

Witness to Reconciliation

Dave De Block

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I work for the son of a Jewish carpenter

When asked to speak on my involvement as an advocate for housing in the city of Holland I was hesitant, but said yes. Personally I'm a behind the scenes guy who would rather problem solve in the shadows.

Let me give you little history about how I came to Hope Church. I was involved with a group of Christians worshipping together in a house church when I took my first job in Holland, but I was active in Holland Peacemakers (thank you, Elsie Lamb and Joanne Brooks) and Ah Mun food coop. Both met at Hope Church. When the house church dissolved I joined Hope Church. Soon I was actively involved at Hope and was a deacon when Kristen and I met so she joined me here.

But how did my interest in housing for all evolve? I grew up in Paterson NJ living in the house my grandfather built. We were a family of 5, plus my grandmother living on a typical city lot that was 25 wide by 100 feet deep. Yes, that is the measurement of the lot, not the house. I grew up in a small (some would say adequate) and loving home. My parents decided to remain in the hood when most folks, and even our Union Reformed Church, fled to the suburbs as the neighborhood became more Black and Puerto Rican. I came to Hope College for 3 years and then the University of Michigan for a degree in Mechanical Engineering. When I graduated, I looked for work that would allow me to be a peacemaker by not looking at weapon or military-based jobs.

My career began at Herman Miller office furniture in product development. Then an opportunity at ODL brought me to building products. During my time there I developed many new products bringing natural light into the built environment. While there a new focus on measuring energy losses and gains through windows, doors and skylights brought me to working with the National Fenestration Rating Council (NFRC) for ODL. Developing standards evolved into becoming a code compliance specialist and also lead to my work with committees for the City of Holland.

Housing and Construction Board of Appeals addressed requested variances and other housing issues. In the mid 90's the city council empowered the "Ourstreet" Committee (OC) to address the deteriorating central city.

There was city, state and federal money to spend improving the "ourstreet" neighborhood. Any project visible from the street was eligible for funding. I was on the design committee there and also became committee chair. In the committee's 20 yr history the core city became and remains more livable. Maybe we did too good of a job of making the core city of Holland more desirable as United Way recently published a 6000 Ottawa County unit housing need (rundown rental units making them affordable are now rare). As city staffing was reduced and committees merged, the OC was blended into the Neighborhood Improvement Committee and they now advise funding for housing issues.

Around the same time, 30 years ago, I was asked to join the board of Lakeshore Habitat for Humanity. Habitat's mission is to work with families to build simple, decent housing. When I started

working with LHFH, there was no paid staff and it became my other 40hr/ week job. I oversaw our first executive director hire. During my 6 years on the board, and ever since, I do much of their design detail work and have many of the drawings on my home pc. Since the efficient use of materials has always been important to this “Dutchman” by working on designs, I can positively impact the way in which materials are used. These days, I build with the Wednesday crew whenever possible.

As word got out that I was willing to do design and drawing work, I was approached by both Jubilee Ministries and Homecor. Jubilee Ministries is working to maintain the value of the core city neighborhoods by rehabilitating houses as well as building new homes. Their hope is that by increasing owner-occupied homes at all levels, there will be increased stability in the core city. Homecor works to make existing housing stock more livable. They are currently both working on 16th and Central Avenue. Homecor renovated 3 of the larger older homes and added garages. Watch as Jubilee is building 6 small houses (475 sf) there as well. A new idea for Holland.

LHFH builds simple housing with families on the edge of making it. Homecor works to make existing core city housing stock livable and still affordable. Jubilee works to keep the neighborhood up by taking core city houses that need major updating and renews them for the upwardly mobile and empty nesters that want to be near town. The City of Holland has boards and commissions addressing housing concerns from a variety of perspectives. I find many places right here for the gifts I’ve been blessed with. Join me as the spirit moves you.