

ULI FRANCE PARIS 28TH NOVEMBER 2025 BISHOP JAMES JONES

Mesdames et Messieurs, je suis honore de contribuer a votre conference importante au sujet de la transformation.

I owe my own awareness of the environmental crisis and the need to change to young people. A quarter of a century ago I marked the new millennium by visiting 16 schools and meeting with hundreds of 16 to 18 year olds. I wanted to hear about their dreams and dreads of the future and to share with them the importance of faith as a source of hope. I asked them on a scale of 0 to 10 how worried they were about the future of the planet. I asked them to put up their hands if they had placed themselves between 5 and 10. To my surprise in every one of the 16 schools 100% of the hands went up. I then asked them to what extent should we do something about it on a scale of 0 to 10. Zero is 'don't bother', 10 is 'do something urgently'. When I asked for those who had placed themselves between 5 and 10 then 98/99% of hands shot up.

This challenged me to rethink my own attitude to the environment. It led to a new understanding of our responsibility for the earth and of the line in Lord's Prayer for God's will to be done on earth as it is done in Heaven. It's a prayer and a hope for the earthing of heaven, for a new and transformed world.

I have spent the last 25 years working for a more sustainable planet including chairing the British Government's Independent Panel on the future of Forests and Woodlands. There was a popular uprising when the Government threatened to sell off the National Forests. I was asked to chair an Independent Commission.

We recommended that the Forests should be held in Trust for the nation because they were good for people, good for nature and good for the green economy.

I wrote in our report: “Our forests and woods are nature’s playground for the adventurous, museum for the curious, hospital for the stressed, cathedral for the spiritual and a livelihood for the entrepreneur”.

Wood is one of nature’s most sustainable resources.

When we were doing our research we visited The Forest of Dean with its ancient oak trees. I made some comment about how wonderful nature was. The local forester challenged me. “Bishop, that’s not a natural landscape, that’s a political landscape. Those trees were planted to build ships for the navy.”

In that rebuke there was an important truth: every landscape is political for what is created and built in every generation reflects the values and priorities of that era. And that’s the point and the challenge of your conference. To what extent does your built environment express the urgency of the current crisis and the imperative to take seriously the changing climate and the need for the built environment to be transformed and sustainable.

Over the last thirty years I have also been involved in the regeneration of two great northern cities in England – Hull and Liverpool. Ahead of Liverpool becoming European Capital of Culture the local newspaper, the Liverpool Echo, set up the Stop the Rot Forum that brought together City Planners, Developers, Investors and local Community groups to restore the vast amount of heritage buildings that had fallen into disrepair. This retro-fitting was in itself a sustainable solution to the City’s future.

I also chaired what was called the New Deal programme that was intended by the Government to be Community-led urban regeneration. When it comes to transforming communities the leadership must involve local people.

These are some of the lessons I've learned about transforming communities.

Cities often suffer from a disease I call 'Urban Diabetes'. It's when the wealth of a city is concentrated on grand projects at its heart, but the blood fails to circulate around the whole body, not reaching the extremities of the outer estates so that they atrophy and die. The challenge of transformation is to ensure that the valves are open and the wealth reaches and enriches the whole.

The areas of the greatest challenge suffer from what I call 'consolidated poverty'. This is where poor infrastructure, generational unemployment, educational underachievement, bad health indicators, inadequate housing all conspire with an ugly environment to depress the local neighbourhood. It means that any transformation can be achieved only through a partnership of different agencies with local people.

The greatest blight to be found in untransformed communities is a combination of low self-esteem and low aspiration.

Over the years I've listened carefully to the language people use in the narrative of transforming communities. Those who live in challenging neighbourhoods (and often it is women and mainly mothers who want to see change for the sake of their families) use organic language such as seeds, planting and growing; those who control the purse strings use mechanical language such as levers, buttons, triggers, tools, targets and outcomes. The point is you cannot prescribe mechanical solutions to organic problems.

You cannot transform communities by splashing on them money, consultants and resources from above. It is only by irrigating neighbourhoods with these things that you begin to revive and regenerate them. This work requires genuine partnership between business and communities, between public and private sectors.

Investors both public and private talk too loosely about empowerment without realising that if you really empower others then you will have a little less as you share it with them.

The issue of power comes into sharper focus when considering the relationship between tenants and landlords. What I have learned from listening to the Grenfell Tower Communities is that the most effective landlords are those who commit to their tenants being treated not just as a means of profit but as full human beings, dignified and free to create their own home.

Entrepreneurs have a responsibility to rehabilitate 'profit and wealth' because without these things there is no money to invest in the transformation of communities.

All of the above calls for leadership. Let ULI members become the new leaders. The principal quality of an effective leader is to be a learning leader who gives space to others in their team to contribute their own insights. The Learning Leader secures a following. And if you want to know the sign of an insecure leader then there is never any laughter in their presence!

Transforming communities is first and foremost a matter of justice. For a definition I turn to a 4th Century African Christian Philosopher called Lactantius who said: "The whole point of justice consists precisely in our providing for others through humanity what we provide for our own family through affection."

