

**Address by Netty Horton
CEO, CatholicCare, Archdiocese of Melbourne,
at the launch of the Australian Catholic Bishops’
Social Justice Statement 2018–2019**

***A Place to Call Home:
Making a home for everyone in our land***

St Patrick’s Cathedral Hall, Parramatta, 6 September 2018

Thank you, John, and thank you for the Acknowledgement of Country. It seems particularly appropriate this morning for me to also acknowledge the traditional owners of this land and Elders past and present.

Thank you also to Bishop Vincent Long, Jack de Groot and indeed to the Australian Catholic Bishops conference for inviting me to speak at the launch of this very important and very welcome Social Justice Statement *A Place to Call Home: Making a home for everyone in our land*.

Whenever I am asked to speak at an event on homelessness and disadvantage, it provides an opportunity to reflect on my own experiences and learnings over several decades of working in the sector in Australia.

I began working with homeless people in Australia about 30 years ago. I had just arrived from the UK and was surprised by the prominent role played by predominantly faith-based organisations in providing services and support to homeless and disadvantaged people. I had grown up in an environment of a – since dismantled – welfare state, based on entitlement, and with a community expectation of the provision of services by government. I was employed as a very green, but optimistic, outreach worker with people sleeping rough in and around the city of Melbourne. I rode my bicycle through the parks and lanes of Melbourne and received a fabulous orientation to Australia through the eyes and experiences of predominantly homeless men.

I visited appalling rooming houses, crawled through squats, picked up homeless people from the streets and negotiated accommodation with both private and community landlords. I also interviewed numerous homeless people gathering data about their lives and experiences and was educated by them about their pathways into homelessness.

I learned that these individuals became homeless for many and multiple reasons. I learned about the high prevalence of mental health and addictions, and a range of complex needs. I learned that homeless women were the most stigmatised even within the homeless population. But mostly I learned about the absence of positive relationships, and the

marginalised life of the people I met, and their exclusion from so many of the services and environments that I had taken for granted.

Most importantly, I learned that homeless people had exactly the same aspirations as me, and most of us. They wanted somewhere to live, yes, somewhere they could call home; they wanted a meaningful relationship; and they wanted a job. The exposure so intensely to the lives and experiences of these homeless people fired up a passion in me to try to bring about change – change to the lives of individuals and families, but mostly to address the injustices within our community which perpetuate poverty, disadvantage and homelessness across generations.

Since then I have spent much of my working life advocating for changes in our politics and systems to better provide for and alleviate homelessness for very disadvantaged people in our community.

So standing here this morning I feel both a sadness and an optimism about our capacity to address the issues of homelessness.

Dealing with the sadness (or should I say frustration?) first. You will have already noted that my experiences 30 years ago are not so different from today. Yes we have better mental health systems, smaller and individually targeted services, better understanding and more research than we can cope with in the areas of homelessness, but actually, we know that the rates and numbers of people who are homeless are increasing. As someone who has spent a career in advocacy around homelessness, it is somewhat dispiriting to realise that in numerical terms there has been little improvement, and that today we are dealing with a very broad homeless population – women and children escaping violence, young people, single women. And despite the acknowledgment that the provision of affordable housing can bring about immediate reduction in the numbers of people who are homeless, there is an overall lack of commitment and investment by government and the community in developing and providing access to housing. We seem to invest more in talking about other ways of funding housing, rather than funding development directly.

In some areas we have been asking for the same changes for all of those decades. As an example, working with people coming out of prison. At CatholicCare in Melbourne we have a chaplain or pastoral carer in every prison and custodial centre in Victoria. We have information from the source and I am horrified to learn of some of the stories and of people being discharged without any support and accommodation or preparation for the life outside. If we could invest a little more in support we would contribute to reducing both homelessness and recidivism and reduce overall costs to the individuals and the community.

However, my optimism is sparked by the strong Social Justice Statement being launched today, which calls on the whole community to make significant contributions to ending homelessness across Australia.

This Social Justice Statement asserts that there is an entitlement to housing as a human right. I know this is challenging for many – and it strongly outlines the damaging experiences of homelessness for individuals and the broader community.

The growing rate of homelessness in Australia is a real concern and it is very significant that the Australian Catholic Bishops have chosen to focus this statement and a call for action on homelessness and housing in Australia. There is also optimism – or potential optimism – because the ‘problem’ of homelessness is solvable. The call of 116,000 Australians a night on the entire population of 25 million is not such a huge one. We need improved levels of income support and assistance for the most vulnerable, for greater investment in public and community housing, and action to address the structural issues that overinflate the cost of housing. But even prior to this we must face a challenge of attitude – as individuals, as communities and as a nation. We must be careful not to romanticise poverty, equating it with a kind of simple and uncomplicated lifestyle; the reality is that the experience of poverty is complex, insecure and unsafe. As a community we need to stop pathologising homelessness – saying that people who are homeless ‘have something wrong with them’ or are without accommodation because of their own life choices. So often I have people telling me that a lot of homeless people choose to be homeless, yet I have never met anyone who makes this choice when offered real alternatives. I suspect this myth makes us feel better about dealing with the increasing visibility of homeless people. The overwhelming cause of homelessness is poverty, which is the responsibility of all of society to address. And we must challenge a view of the world that says that homelessness will always be with us – that it is unsolvable and someone else’s problem.

It is time for governments, and indeed all of the community, to assert that secure and affordable housing is a human right – and to act to make this a reality. We need a national strategy to address homelessness that combines the commitment of the Commonwealth, state and local governments as well as businesses and developers, the community sector and local community groups.

We are all in this together. Whether it’s school or parish groups raising awareness about homelessness or providing direct assistance; whether it’s social services and charities providing support and giving voice to some of the most vulnerable members of society; and where there are church and community groups looking to free up resources for the development of community housing; to policy makers and political leaders who are committed to ending homelessness and addressing its causes – we are all part of what you would have noticed is a growing movement to ensure everyone in Australia has a place to call home.

I do think the Church has an important role to play in bringing together these efforts. Too often, the actions of individuals in providing for individuals are not recognised as part of a collective action. Within local parishes for instance, there are daily examples of people providing support and assistance to individuals and families which transform their lives, but we are not able to represent these efforts collectively to paint a real picture of the needs and

responses within the community. Through our parishes, schools, social services, health and aged care, and other resources, the church has the power to influence the debate extensively and I am very encouraged by today's Statement, which represents the real interest and opportunity for all in the Catholic family, along with others, to take action on this critical and shameful issue.

As the Bishops say in this Statement:

Homelessness destroys the bonds of solidarity and 'neighbourhood'. Its roots lie in structural injustices – a market that fails to accommodate, policies that distort access to that market, and programs that are failing to address the symptoms of homelessness. We must remember that the difficult circumstances surrounding the homelessness of [various] groups ... cannot be treated simply as a collection of individual tragedies that evoke feelings of sympathy. They require a national response that addresses the structural causes of homelessness as a shared social responsibility.

In closing I will draw your attention to a parable which has become a guiding influence on me in recent years. This is Luke 18:1–8, the parable of the persistent widow. In it, a judge who lacks compassion is repeatedly approached by a poor widow, seeking justice. Initially rejecting her demands, he eventually honours her request so he will not be worn out by her persistence. This parable can guide both individual and institutional action. Just as the story of the persistent widow can guide my own activities in the area of housing and homelessness, I like to suggest that it can drive church action in the social justice arena, and in particular in the area of housing and homelessness. The Church – or the family of the Church – should behave like the persistent widow, reminding our community constantly about the injustices perpetuating chronic disadvantage across Australia. Most importantly we need to join together and collectively represent the view that we need to do more and homelessness is preventable – and the Church has the critical role to play in bringing this influence together.

Thank you.