

Diocese of Honolulu • Office of the Bishop • www.catholichawaii.org
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May 10, 2009
Feast of Father Damien DeVeuster, SS.CC.

To the People of the Diocese of Honolulu

Dear Brothers and Sisters:

Peace be with you!

When Blessed Damien and Blessed Marianne began their work among the patients with Hansen's disease, one of their first priorities was to assure suitable housing for all the people they served. They relied on their faith in God and the generosity of others to accomplish their goal of making life more livable for the people they served, and they collaborated with government agencies and other charitable organizations. We in Hawaii are blessed by the example of these two saintly people who gave witness to Jesus in very concrete and practical ways.

The lack of affordable housing in Hawaii is a challenge that is constantly before us. The visits to parishes in preparation of our pastoral plan – the Diocesan Road Map for Pastoral, Program, and Facility Needs 2008-2013 – surfaced a strong desire among the people of the diocese to address the issue of homelessness. It is one of the priorities of our Road Map (see www.catholichawaii.org).

Many homeless people are living on our beaches, in their vehicles or in other places not meant for human habitation. Many others live in shelters provided by the State or non-profit agencies. Some families share houses or apartments with other families, crowding into facilities designed for only a single family. Many of our young local people are forced to move to the Mainland because there is such a scarcity of affordable housing here in Hawaii.

The challenge of a lack of affordable housing is already being addressed by the State, the Federal government, and by many non-profit agencies. Yet their efforts, as valiant as they may be, are simply not able to keep up with the demands.

We Catholics are the largest Church in Hawaii (one out of five people is Catholic, 20% of Hawaii), and we are blessed with a tremendous variety of gifts and talents. For some time now, I have been meeting with a "think tank" of people who believe that, if properly mobilized, the Catholic Church could make a huge impact on this crisis. So I am writing to all the Catholics of the Diocese of Honolulu to ask you to consider what you can do to address this critical social issue. The plan we envision seems simple, but I am sure its implementation will be complex and taxing. Yet our faith in Jesus Christ calls us to respond to the basic needs of our sisters and brothers. We are also aware that people who do not belong to our Church will be happy to offer their talents and resources as well to collaborate in this plan, and we look forward to working with anyone who may be interested in joining us.

We have established an Office of Affordable Housing, which is ably headed by Carol Ignacio, Director of the Office of Social Ministries. The Office of Affordable Housing will conduct an educational program and will solicit and receive donations of land and of money to provide more affordable housing throughout our islands. It will also identify skilled professionals who could offer their talents to work on various aspects of the goal.

Here are some ideas about how we hope to implement the plan. It is essential that prayer be included as an integral part of each of these gatherings.

- Call together Catholic realtors to reflect on what they can do to help solve this challenge by identifying potential properties for affordable housing of various kinds and create a plan to acquire them.
- Call together Catholic attorneys who would volunteer their time to offer advice on the transfers of properties, and to tend to other legal matters.
- Gather Catholic bankers and financial planners to search out possible sources of funding for land purchase, building costs and maintenance.
- Ask Catholic facilities managers for advice on policies regarding the housing units to be developed.
- Ask Catholic land owners to consider donations of land parcels, of various sizes, for affordable housing..
- Call together Catholic developers to discuss how we can work in the long term to make sure that enough affordable housing is available to meet all the needs of our community.
- Gather Catholic social workers to formulate plans to meet the social service needs of housing clients.
- Gather Catholic healthcare workers to offer health services to clients who may need them.

Once the Affordable Housing plan is established, we hope to mobilize Catholics and others interested in the issue, so that families or parishes can be sponsors for families seeking affordable housing but who may need some training in financial management, maintenance, or educational needs.

I ask that every parish pastoral council discuss this letter and report the results of the discussion to Carol Ignacio at (808) 935-3050 [or toll-free at (877) 935-3050], or at cignacio@rcchawaii.org. The Office of Affordable Housing will provide an educational kit that can be used by pastoral councils, youth groups, and others, so that we can accept the challenge of wrapping our arms around this crucial issue. I am sure that the faith of our people and their desire to serve the Lord by serving those most in need will help us to surface many good ideas and develop wonderful resources that will move us toward a lasting solution to the affordable housing crisis. We will continue to cooperate with our government agencies and other churches and non-profits involved with this issue. But we pray that our grass-roots mobilization will yield great dividends for years to come.

Finally, please pray for the blessing of success on our efforts, since they are not for our own glory but for the glory of God.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Larry Silva". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Larry Silva
Bishop of Honolulu