

NARRATIVE GUIDANCE FOR CHRISTIAN FAITH LEADERS

February 2025

The Housing Narrative Lab is a national narrative research, storytelling and strategic communications hub focused on building support for public investments, resources and policies that solve the nation's housing challenges. We conduct narrative research to see what ideas, values and messages about homelessness and housing resonate with everyday people and create toolkits and message guides to ensure tested messages are infused across mass movements, mass media and mass culture.

In the past year, Christian faith leaders have requested messaging and narrative strategies to help engage other faith leaders and, in turn, the wider faith community in solving homelessness. While some faith-based organizations and congregations reject or are unaware of best practices such as Housing First, which provides housing and health services to those who need it, others are keen to be part of the solution and welcome information to make their efforts more impactful.

That said, our narrative research uncovered a trend, especially in [Heartland communities](#), that the more frequently a person attends religious services, the less likely they are to support solutions to homelessness that ensure housing and economic support. We hope to collect more data on this in our future research.

To that end, we offer this message guidance as a starting point. It is based on what we know from messaging research with local and national audiences and conversations with Christian faith leaders who have been working for solutions to homelessness.

This guide is designed for Christian faith leaders who already support proactive housing-based solutions to homelessness so they can engage, educate and organize other Christian leaders around meaningful next steps.

The guide may also be useful to anyone working to start conversations in more conservative Christian communities. All kinds of Christian congregations can be encouraged toward more compassionate and effective responses to homelessness with sustained strategies tailored to the specific culture of the congregation and role within the community.

“What has been helpful is reminding people that it’s not enough to believe something, you have to do something. That there is an opportunity to create a “kingdom of heaven” or “heaven on earth” if we as human beings decide we want to create it.” - Faith Community Organizer, California

KEY INSIGHTS FROM CHRISTIAN FAITH LEADERS:

In 2024, we interviewed seven diverse Christian faith leaders and faith-based community organizers in North Carolina, California, Tennessee, Minnesota, New Jersey and Indiana. Throughout our interviews, several themes emerged about the role of churches, established narratives and housing and social justice efforts.

- Many Christian leaders hold onto deeply embedded narratives about individual responsibility. This is a key barrier to building support in congregations for real, sustainable solutions to homelessness such as Housing First approaches and stronger tenant protections.
 - Beliefs about hard work and economic success as signs of personal goodness along with stereotypes about people who experience homelessness play a big role in shaping how Christian leaders and their congregations think about homelessness.
 - Often, leaders and their congregations see short-term acts of charity – what we think of as “soups and socks” – as an adequate response to homelessness.
- Some Christian leaders do not believe that churches have a role to play in solving homelessness or think that homelessness is an issue that faith communities cannot or should not be involved in.
- The lack of personal connection to homelessness or unstable housing and limited understanding about the causes and effective solutions are significant barriers to church engagement and action in support of systemic solutions.
- Homelessness and affordable housing aren’t the only topics that Christian faith leaders and advocates struggle to discuss with other Christian leaders and their congregations; the challenge extends to many issues about human rights and justice.
 - In conservative-leaning majority-white congregations leaders can find it difficult to build empathy across lines of racial difference or generate support for solutions that are perceived to be

progressive. For example, efforts to shift public funds to build housing can be seen as too progressive or “socialist” and met with disinterest or dissent.

- People in more conservative evangelical denominations tend to hear “do unto the least of me” and other messages emphasizing that Jesus was someone who loved the poor as being aligned with socialist narratives, which they immediately reject.
- The Christian leaders we spoke with who are working to solve homelessness named classic organizing methods as the most effective ways to connect with other Christian leaders and encourage their understanding and action. These include creating ladders of engagement, finding a champion inside the community to organize their peers and collective storytelling.

It may be tempting to hope that one strong message oriented to the values and stories of Christian teachings would move leaders and their congregations into action to help solve homelessness. But our interviews reinforced what we know about narrative change in general – no single story or message will shift the beliefs of diverse people who hold a range of identities, information sources, peer groups and political attitudes. It will take sustained, broad and shared effort. Below we provide narrative strategies and recommended messages to start the conversation and encourage the church’s role in solving homelessness.

NARRATIVE STRATEGIES TO BUILD CHRISTIAN SUPPORT FOR SOLUTIONS TO HOMELESSNESS

In order to reach “persuadable” or “opposition” audiences, leaders should develop strategic and sustained plans to engage people in self-reflection that allows them to wrestle with contradiction and build empathy across shared values.

Consider the following recommendations:

Engaging trusted messengers

- Consider who might be a trusted messenger to educate a pastor or make a request of a faith leadership committee.
- Sometimes, a pastor-to-pastor engagement will be the best opportunity to educate and invite another pastor to participate in homeless solutions given their shared leadership roles.

- Other times, advocates within faith communities have found that a person within the congregation with a powerful story to share or a personal commitment to solving homelessness may be most effective in building support among other congregants and eventually bringing the pastor into the shared work to advance proven solutions to homelessness.

Rely on storytelling from impacted people

- Both faith leaders and congregants hold dominant narratives, which tend to blame people who experience homelessness. Stories are [a proven way to connect people to an issue](#) and move them into new understanding and eventually, action.
- A person within the congregation who has a lived experience of homelessness and housing insecurity can begin a community conversation and reflection.
- While many congregations may lack diversity in experience, race, class or other cultural differences, the number of people who have experienced inadequate housing and homelessness or know someone who has is growing. Consider if trusted community members may already have a personal story to share that can kick off your community storytelling about when they've struggled and relied on help when needed. This can begin to shift perceptions about who experiences homelessness and who needs help.
- Invite storytellers with lived experiences of homelessness who have a relationship with the congregation – perhaps they are a respected member of the wider community – to share their story.
- Use films such as [Beyond the Bridge](#) to kick off community discussions about the root causes of homelessness and effective and humane solutions to homelessness.
- Tell stories about the role of other Christian communities doing powerful work to solve homelessness, such as leaders who've [successfully passed “Yes In God's Backyard” measures](#) to create homes on the congregation's land for seniors or people exiting homelessness. This helps show the role that churches can play.
- Amplify stories about Christian leaders who connect religious teaching to policy decisions to solve homelessness (or make it worse) such as [George Young's comments on the Oklahoma Senate's bill to ban providing services to people who experience homelessness in small towns and rural areas](#). “Young says, as a pastor, he can't square the bill's proposal with the Bible's teachings to help the needy and ‘love thy neighbor.’ ”

- Use storytelling groups with facilitated reflection questions to get each leader or member to reflect on their own experiences with needing or receiving support at some point in their lives and how that support made a difference for them.

Start early

- It takes time, consistency and repetition to shift widely held beliefs. Faith leaders and advocates for affordable housing can plant the seeds for long-term narrative change and action by starting early.
- Consider educating Christian faith leaders about the causes and solutions to homelessness in seminary school. Work with divinity schools and professors of theology to integrate causes and solutions to homelessness into the curriculum, inviting guest speakers and other educational opportunities to educate a new generation of faith leaders to understand the relationship between theology and homelessness.
- Leaders who teach young people can help a generation of Christians consider the root causes of homelessness.
 - Engage youth ministers and leaders at Christian educational institutions about the causes of homelessness and invite them into action to be part of the solution.

Use a ladder of engagement

- It's not realistic to ask other faith leaders or congregational leadership bodies to go from doing nothing about homelessness to using their land to create housing for people who have experienced homelessness. But ladders of engagement – moving from one small action, such as having a one-on-one conversation, to a larger action, such as visiting a group of people with a story to share – can be an effective way to build shared understanding, support and eventually more action.
- Participate alongside other faith leaders in building housing that people need through Habitat for Humanity or other programs. One leader we spoke with shared how new conversations became possible when pounding nails next to someone who otherwise wouldn't participate in a storytelling circle or direct face-to-face conversation. Leaders can use the in-person, purposeful project as an opportunity to share stories and build connections between the need for housing for families, causes of and solutions to homelessness and the role of the leader.

- Support an individual or family in the transition from a supported shelter into stable housing by generating cash and goods contributions, labor (such as moving items, helping install and set up a bed) and creating an active welcoming community.
- Collaborate with a local homeless service organization to host a safe parking program on the church parking site.
- Join a city-wide effort or faith-based coalition's campaign to increase the number of homes that are affordable to people with low incomes or for tenant protections.

MESSAGING THE CAUSES OF AND SOLUTIONS TO HOMELESSNESS AUDIENCES

Below are messages that can be used in conversations, written communications, press statements and more. Strong messages focus on shared values, name the root causes of homelessness and solutions available to house people. There is also language showing people who are taking action, which provides an opportunity for you to add your own call to action.

These messages are a guide, not a script. Some messages will resonate more than others and should be adapted to fit your 'voice' or the voice of your organization. Use what is helpful and add your own specifics after leaning into the shared values we want to highlight. We are all working to ensure everyone – no matter their race, religion or what they've been through in life – has a safe and affordable place to live and thrive.

Communicating About the Root Causes of Homelessness

- Whether you spend way too much of your paycheck on rent or see members of our church struggling to get by, it's clear that housing is too expensive for many people and there's not enough of it, especially for people who need to start over, who take care of family members with health issues or face sudden job loss. I think our church can help and wonder if you are interested in figuring out how we can put our faith into good action.
- No matter our race, our gender or where we were born, we all need a safe place to sleep each night. One of the top causes of homelessness for women is violence at the hands of their partner. They flee for safety with their children and often have no safe place to live. Even if they can keep their job, the high cost of housing keeps abuse survivors from regaining safety and hope. Interim housing for these families would provide safety and the chance to rebuild their lives.

- Share other people's stories. For example, "Homelessness was not part of my plan, but after I lost my job, I was evicted and forced to live on the streets. This was stressful and taught me that homelessness can happen to anyone. Thankfully, I wasn't fined or thrown in jail for trying to survive and sleep in the public park. Instead, thanks to my church, I received the help I needed to secure stable housing and a permanent job. The housing programs and support services made available to me helped me regain my dignity and hope."
- People work hard their whole lives and hope they can retire to spend time with their families. But the rising cost of housing means too many seniors and people with disabilities or on fixed incomes have been pushed out onto the streets. It doesn't have to be this way. Our city has enough space to create housing that seniors can afford, and our church might be able to play an important part in the solutions to our community's housing problems.

Communicating effective and compassionate solutions to homelessness

- No matter who we are or where we come from, we all need a place to come home to. That's why I want to talk with you about the [nearby church]. Their congregants came together to share the blessing of their community by using the land they have behind the church as housing for seniors with low incomes. That's real faith in action.
- Everyone, no matter our race, our faith or our zipcode, needs a safe place to sleep each night. Arresting and ticketing people with no place to live will only make homelessness worse. But when we provide people with the stability of a room of their own *and* services like mental health care, people get a chance to rebuild their lives.
- Our community will be stronger when everyone has a place to live and support like mental healthcare when we need it. But right now, the high cost of housing and not enough funding for support services means that too many people in our city have to sleep outside or in their cars. That's why I gave to the (name fund or organization here) to create apartment homes that will be built (name the place where they will be built). I'm glad we can use what we have to support people who need the stability of a place to call home.

To begin to shift long-held narratives we need to name our shared values, show the root causes of homelessness, illustrate how people working together can help solve homelessness and repeat these messages in lots of different ways. See housingnarrativelab.org/resources for additional resources on [advancing narratives about housing and care as a solution to homelessness](#) and general narrative change recommendations in our [Field Guide to Narrative Change](#).

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

In 2024, we interviewed seven diverse Christian faith leaders and faith-based community organizers in North Carolina, California, Tennessee, Minnesota, New Jersey and Indiana. Each has led congregations or housing and homelessness advocacy programs focused on engaging faith leaders. The leaders came from a range of denominations including evangelical, mainline Protestant and Universalist Unitarian. Thank you to each of the leaders who shared their time and knowledge with us.