

What about the Occupy movement?
November 19, 2011

With the Occupy movement spreading across the globe, faith leaders have been busy taking sides in the debate, with many seeming to support what the protests are trying to achieve. According to OccupyTogether.com, the protests were formed to oppose “the greed and corruption of the wealthiest 1% of America.”

Targeting Wall Street first, protests have moved across the globe in major cities and smaller towns. Protesters in London managed to shut down St. Paul's Cathedral for several days and the event even led to the resignation of its Canon Chancellor (a church official who works in the areas of education and scholarship), who disagreed with the way the crowds had been handled. In a BBC interview he said, “[P]art of the reason why Christianity is so suspicious of money is that the power and glamour of money can easily corral us into a narrower and narrower sense of what it is to be human.”

Several protesters have been seen dressed as Jesus and holding signs saying, “I threw out the moneylenders for a reason.” The Protest Chaplains, a group of Christians based in Boston, believe American Christians have been “far too polite, too quiet, and too accommodating of both the injustice and the blasphemous use of Jesus' name in committing atrocities in our nation and our world,” and attend the protests to give aid to anyone who wants it.

The protests have also drawn together members of different faiths, with Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic and Buddhist congregations attending. Trinity Wall Street, the local Episcopal church, even opened its doors to protesters in need of advice or just a rest.

Do you agree with what the Occupy movement is trying to achieve? Should spiritual leaders take a more prominent role in the protests?

Answer:

Although I have not been an active participant in the Occupy movement, I have great empathy for those who are making their needs and opinions known through encampments in public places within cities, large and small. They are saying that the widening gap between the rich and the poor in our country is not OK. And I believe we need to listen. As people of faith, whatever our religious tradition, we have been charged with ministering to those who are in physical and spiritual need.

While statisticians tell us that the percentage of those in poverty today has increased to its highest level since 1993, the percentage of wealth held by the rich is on a sharp increase. And directors of homeless shelters and food pantries in the community where I live have told me that their caseload has increased to much higher levels than ever before. There is something wrong with that in a country where we claim to be a land of opportunity for all.

The problem I find with the Occupy movement and their opponents is that the economic battle has seemed to encourage finger-pointing by both the haves and the have-nots. Those from opposing groups are trying to identify the ones who are to blame. Is it the bankers, the mortgage companies, the government, the millionaires, the credit card companies, the overextended mortgage holders, the poor financial planners, the undocumented immigrants, the credit card debtors? Everyone seems to have someone else to accuse.

So what is the role of spiritual leaders in this important moral issue? I believe that we must thank those of the Occupy movement for making the economic disparity between the rich and the poor an unavoidable reality for all of us. And then we must work to bring an end to that scourge in our country. Name-calling and scapegoating are not the answer. We must bring our pastoral presence into the spotlight and find allies to find an answer to the problem, as difficult as that may be, not just punish the supposed culprit.

The Rev. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills
La Crescenta

Ever since the Occupy Wall Street movement started, I have tried to decide where I should be on this issue. While I don't see how they plan to get helpful change by occupying whatever, I think I agree with the protesters. Their gripe is that the Wall Street bailout was unfair because nobody who got handed government money is accountable.

As I understand what is going on, big banks and big corporations are sitting on lots of cash. They are not lending it out or hiring people with all that money. I can understand a businessperson's unwillingness to take a risk with some of his/her money, but the bailout isn't their money. It came from U. S. taxpayers.

Our elected officials goofed when they bailed out the big corporations with no strings attached. So now the fat cats are free to sit on all that money without taking any risk, while those who have lost their houses because of no jobs are suffering. No wonder they are occupying Wall Street.

The whole bailout business with no strings attached seems so very unfair. And speaking of unfair, last Sunday evening I watched the CBS News program "60 Minutes." According to a segment reported by Steve Crofts, our congressional representatives get to engage in what is essentially insider trading, which is illegal for anybody else to do. People elected to Congress often leave office a lot richer than when they first arrived in Washington.

Democrats and Republicans are feeding at the public trough, and since they write the laws, there doesn't seem to be anything we can do to correct the situation. Talk about unfair! Maybe we religious leaders should Occupy Congress.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman
La Cañada Congregational Church
La Cañada Flintridge

As I understand it, the Occupy movement is a protest against social and economic inequality, and against corporate greed, corruption and influence over government. That's a broad spectrum of protest, to be sure. Throw in world hunger and saving the whales, and I think you've got it all covered.

I find myself wondering exactly what solution the protesters are suggesting. Government regulation, taxation or punishment? Revolution?

Regarding the church's participation, I find myself struggling to find a single instance of Jesus

leading or participating in a protest movement. Occupy Jerusalem? Occupy the temple? Not from Jesus, even though there was plenty of injustice to go around.

There are essentially two motivations for change in people or corporations: coercion or conversion — behavioral change that is forced, or change that is internally chosen. Jesus consistently chose conversion. The external imposition of the Mosaic Law didn't change people's hearts. The law's weakness was our inability to keep it. And indeed, "by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" before God (Galatians 2:16). Nicodemus was an expert in the law, but Jesus told him, "You must be born again."

The Occupy movement is essentially protesting the deeds of fallen human nature. Only God, through individuals' personal entrance into the New Covenant by faith in Jesus' blood, can make that change. So the appropriate approach by the church to social injustice is prayer, preaching of the gospel and personal righteous treatment of others, not protest. Or, as Proverbs 14:23 puts it, "In all labor there is profit, but mere talk [or protest?] leads only to poverty."

Pastor Jon Barta
Valley Baptist Church
Burbank

The ongoing work of progressive faith organizations shows a clear alignment with the economic justice goals of the Occupy movement. For years we have been active advocates for worker justice (see, for example, the work of Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice).

We have been active partners in fair trade initiatives that return fair profits to small farmers and indigenous craftspeople around the world (see Equal Exchange or 10,000 Villages). The \$15-billion United Methodist pension fund is carefully screened to exclude companies with unfair labor practices, human rights violations, the exploitation of child labor, and egregious damage to the planet. Bread for the World organizes faith community advocacy for a moral budget that protects the most vulnerable and promotes policies that redistribute resources so that everyone has enough to eat.

We do these things because this is how we understand God's intentions as expressed through Scripture. We read the warnings of the prophets — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos — to correct economic practices that exploit the poor. We see the signs of a world destroyed by greed and carelessness. We hear the cries of the poor, and we know that the Lord hears them too.

This is why many spiritual leaders are participating in the Occupy movements. In Los Angeles, we have a small but growing presence. Some dedicated folks have been there since the beginning, offering practical assistance and spiritual care. Several interfaith worship experiences and sacred moments of different types have taken place this week at our Interfaith Sanctuary on the south lawn of City Hall. The Shura Council was there on Saturday, followed by the Quakers on Sunday, the Methodists on Tuesday, the Unitarians on Wednesday, the Episcopalians on Thursday, and a Jewish service on Saturday evening, plus probably more by the time this is published.

Our hope is to support the voice that is rising, rising, rising, with a ministry of hope, spiritual grounding, and the words of economic justice that call out from ancient days to our present crisis.

The Rev. Paige Eaves
Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church
Montrose

To be honest, I find it hard to agree or disagree with the Occupy movement, since I'm confused as to what precisely its goal is. I have watched various interviews with protesters, and it seems as if every one of them has a separate agenda. Some have rather zany ideas, such as abolishing money or forgiving all debt, while others come across as intelligent, sincere people with genuine concern for our nation's future. Most seem to take a determined stance against the current political system and financial establishment — and while I respect their 1st Amendment right to free expression, I am concerned by those who occupy public property in an anarchic fashion, and troubled by those who would intentionally cause chaos.

I suspect that this phenomenon is an outgrowth of the age-old quarrel between the haves and have-nots, and that our national economic struggles have prompted this flare-up. On one side of the line, you have those who argue that vast amounts of wealth — often created on the backs of the working class — should be heavily taxed and redistributed to those less fortunate. The rich will argue that a basic principle of this free country and its capitalist system is that every person has a right to spend their hard-earned dollars in whatever way they see fit. I personally believe that a true, fair solution lies somewhere in the middle, and can be found far from an occupied park or a Wall Street corner office.

Regardless, any unruly behavior or disorderly conduct by members of the Occupy movement reflects negatively upon them and their cause. There are certainly many people who would listen to a reasonable argument against excessive greed and institutionalized corruption. However, the path to winning over the hearts and minds of mainstream America is through intelligent discussion and civil discourse. Thankfully, in our country the rule of law is paramount. Anything that needs to be said or otherwise addressed must be done within the parameters of our governing laws.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
Chabad Jewish Center
Glendale

In responding to this week's question, I want to highlight that I am responding personally, and not for the church.

The Occupy Wall Street movement has brought attention to important issues — economic disparities and greed and corruption within our financial institutions. No question, these issues need to be addressed. Even so, the movement itself gives me pause for concern.

I am troubled by the movement's demonization of individuals simply based on income or wealth. One of its articulated purposes is: "We are the 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%." According to one measure of the 1% — based on 2009 tax returns — they are those individuals who have adjusted gross income of \$343,947 or more. By that measure, the 1% includes doctors, small-business owners and salespeople, to name a few. Are all such people greedy or corrupt?

As evidenced in multiple cities across the county, the movement's camps have become

problematic in terms of sanitation, public safety and public access. Within the last several days, several cities have closed down their Occupy Wall Street encampments. One may question the tactics used by those cities, but at the same time, serious problems did exist within the encampments.

Although self-proclaimed as non-violent, the movement's protests have led, in certain instances, to violence and clashes with police. Some may blame the police for this, but the mere existence of large crowds has the power to lead to violence, regardless of who the initiator is.

I am not a tea-party person, but I acknowledge the fact that the tea party has had an impact on the national landscape. Rather than occupying city parks, the tea party has delivered its message proactively through the political system.

In light of the foregoing, I believe spiritual leaders should make a distinction between the issues raised by the movement and the movement itself.

Spiritual leaders should encourage their parishioners to be involved in addressing our nation's issues on poverty, income disparity, opportunity inequality and greed and corruption. However, I don't believe the way to do that is through the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Rick Callister
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
La Cañada

Yes, I agree with Occupy's sweeping agenda and fully support its quest to make the world work for the rest of us, not just for the wealthy top 1%.

Some complain that Occupy hasn't produced a laundry list of demands in its first eight weeks, but that, to me, is its strength. Our economy, environment, education and health sectors all need a bailout. Issue activism is too limited, given our profound mess at this point. Occupy has a broader vision. A sign I saw at Occupy L.A. said, "A Better World Is Possible."

Occupy touches on ideas that myriad progressive groups seek — economic justice, non-monetized politics, deep democratic participation, imperialism replaced with real security. A book just out called "This Changes Everything" (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2011) captures better than I can the monumental impact Occupy has already made.

There has been lots of negative press about behavior and conditions at the Occupy sites. Should we be surprised, given the camping locations are in downtowns, in a country awash with guns, where addiction is criminalized and inadequately treated, both medically or socially?

More of a mainstream, non-fringe presence in Occupy is the solution for its excesses. We are the 99%, and the 99% can and should be us: nonviolent, inclusive (the tea party is the 99% too, it just hasn't dawned on them yet), and optimistic that citizens can make a difference.

Occupy has bypassed the political parties, correctly seeing them to be servants of the real rulers, the titans of the giant corporations.

After the earlier debacles brought on by unrestrained greed, the crash after the Gilded Age and the Great Depression after the Roaring '20s, the Progressive Era and the New Deal made

sweeping corrections. That time is here again.

Certainly the religious community is a kindred spirit with Occupy.

Believers are the 99%. Spiritual leaders don't need me to tell them what role to take, but I offer one suggestion.

Occupy needs safe sites to make public their message. Churches have outdoor spaces (and indoor plumbing). Without becoming campgrounds, perhaps churches can help. Instead of sprawling, squalid gatherings in downtowns, how about a handful of Occupiers on every church yard across the country?

There they can bear witness, provide information and inspiration, and work on a plan. The churches can contribute lessons learned in their long history of supporting positive change in society and in personal behavior. The idea of sanctuary would be made real, and given a little luck and lots of hard work, so might be our salvation.

Roberta Medford
Atheist
Montrose

I'm not sure what they are trying to achieve. When asked, most of the protesters seem be protesting just to support the protest. Others say all kinds of odd things about the evil rich and corporate corruption, but what does their protest achieve to address whatever issues they think they have? How many people can squat on a park and camp there for endless days? People not working or looking for work, I'm guessing. Those evil rich people, running businesses and making their money — boy!

It seems to me to be more of a happening, and that people who are deemed happening are in attendance. It's sort of like a political Woodstock. Apparently they're having sanitation and crime issues just the same. I'm just not sure what benefit smoking weed and lighting candles has, in terms of making any real change in our economy or with those being blamed for it. And the Occupy label identifies their goal of occupying areas to shut down the local economy. How does that benefit people?

I also keep seeing the sign, "blessed are the poor," held up by protesters. If they think that refers not to spiritual matters but material destitution, then ought they not take down their tents, go back to wherever they came from, and be so blessed? As a clergyman, I am perplexed. Even the so-called Occupy chaplains are being muzzled from speaking any particular spiritual truth, unless it lines up with the movement's agenda. Everyone there agrees that there are financial inequalities in this country, but also that corporations are evil and that the poor exist as a result. I get the impression that everyone there sees themselves as poor, since they can't afford the latest iPhone or flatscreen, but how does the protest fix anything? What if they simply met in halls, elected representatives to local government, and started actually planning and implementing whatever financial switcheroo they desire? Wouldn't it then be truly government for and by the people?

The Rev. Bryan Griem
Montrose Community Church
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