

Occupying church property

BY CHRIS HARWOOD-JONES

As I write, the “Occupy Wall Street” protest movement is seven weeks old, and continues to generate conversations in the media and on the street. Our church has connected with this movement in various ways, notably at our cathedrals in both Toronto and London, England.

In Toronto the protest camp is seen by the cathedral as a harmless expression of a political opinion, with which the church is in sympathy. As it has not had a material impact on the operational life of the cathedral or the safety of the neighbourhood, the occupiers have been treated with sympathy and courtesy.

In London, by way of contrast, the cathedral receives substantial income from tourists, and the camp had deterred most of that business. Opinions were sharply divided within the church, and a decision to side with the police in evicting the protest camp prompted a number of clergy resignations including the dean. There was a subsequent retraction of the decision, but the press has declared it a public relations debacle on the part of the Church of England.

This has led me to consider the question: what would we at All Saints do if an Occupy protest set up camp on our property?

In considering this question, the first issue is whether we as a church ought to be sympathetic to the Occupiers in general.

I take it as a given that, in principle, the Christian faith sup-

ports the fundamental moral stance of the protests, namely that human society suffers when greed is allowed to run unchecked. I think most people would also agree that since 2008 it is hard to argue that our society has not been hurt by greed, and that our financial sector is not necessarily the friend of “Main Street.”

As a matter of analysis, it is no surprise to me that one of the effects of financial deregulation has been to create new opportunities for the gamblers, the hucksters, and the fraudsters. No one likes taxes or red tape, but in the absence of oversight the criminals have had a field day, and I strongly suspect that their financial successes have given them undue influence in the overall culture of high finance. How else can we explain massive, once-respectable institutions behaving like gambling addicts? In my view, it is because greed has become acceptable.

Therefore, it is my view that, due to our economic policies — or lack of them — we have created a class of financial parasites that are leeching the health out of the system, and unless something changes we will find ourselves back in a society that would be recognizable to Charles Dickens. It is for these reasons that I am in deep moral sympathy with the protests, and hope that our Church would be as a whole.

The second issue is whether we as a church ought to support the Occupiers’ demands for change.

This is a harder question, not least because the anarchistic nature of the movement has not produced a clear list of demands.



PROTESTING — The occupy Wall Street protest spreads in Canada.

From what I can gather, the Occupiers seem to be attempting to reconstruct society in micro-cosm, based on the goal of maximum democratic participation. This means that they are wary of appointing “leaders” and even the very concept of “making demands” (because that presupposes that they are supplicants to some external authority).

In this I cannot see the church supporting the Occupy movement, because even as they maintain that their structures and agenda are under development, they have implicitly accepted that they are participating in revolution rather than reform. My problem with revolutions is that historically they tend to be violent; and moreover, few of them have

accomplished more than the replacement of one set of elites with another. Because I see non-violence as being high on the Christian agenda, I tend to be more in favour of reform movements such as the Social Gospel movement that produced, among other figures, Tommy Douglas.

As Christians, therefore, if we agree with the basic analysis that our society has become corrupted by greed, I would argue that our obligation is to “occupy” the institutions that already exist that can do something about that greed: namely, the political parties. If as Christians we are there at the meetings asking questions about economic and environmental justice, or indeed running for office, we will accomplish more than any

protest movement, however well-intentioned.

Therefore, with regard to the initial question of what we would do if an Occupy camp sprung up on our lawn, my honest answer would be “we should host them, provided it didn’t cost us too much!” I believe that the Occupiers’ fundamental aims are consistent with Christian morality, and therefore deserve our support. However, it would not be to society’s benefit if the only immediate result of the movement is to put out of business the very churches that show them hospitality... and indeed who exist to promote the very morality that has been so widely abandoned, to our society’s great detriment.

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photo peter davison



Construction site behind the new St. Michael House, which annexes St. Michael & All Angels Cathedral, Kelowna.