INTERFAITH LEADERS, FORGO HOMEBUILDING

Take on developers, politicians and banks to help people keep a roof over their heads

Henry G. Brinton

The Christian housing ministry Habitat for Humanity builds houses using volunteer labor and has helped many low-income families become homeowners. But the recent foreclosure crisis and shortage of rental units have opened my eyes to an even bigger need — helping families to stay in their homes.

Instead of swinging a hammer, I'm meeting with developers, bankers and politicians in an effort to preserve affordable housing for my needy church members and neighbors. It's a trend that has caught on across the country.

The work is critically important given the failure of big banks to help people who are struggling to retain their housing. A June 19 report by a court-appointed monitor revealed that Bank of America, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase and Wells Fargo have done a poor job of handling homeowner requests for lower monthly payments, a violation of the $25 billion national mortgage settlement.

In addition, rising mortgage interest rates and escalating housing prices are making it impossible for many people to buy a home. Only 36% of Californians can now afford to buy a single-family home at the median price, according to an Aug. 12 report from the California Association of Realtors.

RESULTS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

In my experience, only interfaith groups have the organizing power and the moral authority to deliver real results at the local level. This spring, I worked alongside clergy and members from a variety of denominations to assist the residents of a moderately priced apartment complex in Fairfax, Va. The owner planned to tear down the complex and replace it with luxury apartments, which threatened to displace the current residents.

I met with the developer, the mayor and members of the City Council, and I then testified before the council about the need to be fair to working-class residents. Our group was successful. The City Council demanded that the developer set aside 5% of the new units as affordable housing, and that he provide a decent relocation package for the current residents.

Leading mortgage servicers haven't complied with new standards for handling home loans and must correct the problems or face fines.

the city of Fairfax, which is only now beginning to work on an affordable-housing policy, such an action felt like a victory for justice.

CONFRONT THE BANKS

A few days after my testimony, I was one of 500 Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith leaders, part of VOICE (Virginians Organized for Interfaith Community Engagement), who gathered in a middle-school auditorium in Woodbridge, Va., to meet with representatives of Bank of America, General Electric and JPMorgan, demanding that they invest in communities blighted by foreclosure.

Bank of America agreed to offer $10 million in low-interest loans, and GE to commit $5 million for a pilot program to rehabilitate vacant townhouses and provide 1,500 affordable rentals. VOICE is continuing to put pressure on JPMorgan to reinvest in Prince William County, which suffered more than 20,000 foreclosures during the recession.

Such reinvestment is the right thing to do. Not only because these banks profited during the housing bubble and foreclosure crisis, but also because blighted neighborhoods are bad investments for homeowners and banks alike.

Elsewhere, a group of more than 30 congregations called Austin Interfaith is defending affordable-housing construction in Texas. In Milwaukee, the interfaith Common Ground, which targeted five major banks, received commitments of $33.8 million and is working on rehabilitating 100 foreclosed properties.

And through a movement that began in California, faith communities are withdrawing church money from banks implicated in the foreclosure crisis — 25 congregations have withdrawn $16 million from large financial institutions.

Just as Jesus overturned the tables of the money-changers in the temple, interfaith groups are agitating banks and politicians about affordable housing. This might seem radical, but in a non-partisan way, these efforts are remarkably successful. In New York, an interfaith organization called East Brooklyn Congregations has partnered with the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development to build townhouses that are now occupied by 233 first-time homeowners. A section of Brooklyn that was once completely rundown is now filled with well-designed and colorful new homes.

Swinging a carpenter's hammer is not the only way for houses of worship to help people with housing. A more powerful hammer is the strong interfaith political action that can preserve, restore and expand affordable housing across our country.

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