

FOXES HAVE HOLES

CHRISTIAN
REFLECTIONS
ON BRITAIN'S
HOUSING NEED

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Chapter Eight

For Richer and Richer...

Paul Lusk

Generation Rent

Fifty years ago, Britain had 16.5 million homes and a population of 51.3 million – one home for every 3.1 people. The average house price was about three times the annual wage of a male industrial worker. So reader, if you are in your twenties, your grandfather (though not your grandmother) could very likely afford the mortgage on a house if in regular work. By the 1990s, there was one home for every 2.5 people, and prices – at about four times average annual wage – still left purchase within the reach of your working parents, especially with a second salary taken into account. Now there are nearly 28 million homes for a population of 64 million – one home for every 2.3 people – but the average price,¹ at around seven times average annual salary, puts house purchase beyond the reach of most employees. Welcome to Generation Rent.

The conventional wisdom is that there are too few homes for the demand, and prices reflect this shortfall, so the only response is to build more homes. This leaves a question as to why, in real terms after allowing for general inflation, house prices have more than trebled in thirty years while the growth in the housing stock has more than kept up with that of population.² So is there really a housing ‘shortage’? Is that an adequate explanation of house-price movements? If not, what else is going on in our housing markets?

My answer will consider the three ways we occupy homes – as owners, as social tenants, and as private tenants – against the background of ‘welfare state’ housing as it developed in the second half of the last century. I will show that the ‘housing crisis’ is really about distribution, though there may still be a case for developing housing unit numbers. The distribution crisis arises mostly from welfare housing policies and their uneven effect. Public discussion of housing is shot through with propaganda, wilful ignorance and the subordination of evidence to political myth. Truth can free us from myth, but only if we can first

acknowledge the stake which most of us (including this writer and the majority of voters) have in its construction. This may be painful but we owe Generation Rent an explanation of the mess we are leaving them to live with.

Please Please Me: The Rise and Fall of Owner-Occupation

Let's start with those grandparents and parents – the people who grew up with the National Health Service and gave birth to more of their number into the 1970s. Having been a teenager when the Beatles topped the hit parade, I think of us as the Please Please Me generation – the one that learnt to take for granted free healthcare, free education and free love. Mostly we got homes for free. *Free?* Yes – if you consider that growth in house prices more than covered the cost of borrowing. An average buyer in 1969 saw the cash value of their home grow by over 10 per cent a year for the life of a twenty-five-year mortgage, when interest rates were generally at or below this figure. Then from 1994 to 2007, house values continued the same rate of growth but now interest rates were at or below 6 per cent. Over the forty years up to 2007, the consumer mindset became fixed as 'Borrow as much on mortgage as we can; it will more than pay for itself'. And then with relaxed financial controls, a corresponding mindset entered the banks: 'Lend as much on mortgage as we can; our balance sheets can only get fatter.' The crash of 2008 was the result, largely, of the house-price Ponzi scheme that printed money for the Please Please Me generation.

To understand this, we need to look back to the creation of the post-war welfare state and in particular to the thought of T.H. Marshall. In *Citizenship and Social Class*,³ Marshall said that in a modern democracy, three goods are to be provided to all to a basic standard. These are health, education and housing. Citizens have a 'social right' to these. Health, education and housing can all be provided through the market, but giving people money to buy them does not promote equality – giving poorer people money might help the poor but it squeezes out those in the middle who cannot compete with the self-funded rich and the state-aided poor. The answer, according to Marshall, is state supply to a roughly equal standard for all. He expected that, in time, council housing would be like education and the health service – provided by the state and available to everyone on more or less equal terms.

By the mid-1970s, one UK household in three was a tenant of the state, but the major form of tenure became owner-occupation. Sustained growth in house prices dates from 1959, when the House

Purchase and Housing Act empowered government to fund building societies to increase lending for older and cheaper homes. Soon after, Schedule A income tax for owner-occupiers – which taxed the ‘imputed rent’ flowing from land ownership – was abolished. Meanwhile tax relief on mortgage interest – which counted as a cost for Schedule A purposes – was kept. So now both public finance and subsidy promoted borrowing for home ownership. House prices grew and profits on sales by residents were exempt from tax.

In 2015, nearly half of owner-occupiers no longer have mortgages – they are ‘debt-free’. Most households headed by a pensioner are in this category. Among homeowners with mortgages, the average mortgage debt is £83,000, and their household income, at £43,000, is £10,000 above the national average. Most of these spend under a third of their income on servicing their debt, and could comfortably deal with a rise in interest rates.⁴ So the majority of the population pays either nothing, or a comfortably affordable sum, for their housing. This majority represents older people and the more affluent.

Those wishing to enter home ownership face restrictions imposed on lenders by the Bank of England. They (mostly) cannot borrow more than 4.5 times the household income, and a ‘stress test’ examines their ability to cope with a rise in interest rates by three percentage points within five years.⁵ With starter rates for mortgages now at around 2.5 per cent, this means allowing for rates to more than double in five years. The stated aim of these restrictions is to limit (though not prevent) the expected rise in house prices.⁶ The effect is that the cost of capital to new homeowners is artificially calculated to equal the rate of return (up to 6 per cent) generally offered to private investors in the rental market – in other words, to prevent new buyers from competing on price with private investors who can borrow cheaply and interest-only on a 75 per cent loan-to-value ratio.

As the Housing Minister told a parliamentary enquiry in September 2015: ‘Government is determined to create a bigger, better private rented sector.’ The main means to achieve this aim is to limit the flow of new homeowners, so that the medium for allocating stock to new (mainly younger) households is private investment and rental rather than the earlier tradition of mortgage-funded home ownership.

The Fall and Rise of Private Renting

The post-war vision of housing for all was fulfilled – but not by the single form of state tenure that Marshall had expected. Under Thatcher,

Major and Blair, council housing gradually declined – giving way first to the ‘right to buy’, then to stock transfer as governments grew housing associations as the preferred provider of what became known as ‘social housing’. Owner-occupation peaked at 69 per cent of the stock in 2003. By 2010 the share of housing associations in the stock was overtaking that of council housing. But the big story became the return of private renting. In the five years to 2013, as the UK housing stock grew by 648,000, the number of owner-occupiers dropped by 380,000 and the number of privately rented homes rose by 930,000. Privately rented homes now amount to about one home in five. If these trends continue, private renting will overtake owner-occupation before 2040. And government policy is ‘determined’ that these trends should continue.

Housing: How Do We Occupy It?

Most people in Britain expect to live in a durably constructed enclosure fixed to land. These dwellings can easily last for a century or more. The predominant type of dwelling in the UK is a three-bedroomed house, and one of these might once have been occupied by a single family with two or three generations under one roof, but now with little adaptation it can provide for several unrelated, single income-earners. Most of us see this kind of turnover, in all directions, happening around us.

In theory, the better the housing market, the more efficiently the people looking for homes will fit into the available stock. This implies that there must be a way of drawing some people out of homes when their occupation of that property is no longer an efficient use of space. In a pure, free rental market, all this is done by price expressed as the rent charged – the rent purchases a right to occupy space for a period of time. Owners need to be able to refix the rent regularly, and tenants can only occupy the property for a fixed term. These are the conditions of the private rental market today.

Measuring by the number of bedrooms, people in the UK currently occupy at least twice as much housing as we need.⁸ A third of us have two or more spare bedrooms, a figure that rises to 47 per cent among homeowners, while 83 per cent of homeowners have more space than they need, compared with 49 per cent for private tenants⁹ and 39 per cent for social renters. The proportion having exactly the space they need is 15 per cent for owner-occupiers compared with 52 per cent for social renters.

In justifying the ‘bedroom tax’,¹⁰ ministers pointed to under-

occupation and low turnover in social rented homes. Social renters are much more efficient than owner-occupiers in using the space they occupy. The turnover in social renting is about 5 per cent per year: about the same as for owner-occupation, compared with 40 per cent in the private sector. The private rented sector, with short tenancies and free-market pricing, routinely reallocates housing among users, and the government finds this efficiency attractive. But if the aim of policy is to spread these benefits, then the real target must be to reduce owner-occupation and transfer stock to private rental investors – which is in fact what we are seeing. Even so, the point where most stock is allocated through a rental market will not be reached for many decades. Meanwhile new waves of the young rely on the private rental market, where stock is limited by under-occupation and low turnover elsewhere, and prices reflect this unequally distributed supply.

Whose Benefit?

Private tenants at the lower end of the market¹¹ can claim Housing Benefit (HB) to pay all or part of their rent. HB is now the main way that the UK supports rented housing. It costs £25 billion per year to house about a fifth of the UK population; 36 per cent of tenants in the British private sector receive HB, rising to 71 per cent of those in the social rented sector. The average award is £108.82 per week for private tenants, £92.68 for housing association tenants and £82.38 for council tenants.¹² In the past much of this was paid directly to landlords, but with the coming of Universal Credit (UC), tenants are starting to receive cash monthly in arrears and pay their own rent.

At the time of writing, UC is still being phased in, and the full results will not be seen for some time. Pilot studies¹³ showed that UC did have benefits for some tenants in improved money management and cost awareness, and greater motivation to find work. But for landlords, the result was sharply increased arrears and higher costs in income recovery, which is always an expensive part of housing management.

What Big Teeth You Have, Grandma: The Rise (and Fall?) of Housing Associations

There are about sixteen thousand housing associations registered with the Homes and Communities Agency in England, providing over 2.6 million homes. This compares with up to 2 million private landlords¹⁴ owning some 5.2 million homes, often paying estate agents to manage tenancies, order repairs and collect rents.

Each housing association operates on a vastly larger scale than the

great majority of private landlords but many associations are relatively small. However, around sixty associations own ten thousand homes or more. How have they got so big, when there seems to be no corresponding drive to scale-up among private landlords? One reason is development – through government grants to build or improve homes, and investment by local authorities. Another factor is VAT on running costs. Landlords can save significant amounts by ‘insourcing’ such things as repairs, computer systems, accounting and gas servicing – using their own directly employed staff rather than purchasing from VAT-registered contractors.

Many housing associations have developed housing-for-sale products, which are not within their charitable purposes but are held by non-charitable side-companies; some have also developed vehicles to trade freely in the private rented market.¹⁵ The ‘blended’ housing association – part private, part social – is attractive if we think that the next step for private renting is to move away from the ‘accidental’ landlord and instead offer a more mature, professionally managed investment vehicle. Others think a fundamental clash of values may impede such ‘blending’.¹⁶

Housing associations earn £11.6 billion per year from rents, mostly paid out of HB. They spend £5.4 billion of this on management and maintenance – about £40 per home, per week. This is big business, covering such things as repairs, rent collection, lettings and handling neighbour disputes. Large-scale ownership makes sense when it comes to borrowing, major improvements and maybe governance, but anyone looking at owner-occupation and the private sector can see that everyday repairs, lettings and rent collection are easily handled on a much smaller scale. There are potential gains in cost and quality if management and ownership are split, as has happened with council housing in the past. Such a split was the basis of a strategy for future regulation of the sector by Professor Martin Cave in 2007.¹⁷

Since the 1980s, government has looked to housing associations to provide its new social housing, through a mix of grant and of private finance repaid out of rents – normally met from HB. As a condition of permitting new housing, authorities require a proportion of ‘social’ or ‘affordable’ homes, so developers wanting to build homes for sale use some of the profits on other homes to subsidise the price of those earmarked for a housing association. The Coalition Government expected social landlords to charge a higher ‘affordable’ rent not just for the new home, but also for other homes falling vacant through turnover.

Housing associations can make a profit on their management and maintenance operations. Following the Cave review, regulation expected landlords to work with tenants to outsource these operations, and share the proceeds, but in practice this rarely happens. The profits from various sources can be packaged across a large association, or better still a group of associations, in order to build balance sheets that attract private investors. Often this has meant the loss of hard-won tenant involvement and local identity as smaller associations are merged and group structures are 'collapsed' under the control of centralised boards.

The affordable homes programme started under the Coalition Government built 170,000 homes in four years, at a cost of nearly £20 billion, of which £15 billion was raised in the money markets by large social housing groups. Raising such money to provide good homes for people with low incomes is not an achievement to be sniffed at. It requires highly skilled financial professionals answering to boards that speak their language, and complex business plans.

In July 2015, the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a cut in rents of 1 per cent per year for three years, in order, he said, to reduce HB. In so doing, he put every housing association business plan through a shredder. It was a crude reminder of how the Treasury sees the social housing sector and the sophisticated development programme negotiated with the Coalition Government: it is one conduit through which the government procures welfare housing out of benefits paid by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), and it's a tap the government can turn up or down as it chooses. As a result of increased political risk, housing associations will pay more for capital. The social housing regulator had a helpful suggestion about how to prepare for that. Associations should 'consider merger'.¹⁸

A wider political agenda was at work.¹⁹ On 9 September 2015, *The Times* reported:

George Osborne has attacked housing associations for failing to deliver the homes the country needs.

The 1,500 state-backed providers of affordable properties are inefficient and their performance is 'not particularly impressive', the chancellor told a House of Lords economic affairs committee as he defended the government's policy to extend right-to-buy to them.

‘Is the housing association sector doing what it was designed to do, a vehicle for building homes?’ he asked. ‘The last data I saw, four out of five associations built no houses at all.’

This effectively classes associations as ‘inactive’ if they do not build homes. The business that goes with owning existing estates – managing and maintaining homes, finding and welcoming new tenants, settling neighbour disputes and building the relationships that sustain thriving neighbourhoods – is not ‘activity’. Housing is understood to mean sticking things together to create more enclosures, not the economic relations that mediate the use of what is already there. This thinking views housing as ‘stock’ but not ‘flow’.

Whether or not housing associations and councils back off from stalling the expensive right-to-buy policy, I suspect that the next Conservative manifesto will include privatising at least some associations.

In October and November 2015, the government announced a series of policy changes. ‘Affordable’ homes will in future be to buy rather than to rent. New social housing tenancies are to be time-limited to up to five years. A higher rate of stamp duty will apply to properties bought for private renting and private investors’ relief on buy-to-let mortgages will be limited to the basic rate of tax. This shows a government moving quickly with presentational effort to address the political risks of the shift towards private renting, but the practical effect is unlikely to be more than marginal. Social housing now has little part in the policy mix.

Housing Myths

For a long time, new household formation overshot predictions as the number of single-person households grew. However, Professor Alan Holmans’ analysis of the 2011 census, published in 2013,²⁰ reports an ‘abrupt’ change: fewer households than forecast, despite a higher population, compared with projections made as recently as 2008. This is partly due to more multi-generation households, maybe due to economic pressures keeping more young people with parents.

But Holmans said the ‘most striking’ trend was falling growth of single-person households. Approaching a million homes we had been told were ‘needed’ turn out not to be. And why? There are many more couple households among those aged 35+, most markedly among those aged 45 to 64. It’s that pesky Please Please Me generation again, upsetting household projections by unexpectedly ceasing to live alone.

Holmans' projection assumes some return to the historic trend towards lone living, combined with the two factors that drive population growth: we are going to live longer, and we will continue to attract immigrants. But what that means for housing demand is, in truth, guesswork.

Will immigrants stay and grow families? Probably, but they might tend to form larger households. How will older people want to live? We cannot know, and previous efforts to provide for a supposedly preferred lifestyle came unstuck when we built too many small 'sheltered' flats. Demographers' terms such as 'household-forming age' become less meaningful as people enjoy their cultural and economic liberty to start later and then build a succession of households over a lifetime.

Our level of housing provision, at one home per 2.3 of population, is not low by international standards. If population rises as expected, and we want to maintain the current household size, then we will need to build 4 million homes in 20 years. At current housebuilding rates, around 120,000 per year, the average size will rise to 2.4. So do we really need more housing than is enjoyed in the USA (2.6) or Australia and New Zealand (2.7)? But if we look at Germany, with its thriving rental housing market, the ratio is 2.1. To emulate that, we need housebuilding to exceed 300,000 per year.

Meanwhile the Housing Minister promises 1 million new homes by 2020, and the drive to build new homes is combined with the political priority to protect the green belt. The result is mounting pressure on existing urban sites – most acutely, but not only, in London. Developers and large housing associations partner in programmes of 'densification.'²¹ Housing associations, the 'goodies' in previous iterations of anti-clearance struggles, now find themselves fronting apparently ruthless commercial consortia in confrontation with resident groups and activists.²² When the time comes to explain the failure to achieve 1 million homes, housing associations may be sufficiently unpopular to be a politically convenient scapegoat.

What Is To Be Done?

The housing crisis is first and foremost one of distribution. It arises from post-war welfare housing policies which determined that 'social rights' would endow generations with property rights extending through life and beyond. Now, in a sample set of ten households, three are homeowners paying nothing; another three are owners paying relatively little compared with income and property value; another three

have their housing costs met partly or wholly by the state through benefit and rent regulation; and one pays the full market rent. That last one is likely to be a young worker in a middle-income bracket. Those with free or cheap housing consume more than they need. In the long transition to post-welfare housing, supply pressure is displaced especially onto market-rent payers. Their number will grow.

Devising policy to deal with this is not especially difficult. We could, for example, charge for under-occupation by counting imputed rent on land owned as taxable income. An occupancy allowance for each resident would offset the charge. Taxing imputed rent could also apply to land with planning permission. This is of course a controversial idea; but it seems to me that if the 'housing crisis' is to be properly understood and its origins and implications accepted (especially by the Please Please Me generation of debt-free homeowners) then it would be a practical way forward towards rebalancing the housing market. Some may fear that even floating such an idea is to legitimise the 'bedroom tax'. For clarification, my proposal would not affect tenants and landlords. With the 'bedroom tax', the withdrawn HB for 'spare room subsidy' applies only to poorer working-age households (not to pensioners), and to the category of consumers who are in fact the most efficient users of housing stock. It is intrinsically unfair and largely irrelevant to housing market reform.

But selling policy is a different matter, when the majority of voters have a vested interest in the current system.

We need, I think, an informed debate on two key questions.

1. What kind of tenure do young people and other future householders want?

The pressure group Generation Rent (GR) suggests that most want to become owner-occupiers. But that would need a return to relaxed lending conditions and, probably, prolonged house-price growth. Is that what we want? If not, what are the alternatives? I think most people would say that longer-term tenancies would enable people to plan. The private rental market, as it matures, may move in this direction. But another option is for medium-term leases (say from five to twenty years). These could be sold by the kind of 'secondary housing market' vehicle proposed by GR.²³ It could own freehold, sell leases and revalue its assets periodically; leaseholders (individuals, co-ops or landlords) could receive a premium based on revaluation.

2. What scale of new build do we want to accommodate?

There is no certainty about what we 'need' to meet future 'demand.' Pressure to 'densify' cities threatens losing green amenity from where people need it – close to home. We could consider flexible 'modular' garden-city extensions, along the lines suggested in the winning entry to the 2014 Wolfson Economics Prize,²³ with infrastructure in place to support amenities and add housing when and if the demand is there. But as with tenure, the key to progress is an informed debate with a level of public literacy about density, cost and the real benefits of falling household size, rather than the current atmosphere of frenzy and bullying about imagined necessities.

Before any sensible discussion of our housing future can begin, the task is to speak through the noise of myth and propaganda and build an audience ready to discuss an awkward truth: our housing model has for long been unsustainable, and the upcoming generations should not be left alone to bear the cost of its failure.

- (Perth: Rural Forum, 1984).
- 2 See www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/About/Methodology/UrbanRuralClassification
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 - 6 The story of community-based housing associations is told in R. Young, *Annie's Loo: The Govan Origins of Scotland's Community Based Housing Associations* (Glendaruel: Argyll).
 - 7 Hunter, *From the Low Tide of the Sea*.
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 - 9 Rural Affairs and Environment Committee, *5th Report, 2009 (Session 3) Rural Housing* (Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament, 2009).
 - 10 OECD, *Rural Policy Reviews: Scotland, UK* (Paris: OECD, 2009).
 - 11 D. Alexander, *Rural Housing Burdens: How Effective Have They Been?* (Dunfermline: Carnegie UK, 2011).
 - 12 Energy Advisory Service, *Fuel Poverty Report 2014* (Edinburgh: TEAS / Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, 2014).
 - 13 Planning Advice Note 2/2010 – *Affordable Housing and Housing Land Audits, Scottish Government* (Edinburgh, 2010).

Chapter 8

- 1 House prices are from the Nationwide house price index. As only a fraction of homes are sold in any one period, the actual average transaction cost is adjusted in any index to provide a 'typical' figure. For a fuller study of indexing, see Acadata, 'Which Houseprice Index?' (July 2014).
- 2 It is often said that housebuilding programmes were much larger in the past, which is true. But the large-scale, public-sector housebuilding of the mid-twentieth century was part of huge 'slum clearance' programmes, so the actual net stock growth was much less than the scale of building. UK's housing stock relative to population has grown fairly steadily.
- 3 T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge

- University Press, 1950).
- 4 'The Impact of Interest Rates on the Household Sector', in the Bank of England quarterly bulletin, Q4 2014 <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/Documents/quarterlybulletin/2014/qb14q405.pdf>
 - 5 <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/financialstability/Pages/fpc/intereststress.aspx>
 - 6 <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/jun/26/bank-of-england-limit-large-loans-housebuyers-mortgage-lenders>
 - 7 Social housing is likely to move towards fixed-term tenancies in accordance with Coalition legislation.
 - 8 These figures are from the 2011 UK census accessed through NOMIS tables for England and Wales.
 - 9 The dataset used here includes small numbers of rent-free and old 'fair rent' regulated tenancies.
 - 10 Officially known as the 'spare room subsidy', this restricts the amount of housing benefit paid to tenants who 'under-occupy' social housing. This currently affects about 450,000 tenants who lose an average of £15.24 per week, which they need to find by other means such as saving on other expenditure or sub-letting a room. The 'bedroom tax' was introduced by the Coalition Government and brought social housing into line with the system already applying in the private rented sector.
 - 11 The ceiling for private sector HB is set by the Local Housing Allowance representing the lower end of the rental market in each area. For details and local rates see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-local-housing-allowances-rates-broad-rental-market-areas>
 - 12 HB caseload statistics for Great Britain, May 2015.
 - 13 DWP, *Direct Payment Demonstration Projects: Key Findings of the Programme Evaluation* (December 2014).
 - 14 *Daily Telegraph* (22 October 2014).
 - 15 For example, Fizzy Living, a subsidiary of Thames Valley Housing Association, specialises in rented housing for young professionals.
 - 16 For an interesting insight into this debate from a private-sector perspective, see on the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors website: www.rics.org/uk/news/news-insight/comment/social-ambitions-the-risks-facing-housing-associations-moving-into-the-prs/#
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 - 20 ‘Home Truths’, London First (1 March 2014) http://londonfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/LF_HOUSING_REPORT.pdf
 - 21 <http://www.oceanmediagroup.co.uk/features/housingprotests/>
 - 22 In its 2015 ‘Queens speech’: http://www.generationrent.org/demand_a_queens_speech_on_housing
 - 23 <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/WolfsonPrize2014/20140827%20rudlin%20stage%202.pdf>

Chapter 9

- 1 Matthew 8:20, NRSV.
- 2 See Exodus 2:22; 1 Peter 2:11.
- 3 Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), p. 51.
- 4 Andrew Francis, *Shalom: The Jesus Manifesto* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2016), ‘Introduction’.
- 5 Author’s paraphrase.
- 6 Genesis 1:27, NRSV; see Matthew 19:4.
- 7 Francis, *Shalom*, chapter 2.
- 8 Matthew 8.
- 9 John 11.
- 10 Acts 10.
- 11 Acts 16.
- 12 Acts 18.
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- 14 Robert Banks, *Going to Church in the First Century* (Beaumont, TX: Seedsowers Christian Publishing House, 1980).
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- 16 Alan Kreider and Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2010), p. 215.
- 17 Ian Adams, *Cave – Refectory – Road*, publisher’s back-cover comment (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2010).
- 18 Brother Ramon, *Franciscan Simplicity: Following St. Francis Today*