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'Protest chaplains' shepherd at protests

by Jack Jenkins by Religion News Service

BOSTON -- As waves of demonstrators descended on New York City to protest corporate greed, they were met by typical sounds of raucous youth-led protests: drum beats, police sirens and shouted political slogans.

They didn't expect to hear hymns.

Yet protestors rounding the corner of Zuccotti Park encountered dozens of white-robed worshipers singing spirituals and blessing the demonstrators while holding signs reading "Blessed are the poor" and brandishing handmade Christian crosses.

The group, calling themselves the "Protest Chaplains," traveled from Boston to join the "Occupy Wall Street" movement, which claims to advocate for "the 99 percent" of Americans against the "1 percent" who control much of the country's wealth.

The Protest Chaplains, a loose group of mostly Christian students, seminarians and laypeople organized through Facebook, expressed support for the movement the best they knew how: through their faith.

"In a group that had a lot of bandanas and black hoodies, we stood out," said Marisa Egerstrom, an organizer of the group and doctoral student at Harvard University's Graduate School of Arts Sciences. "But people kept coming up to us and saying, 'You know, you are the first Christians I've seen at a protest ... on our side.'"

Religious protesters, once a staple of the American progressivism, have become a rare sight at liberal demonstrations in recent years. But as the Occupy Wall Street movement rapidly expands to Boston, Chicago, Washington and other cities, progressive religious groups are playing an increasingly visible role.

‘We had a real desire for there to be a specifically Christian voice of protest,’ said Egerstrom, an Episcopalian. ‘Advocating for the 99 percent is the same vision for the world that Christianity has, only rendered into secular language.’

While many of the religious elements of the Occupy movement have been spearheaded by laypeople and students organized through social media, more established clergy are starting to follow the lead of groups like the Protest Chaplains.

The Rev. Brian Merritt, senior pastor at the Palisades Community Church in Washington, started affiliating with the Occupy movement after delivering peanut butter to ‘Occupy K Street’ demonstrators in Washington’s McPherson Square. He was surprised, however, when organizers asked to hold a ‘wholeness’ worship service on behalf of the protesters.

‘I was just really shocked,’ Merritt said. ‘But God is so free, God can institute the church wherever God thinks the church can be.’

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On Sunday (Oct. 9), a diverse group of New York religious leaders marched to Zuccotti Square carrying a handmade golden calf fashioned to resemble the iconic bull statue near the New York Stock Exchange.

‘We think Wall Street has become idolatrous,’ said the Rev. Donna Schaper, senior minister at New York’s Judson Memorial Church and one of more than 50 clergy who joined the New York protest, independent of the chaplains group.

‘I’m not saying God is against the people of Wall Street, but I think God is sick of Wall Street taking more than they deserve.’

Schaper explained that the group’s guiding principle was the biblical ‘golden rule’—‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’—but stressed the interfaith aspect of the demonstration, noting that the march was followed by a prayer service featuring Christian, Jewish and Muslim speakers.

‘The golden rule is not just one that Christians observe ... it’s a way that all major faiths can unite,’ Schaper said. ‘We plan to be (at the demonstration) every Sunday and pray with people and thank people for making incredible sacrifices on behalf of our nation.’

Interfaith activities are increasingly the norm for the Occupy movement. Organizers of the ‘Occupy Boston’ tent community partnered with the Protest Chaplains to erect a ‘Faith and Spirituality’ tent in early October. The tent hosts yoga workshops, Muslim prayer celebrations and even a Yom Kippur service that drew more than 125 Jewish attendees.

‘The Occupy movement feels like church,’ Egerstrom said. ‘You have to work with people you don’t necessarily agree with, but we also have to eat together, and there is room for everyone.’

One of the Muslim prayer services in Occupy Boston was led by Nuri Friedlander, the Muslim chaplain at Harvard University, who said his involvement was a natural extension of his religious commitment.

‘One of the principles of my faith is to stand up for those who are oppressed, to give to those in need, to bear witness,’ Friedlander said.

Ryan Adams, a student at Harvard Divinity School and lead organizer of several Jewish services at Occupy Boston, echoed Friedlander's spiritual call.

"I think it's very important for me, as a Jewish person, to be out here supporting this. Your identity as a protester and your identity as a Jew shouldn't have to be mutually exclusive," Adams said after a Yom Kippur service.

"As a spiritual people, we have a great responsibility. And if this can be a shofar blast to the world, to recognize the spiritual reality that's around us, telling us to do less in terms of greed and more in terms of people, that would be good."

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