

## **Do's and Don'ts when Opening Church Space: Learnings from Occupy Wall Street**

**On Monday night, November 14, 2011 the mayor of New York City ordered the police to evict the 500 or so overnight occupiers in Zicotti Park. The eviction happened around 2 a.m. He did not tell them to leave within 72 hours. Or 48 hours. Or even by morning. He moved them out by force at 2 a.m. using surprise. In addition the police put the tents and tarps, many of the backpacks, computers, notebooks, sweatshirts and granola bars into a trash compactor and let the grind be heard throughout the park. As Rev. Robert Coleman of Riverside Church said, "I have the receipts for the 100 tents we bought. I'd like the city to repay my congregation for the destruction of our tents." Sacred space may start with tents and have a middle stage in church buildings, even sanctuaries. Sacred space has no need of one place. It can occupy many, at the same time.**

**What follows is a list of blended do's and don'ts if your congregation or minister were to decide to open your space as a sanctuary for Occupy Poughkeepsie or OWS Protesters. For the record, my congregation has done so the last two nights, will again tonight, and will consider doing so going forward. We "slept" about 100 each night, turned away about 40. Riverside, our chief partner, in this enterprise, slept about 60. The rest have been scattered to the four winds, originally by the police eviction which separated then forcefully by allowing only forty or so at a time to go any one direction. The police action gave new meaning to the words, "divide and conquer." It didn't work – as the movement is already too deep in the hearts and minds of Americans. If anything, the eviction moved us forcefully into a second phase of this movement, which has changed the American story about ourselves. We are now authoring the story again – not reading what Wall Street tells us about our political and economic futures or ourselves.**

**The first are theological in nature; the second practical. By the way in the Christian theology by which I live, body and soul are permanently connected. We incarnate theology in practice.**

- 1. Do understand sacred space as beyond any one time or place. Note what divides Jerusalem. Note what people said about the World Trade Center and how some unsuccessfully tried to make a few deaths so sacred that a mosque couldn't also pray there.**
- 2. Do come to love the word open. There is nothing so depressing as a locked church door or anything so ungreen as an empty church building.**
- 3. Don't ascribe much virtue to the act of opening. It will be more like a mission trip. You will help the protesters LESS than you will help yourself and your people. Ever been on a mission trip? "I came back so changed...and here I thought I was helping others."**
- 4. Don't agree to open to the "good" protesters and turn the addicts or broken away. Host the protesters and refrain from moralistic self-adulation.**
- 5. Understand that immediate charity is not long-term justice. If you wanted to be a shelter, you could have been one for a long time. Create space so the scattered movement can regroup. Phase two has to become phase three very quickly.**

#### **Practical Measures:**

- 1. Do respect yourself, your property and your building enough to require a pledge of sobriety, non-violence and willingness to abide by the rules. Do not imagine that all your members, whether left or right, will think it a good idea to open. Note I said "open" – that is the better word for this combined act of hosting and guesting and restoring the fragmented community back to itself.**
- 2. Do have volunteers and members, not the clergy, staff the place. Let in ten at a time. Get their consent to the pledge, which you will have written out. Expect undercover police. Expect people to show up with their dogs. (We had one with a large pet rat.)**

- 3. Don't overdo it. Realize that the Occupy Movement has its own security, its own medics, and its own self-respect. It has lived for two months together, under the rubric of self-regulation. Get out of the way once the doors are opened up and have high, not low, expectations for your guests.**
- 4. Do make a decision about together about whether you or your guests want press. The press will want to come in. Some of them will praise you; others will assault you. Be careful in saying you are offering spiritual support and material comfort, no more, no less.**
- 5. Do make room for other congregations and individuals to give you money, blankets, food, and more. Make sure people understand that you need money for utilities, rug damage, custodial, toilet paper. Consider these matters sacramental.**
- 6. Finally, don't guilt trip your peers. Involve them. Here in New York, many want Trinity Wall Street to open up. They have done a lot already – port a potty's, meeting rooms, opening a day shelter. Could they do more? Would it mean EVERYTHING to this movement right now to have one place, like St. Paul's or a vacant lot owned by Trinity, to gather in? Yes, it would. But that is not for others to say. The better answer here is to rethink self-regulation. Don't blame other people. Do what you can instead. Wagging fingers at Trinity, or OWS, or anyone else doesn't help. What matters is to open and I don't mean just opening space, I mean opening hearts, opening stories to our participation in our own story.**

**What people want is a role in this story. My congregants brought deviled eggs, apples, coffee. Someone sent us two dozen comforters, bought and paid for by Bed, Bath and Beyond. You don't necessarily have to be camped some place to participate in the occupation. Space is nice, it is often sacred and sometimes it is as simple to find as opening a door.**