slums' area of central Melbourne in the early 1920s, Barnett anguished over the dichotomy between life in the slums and suburbs. His response was to enlist the support of the Young Men's section of the Methodist Church Laymen's Missionary Movement (LMM) in rescuing children from such appalling living conditions. In fact, the LMM was organised for overseas mission work, but as a result of Barnett's urging, the President, Fred Cato, allowed the Young Men's section to adopt the establishment of a home for 'slum babies' as one of its objectives.

The 'young' men were mostly of similar age to Barnett - in their thirties or forties, family men and members of suburban Methodist congregations. They were a small and cohesive group who were carried along by Barnett's enthusiasm and determination. The idea for the group to take as its particular task the establishment of a babies' home to care for neglected babies and to provide for their adoption into Christian families seems to have come specifically from Barnett. There was little enthusiasm for the idea from the Home Mission Department of the Methodist Church. Nor does Barnett appear to have consulted with the Executive Committee of the Methodist Home for Children (later the Orana Peace Memorial Homes) in developing his idea and there was little co-ordination or reciprocity between the two institutions in the early development stage of what was to become the Methodist Babies' Home (MBH).

The determination to take some practical steps in relation to child poverty set Barnett on a path that was to lead him to an influential position in national housing and planning policy in the post-war period. In establishing the MBH, Barnett demonstrated some of the skills that were further developed in later campaigns but more importantly learned the complexity

of the issue he was tackling. While his concern to 'rescue' children was the policy followed by all evangelical and social groups working in Melbourne's back slums, the proposal to rescue only babies, to provide a clean and pleasant environment in conjunction with 'scientific' nursing in the Babies' Home before adoption by suburban families was largely developed by Barnett. Adoption was and still is a controversial policy and Barnett himself was to realise that the removal of babies from parents whose only crime was poverty could not solve the problems of poor housing and poverty.

Barnett's considerable skills in organisation, publicity and fundraising, meant that the Babies' Home and Mothercraft Nurses' Home were opened free of debt at Copelen Street, South Yarra in 1929. Barnett and his committee gathered support directly from local circuits through regular visits and the appointment of agents to collect weekly donations of money, recorded in the distinctive MBH 'Blue Books' (they had a bright blue cover). Circuit visits and fundraising were organised at first from Barnett's office in Temple Court, Collins Street. As the workload increased, a nearby office was rented and a secretary appointed. The first professional member of staff was a 'Confidential Officer', Mrs Frances Leyton Brown, who was to identify children suitable for admission and to interview adoptive parents. Barnett recalls in his memoirs that he and Mrs Brown met every morning to discuss applications for babies and other work connected with the Home. Even after the opening of the Copelen Street building, the offices of the MBH remained in Temple Court in proximity to Barnett's.

Barnett's importance in the founding and subsequent history of the MBH can be exaggerated, partly due to his high public profile (although he himself always acknowledged the work of others) and partly to his subsequent role in the establishment of the Victorian Housing Commission.

The role of the Babies Home Maintenance Circles, women's groups which provided a range of support services and were organised on a circuit basis, the work of Arthur Wilson (an old Brunswick friend) in organising the circuit fundraising and Barnett's co-treasurer, Merv Harris, who increasingly did the accountancy work, were essential to the MBH survival. However, Barnett through his proximity to the MBH Temple Court offices and meetings, was a central figure and closely involved in all important administrative and policy decisions until the early 1940s. This attention to administration and implementation was an important Barnett characteristic, along with his ability to inspire people to participate in his causes, his energy and organisational skills.

His early theological and social imperatives also shaped his later ideas and activities. He wrote that the establishment of the Babies' Home was 'youthful Christian faith in action'.

'The Cause, the saving of the slum baby, inspired the youth of the Methodist Church, enabling them to put their spiritual ideas into actual practice for the benefit of little babies, otherwise condemned to live in a slum environment, often of a vicious or immoral nature. The change of environment worked miracles.' 2

There are three aspects of Barnett's ideas in this quotation which were the foundations of much of his later work. Although his analysis became more sophisticated, his strong belief in the influence of environment and in the value of a scientific or modern approach to social problems, the injustice of the existence of slums in suburbs and cities and the desire to relate his Christian belief to social action, remained the foundation of his later work.

Barnett's theological and social thought evolved over time and there were often confusing inconsistencies in his ideas and actions. He was

influenced by social gospel theology which emphasised the importance of achieving the Kingdom of God *now*. A social gospel discussion group, later known as the Christian Social Order Group, met in his Temple Court offices from the 1920s to the 1950s. Barnett was important in spreading social gospel theology among the Methodist laity, especially those working in the city, by emphasising the importance of relating Christian belief to the public sphere.

In the study of Wesley Central Mission which I co-authored with Shurlee Swain, we have written how the Central Methodist Mission acted as a focus for the discussion of an Australian Christian socialism in the period following the Depression and strikes of the 1890s. This pre-Marxian Christian socialism emphasised co-operation rather than conflict, equality of opportunity and a protective role for the state.³ It was a tradition that influenced Barnett who also had a strong streak of Methodist evangelical belief in the value of individual Christian commitment and moral strength in achieving change.

I see Barnett as an important figure in further developing a distinctive Australian social Christianity in the 1930s and 1940s. The 1930s Depression challenged the churches to develop institutional and theological responses to the most serious social and economic crisis in Australia's history. Barnett's social gospel theology and his involvement in housing issues was part of this response, as was the establishment by Father Tucker of the Anglican Brotherhood of St Laurence in the inner city suburb of Fitzroy. Father Tucker was also to join with Barnett on the issue of housing reform in Melbourne. The importance of the Christian response to the conditions of the 1930s and the leadership that was provided in developing social and economic responses has not been fully recognised in historical analysis. The contribution and importance of progressive Christians such as Barnett and Tucker lived on in the collective memory rather than in the history books.

FROM BABIES' HOME TO SLUM RECLAMATION

Barnett's subsequent involvement in the slum abolition movement and the establishment of the Victorian Housing Commission, for which he is most well known, owes much to his experience in establishing the Babies' Home.

He soon realised that his initial response to Melbourne's poverty, of removing babies from slum families, was seriously flawed.

"There was a grave limitation to the saving of babies in the slums. When a baby living in a slum has parents who were moral and wholesome, the Court would not consent to commit that baby to a Babies' Home. The only practical solution was to lift the whole family out and place it in a decent home, and then demolish the slum they left." ⁴

The plunge into depression, especially severe in Melbourne's inner city, underlined that a more comprehensive approach to poverty was needed. As well, Barnett, ever the enthusiast for self-improvement, had enrolled at Melbourne University Commerce Faculty, studying economics as a mature age student (he was in his late 40s) under Professor Douglas Copeland. Barnett's thesis on the economics of slums was subsequently published as *The Unsuspected Slums* in 1933. It was based on a study of families involved with the Fitzroy Methodist Mission and revealed Barnett's continuing concern at the relation between 'slum mindedness' and poor housing. There was also however, a growing recognition of the structural causes of poor housing as a result of his experience with the failure of his Babies' Home model, his study of economics and his research in Fitzroy on the influence of unemployment and casual employment on the poverty and vulnerability of families.

The removal of inner city children to better environments was still his prime concern in the early years of the slum abolition movement. Barnett's training for the MBH circuit visitors, emphasised slum reclamation issues and undoubtedly helped build up support for some government action on inner city housing among the Methodist laity. The weekly training session for the Babies' Home circuit visitors included a course on slum conditions illustrated by slides, visits to Methodist inner city missions and study of a pamphlet on the subject, written by Barnett. He continued the same approach as he broadened his campaign beyond the Babies' Home to slum reclamation.

I have traced the pivotal role of Barnett in the achieving of legislation to establish the Victorian Housing Commission (HCV) in 1938 in the Commission's history *New Houses for Old*.⁵ As with the MBH, Barnett was able to inspire a small dedicated group of supporters. He had drawn Marcus Barlow, a client and the the architect of Temple Court, into his sphere of influence during the building of the Babies' Home and this association was to continue over the next decade. Oswald Burt, a solicitor also with rooms in Temple Court, was another member of Barnett's inner group making Temple Court, Melbourne's newest and most fashionable office building, the unlikely location of Melbourne's slum reclamation campaign in the mid-1930s.

Barnett's Slum Study Group, meeting (of course) in Temple Court and representing the main social reform and housing professional groups in the city, was an important reform coalition in the slum abolition campaign. The group met on a Wednesday in Barnett's office and discussed the latest books and reports, mostly from Britain, on slum abolition. The Barnett Study Group included G K Tucker of the

Brotherhood of St Laurence, architects, Saxil Tuxen a surveyor, representatives of the Town and Country Planning Association, the Melbourne Ladies' Benevolent Society, the YMCA and YWCA, and the Jewish Philanthropic Association. As with the Babies' Home Group, the Slum Abolition Study Group developed a set of lantern slides and notes to use when speaking to community groups. The community groups were in turn encouraged to send letters on the issue to the Premier. Again, Barnett showed his adeptness at grass-roots campaigns.

Barnett also gained the support of Keith Murdoch and the Melbourne mass circulation afternoon paper, *The Herald*, for the slum abolition campaign.

As a result of this pressure, the Victorian Premier appointed Barnett, along with Burt and Barlow and a representative of the A L P Slum Abolition Committee, to a Housing Investigation and Slum Abolition Board (HISAB). The Report of this Board in 1936 was a pioneering piece of social research in a country which had relied on Royal Commissions and public service reports as a basis for legislation. Universities had made little contribution to the development of social research and there were no private foundations as in the USA and Britain. The HISAB Report was based on research on households in inner city areas of Melbourne identified as 'slum pockets'. The research was initiated by Barnett and drew on his MA thesis. I have discussed in detail the methodology and scope of the Report in *New Houses for Old* and its use of photographs, graphs and visual material. It was a public document as much as it was a report to the Premier.

The HISAB Report was effectively used to build support for the establishment of a public housing authority by the Victorian State Government. This was a radical recommendation given that the State Government had

no role in housing regulation and provision, and had no desire to undertake one. The Board's recommendation that the State Government accept responsibility for providing low-income housing by establishing a statutory authority reflected Barnett's priorities and his belief in the positive and protective role that governments should play in society. It was a recommendation that had to be fought for, as there was little support for such an authority within the factions dominating the State Government while the Trades Hall Council and the ALP favoured housing schemes run through the State Bank.

The Report reflected Barnett's concern at the slums and suburbs dichotomy in Melbourne. It compared social conditions in the inner suburbs with those in middle class suburbia, especially in terms of differences in income, infant mortality and juvenile crime. It recognised the fundamental importance of unemployment and casual employment in explaining poor housing, as well as the role of absentee landlords in poor maintenance and the charging of high rents to powerless residents. Side by side with these structural issues, Barnett included some of his material on 'slum-mindedness' from his M A thesis which documented the contribution of alcoholism, family breakdown and moral failings among inner city residents.

Despite the later development in social science research, the Report remains as an important source of information on inner city living conditions in the 1930s.

E W Russell sums up the significance of this period of Barnett's life:

"Barnett brought new techniques and approaches to social reform and social action, and more than any of his contemporaries, he gave the concept of a Christian Social Order concrete meaning through social action.

Living in a period of grave social inequality in which extremist movements of many hues gained adherents, Barnett fashioned a form of Christian social action which galvanised support and gained lasting significant improvement for the oppressed.” 6

BARNETT AT THE HOUSING COMMISSION

The link in Barnett’s thought between the MBH and HCV was his belief that all children had a right to a sound and healthy home environment. He developed the Babies’ Home ‘rescue and adopt’ model to one of the total relocation of the slum family to a healthy, well-designed living environment, and also planned for the re-revelopment of the old slum neighbourhoods. These were the aims of the Victorian Housing Commission established in 1938. With the appointment of Barnett as one of the four commissioners, his involvement with the MBH became more peripheral. Although he remained Hon Treasurer of the MBH, a second treasurer was appointed to do the work while Barnett only sporadically attended Board of Management meetings. The next ten years were to involve Barnett fully in public life at a state and national level in the fields of housing and urban development.

The early work of the Commission involved the rehousing of families in garden city environments and building of inner city estates at Burnley, Ascot Vale and Garden City in Port Melbourne. 7 The work of the Commission was innovative in terms of flat and housing design, and in terms of neighbourhood layout. Some of Melbourne’s best architects and planners, including Marcus Barlow, Bert Overend and Frank Heath worked for the HCV in this period. Barnett’s position was a part-time one and he received a small sessional payment for attendance at Commission meetings. This

appointment and payment bore little relation to the energy and determination which Barnett devoted to the task of establishing the Commission. Barnett was involved in drawing up legislation (mostly done by Burt and later a model for other Australian public housing authorities) in establishing a bureaucracy and negotiating with State and local government and other infrastructure authorities.

In the early years of the Second World War, Barnett's ideas on low-income housing were further developed as a result of his experience with the HCV. He moved from his early views on slum reclamation and the rehousing of families in garden city environments to the building of large scale housing estates, described by Barnett as a move from **rehabilitation** of slum housing to **prevention** by the availability of low cost State provided housing. ⁸ Despite some adverse experiences with the HCV showcase estate at Garden City in Port Melbourne in terms of resident satisfaction, Barnett remained convinced that the development of well-designed suburbs of low-income housing was the ultimate solution to slum housing. Looking out of his office window on the tenth floor of Temple Court in 1946, Barnett lifted his eyes from the belt of inner suburbs where

"many narrow streets and lanes, in which factories and dwellings jostle each other for space to the delightful Outer Suburbs, well planned, splendid parks and open spaces and houses fit for human beings to live in... Now what a wonderful thing it would be if we decided to tackle this problem, to use the intelligence with which the Almighty endowed us, and to plan as much for our neighbour as we plan for ourselves." ⁹

From 1941 Barnett became increasingly involved in changing the HCV from a slum reclamation authority to a large scale developer of housing estates for working class families. The HCV was responsible for the

planning and building of large estates related to industrial development in the outer northern and western suburbs of Melbourne (for example, Preston and Maidstone) and in regional Victoria (for example, Norlane on the edge of Geelong and the LaTrobe Valley towns). The Commission pioneered the large scale prefabrication of housing in the post-war period, especially concrete housing, which was used to build villa houses and walk-up flats on the new estates. By the end of the war, the HCV had moved from being a slum reclamation authority to a major urban planning and housing authority.

Barnett's influence on post-war ideas of housing and planning is not as well-known as his establishment of the MBH or the HCV. He actively promoted the HCV as a model for other State Governments and the Commonwealth, which was turning its attention to the problems of inner city housing and solutions to the anticipated post-war housing shortage. Walter Bunning, architect and the executive officer of the Commonwealth Housing Commission which reported in 1944, thought the HCV had "carried out the best and most extensive of the pre-war projects in its demolition and building campaign." He believed the practice of the HCV in buying large areas of land near industrial employment, sub-dividing and building under large contracts and adjusting rent to tenants' incomes was the way to go in the post-war period. **10**

Barnett was involved in developing the housing and urban plans of the Chifley government's Post-War Reconstruction Department and his widely read publications, especially *We Must Go On* and *Housing the Australian Nation*, argued for strong central planning not only to create pleasant living and working environments in the post-war era but also to ensure a more equal and fair society. Barnett made a significant contribu-

tion to the debate on the New Social Order for the post-war period, through his books, produced at the height of war-time restrictions by what for any other author would seem an extraordinary combination, the Left Book Club and the Methodist Book Depot. ¹¹

We Must Go On provided a blueprint for post-war urban development. Barnett and his co-author, Frank Heath, advocated large scale suburbs which would be built to encourage community development. They advocated the neighbourhood unit as the central feature of the future city. Accommodating about 4500 men and women, separated from industry by zoning, the neighbourhood unit was the ideal community;

“The very centre of the unit is the school, accommodating about 650 children. It is built in the centre of commodious playing fields, and it is contiguous with the community centre. The community centre is in reality the centre of the community, for it is the hub of all the social, cultural and spiritual activities of the people even before the cradle, from the pre-natal clinic to the grave.” ¹²

The much discussed New Social Order was for Barnett to be a Christian Social Order:

“Is this not a responsibility for the Church as well as a magnificent opportunity? Gigantic housing schemes will mean the erection of large scientific housing estates. Here people by the thousand will be gathered together and entering the new life, the dreams of a life-time come true - a lovely new home that they rent at a sum within their capacity to pay, or if they so desire, which they can buy on long terms, with little or no deposit. A new community life is to begin, which will centre around the community centre and the community hall. A miracle is taking place.” ¹³

However, in the urgent rush to meet the need for post-war housing such schools and community centres were not built on HCV estates. Nor were the ecumenical churches, envisaged by Barnett as fundamental to community development and an expression of the desire of the denominations to work together to establish the Kingdom of God, built on the estates. Indeed it is doubtful if the people of Maidstone thought 'a miracle was taking place' as they moved into their concrete Housing Commission house, with unmade roads and a small shopping centre as the only community facility. Yet a later survey showed that they were well satisfied with their new home and with the rent which was within their capacity to pay. **14**

Barnett's ideas on the New Social Order were clearly developed from a Christian perspective. Barnett's theological study group, now known as the 'Good Companions Christian Social Order Group' was still meeting in his office in the 1940s. The Methodist Church assisted with the publication of his books and pamphlet such as *Housing and the Church* which was published in 1944 by the Methodist Commission on Reconstruction, a Commission of the Methodist Church General Conference. Barnett was part of a movement in the Methodist Church advocating radical social reform, as the ordained ministry and the laity struggled with the need to overcome poverty and ensure world peace in the post-war world. Barnett's ideas remained informed by the social gospel tradition, despite the emergence of a newer Biblical approach of the American writer on church and society, Reinhold Niebuhr. Barnett, alongside other Australian Christians such as Bishop Burgmann, Father Tucker, the Rev C M Churchward and the Rev Frank Hartley, was an influential participant in the post-war debate on the ideal society.

In 1948 Barnett resigned from the HCV; it was clear that the State Government would not renew his appointment as a commissioner because of his alleged association with groups sympathetic to the Communist Party. The following year he had another forced resignation, this time as chairman of the Victorian Board of City Mutual Life Assurance Society because he was a paid auditor of Australia-Soviet House and therefore a suspected Communist sympathiser. Barnett described himself as a socialist, but 'not because of Karl Marx, but because of Jesus Christ' and the Methodist journal, the Spectator, supported him against such 'undemocratic' attacks. ¹⁵

Nevertheless, the attacks took their toll on Barnett's reputation and business. Now in his sixties, he felt bitterly the recriminations of the cold-war period. As he noted in his memoirs written in 1962 and in an interview with EW Russell in 1972:

"Even now people say 'Well he mightn't be a commo but he's a fellow traveller - he's a socialist at any rate.' If you're interested in the poor and a fair thing all round, you're a commo. It *should* be said of you, 'Oh, he's a Christian.'"

His bitterness did not cause him to withdraw from the interests which had dominated twenty years of his life. He continued his involvement with the MBH and child care and with housing and urban development issues. He remained a leader of the Methodist church laity and continued to challenge the church 'to step into the maelstrom' and take on the political and social justice issues of the day.

BARNETT AND CONTEMPORARY HOUSING ISSUES

Barnett was not and never claimed to be a saint. He has been criticised as a radical communist and as an agent of social control. The inconsistency of many of his ideas - some enlightened for the time and others insensitive and manipulative - make it difficult to develop a critique. A brilliant publicist, he was often given the credit that obscured the hard work of others. His ideas on women and the family were conventional and most of his organisations were masculine in membership and approach. Finally, someone as effective as Barnett must have made enemies and offended sensitivities along the way.

Yet the range of Barnett's interests and achievements makes him a unique and important figure in Australian housing and planning. At the height of his influence in the 1940s, his publications included: *The Making of a Criminal* (1940), *The New Testament Basis of Pacifism* (1940), *Housing the Australian Nation* (1942), written with W O Burt, *We Must Go On – A Study of Planned Reconstruction and Housing* (1944) with W O Burt and F N Heath, a member of the HCV panel of architects. *The Poverty of the People in Australia* (1944) with A G Pearson, a member of the Christian Social Order, as well as articles, pamphlets, three books of prayer and a best-selling volume of poetry, *I Hear the Tramp of Millions* (1945). As E W Russell has remarked, not too many State government officials publish poetry! Nor did many public accountants belong to the Left Book club. As well, he was a member of the Town and Country Planning Association, treasurer of the Central Methodist Mission and the Methodist Babies' Home and a leader of the Good Companions and other social theology study groups.

Barnett's consistency was in his Christian faith, in his social gospel views, in his admiration of the Sermon on the Mount as a guide for Christian living and in his determination to relate faith and society.

Barnett, who saw his time as 'the struggle for houses for the people, houses that are fit for human beings to occupy, that they can rent or buy, at prices within their capacity to pay,'¹⁶ would have been in total agreement with the aim of Ecumenical Housing that 'everyone has the right to an appropriate, secure and affordable home'. Indeed many of the current concerns of Ecumenical Housing were the concerns of Barnett – the relation of the Church to housing and especially the concern with community development.

However, the means by which these aims can be achieved has changed. Barnett's vision of large post-war public housing estates in the outer suburbs is now part of the housing problem not the solution. The Commonwealth National Housing Strategy highlighted contemporary demographic changes and environmental needs and questioned whether outer suburban development is an appropriate direction for the future development of Australian cities. Barnett's model of state involvement in housing provision if equity was to be achieved, also needs to be reviewed. In *We Must Go On*, Barnett and Heath answered criticisms of their policies as Facist plans;

'Our purpose is just the opposite. The State must make the necessary provision to enable each citizen to fulfil his or her own peculiar individual talents to the uttermost... In fact, to plan to develop every citizen to his highest will bring not only happiness to the individual, but greater prosperity and contentment to the community as a whole.'

Again, Ecumenical Housing and Copelen Family Services can share these goals while implementing them through different ways of

involvement with the State, for example, initiating innovative partnerships between the community and government agencies. The public housing estates of Barnett's period may not now be the way forward, but his aim of achieving caring and viable communities for all sectors of the population is still the most important challenge for housing policy.

Churches have an opportunity to contribute to the most far-reaching debate on Australian housing since Barnett's time as our society seeks alternative solutions to those of the post-war period. As in the 1930s and 1940s, analysis of contemporary housing problems raises broader issues of social change and presents

'a challenge for the Church to move from a welfare response, the provision of crisis accommodation alone, to a justice perspective which includes the development of secure tenure housing options for low income families and individuals.'

Homelessness, for example,

'is far more than the lack of a roof over one's head – it is being disenfranchised from a society. Homelessness is marginalisation and any response to homelessness must therefore address the social and communal dimensions as well as the shelter dimension.'¹⁷

Barnett would have been as outraged at present youth homelessness as he was at the housing condition of children at the ragged school in the 1920s and would have challenged ordinary people to do something about it. Copelen Family Services, which is the inheritor of the Methodist Babies' Home tradition, has continued Barnett's concern for families and children in poverty while at the same time developing non-institutional responses to youth homelessness; it would seem that the Uniting Church, into which the

Methodist Church merged in 1977, is content to let the agency's response be the response on behalf of the church. There has been no mobilisation of the parishes on homelessness or its broader 'social and communal dimensions'. No moving from housing issues to the broader critique of society which characterised Barnett at his best.

A recent Ecumenical Housing conference on the subject of 'Housing and the Church',

'encouraged the Church to speak more assertively to government and expect to be heard on the basis that it represents the local grass roots constituency. In this regard, the church needs to take a pro-active rather than the usual re-active stance with respect to social reform.' ¹⁸

To be 'pro-active' on contemporary housing problems still requires the hard slog of putting together coalitions, doing the research, undertaking publicity to get issues into the public arena, motivating and inspiring, pushing the institutional church to show a bit of backbone and support, and taking issues up at the political level. Barnett did all these things; the challenge for churches today is to have the same energy, persistence and vision if they are to reclaim the housing debate from the technicians and economists. Through initiatives such as Ecumenical Housing, the debate has begun to address housing as not just an issue of shelter but as an issue of rights and citizenship, to address the re-building of communities not just as an issue of bricks and mortar but around ideas of shared interdependence. It is an important start but still at the edges of the mainstream of debate. Barnett was driven to 'apply' social gospel theology to housing and social conditions but is there now the same theological imperative, the same urgent sense of mission in the churches' response to inequality in Australia's cities?

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