

# **The Protest Chaplains:**

## **A new paradigm in chaplaincy during a time of social transformation**

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## **Abstract**

The Occupy Wall Street movement that emerged in Fall 2011 also ushered in a new concept in chaplaincy: “Protest Chaplains.” This group, primarily graduate students from Harvard Divinity School, took the initiative to offer a religious voice as well as to provide pastoral care for the thousands of people in Boston, New York, and other cities engaged in the Occupy Wall Street movement. In the months that followed, the Protest Chaplains evolved to be a movement within a movement with chaplains self-organizing in other cities across the U.S.

This thesis explores the roots of the Protest Chaplain concept; the history of this particular group of chaplains; the function of religion, spirituality, and chaplaincy in the OWS movement; and how the Protest Chaplains are developing a new paradigm of street and activist chaplaincy that is responsive to a time of social upheaval and transformation.

# Table of Contents

<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
a) Context	4
b) Methodology	5
c) Overview of paper	6
<b>II. Literature Review and Background</b>	<b>8</b>
a) Historical Precedents of Protest Chaplains	8
b) Background of Occupy Wall Street	10
<b>III. Findings</b>	<b>14</b>
a) The Creation Story: How the Protest Chaplains Began	14
b) The Physical Setting: Occupy Boston and the Faith & Spirituality Tent	17
c) What Does a Protest Chaplain Do?	19
<b>IV. Themes: A Qualitative Analysis</b>	<b>23</b>
a) The Importance of Creating a Positive Field of Action	23
b) Protest Chaplaincy: A Paradigm of Participation Rather than Expertise	24
c) Dealing with Moral Dilemmas and Burnout	26
d) How the Occupy Movement and the Protest Chaplains Embody “Being With Not Knowing”	27
e) Protest Chaplains, Occupy, and Systems Change	28
<b>V. What Can a Buddhist Chaplain Contribute to Protest Chaplaincy?</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>VI. Conclusion</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Appendix I: Interview Questions</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Appendix II: “What We’ve Learned So Far” (from the Protest Chaplains’ website)</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>39</b>

## **I. Introduction**

### **a) Context**

My pathway to this project began a few years ago when, in my capacity as program coordinator, I spoke with a potential applicant for Upaya's Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program. This young man in his 20s had already established himself as a seasoned activist, having worked for several years as a labor organizer with the ACLU in New York City as well as for other progressive causes. He was also a dedicated dharma practitioner and was seeking some way to bring these two streams of his life together. In our conversation he shared with me that he envisioned creating some kind of chaplaincy in service to the labor movement. He imagined himself offering a contemplative presence and spiritual support to workers as they struggled to obtain more just working conditions and wages.

In the end, this young man decided not to apply for the Upaya Chaplaincy Program (instead he went on to study to be a Zen priest at Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery). But his vision has stayed with me.

Fast forward to September 2011, as I headed into the final six months of my own chaplaincy training at Upaya. On September 17, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement began relatively inconspicuously in New York City. Not long after, through Twitter, I heard of a group calling themselves the "Protest Chaplains."

Several weeks later, the Occupy movement had proliferated in ways that no one could have predicted. Suddenly there were Occupy sites in more than 700 cities in the U.S. as well as sites globally. And the Protest Chaplains had become a movement within a movement, with groups of ad hoc chaplains starting up in Boston, New York, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Seattle, Dallas, and many other cities.

As a student of social change movements and socially engaged Buddhism, I was fascinated by the OWS phenomenon and saw something unusual happening through it, in the context of political activism. As a chaplain-in-training, I found

the idea of “Protest Chaplains” compelling and wanted to learn more about this new form of pastoral care and advocacy.

During a time when our whole society is undergoing a tremendous phase shift, the Protest Chaplains within the OWS movement may be a kind of harbinger of what pastoral care may look like in the future.

Through this thesis, I will explore these questions:

- What was the inspiration for this group of people to serve as “protest chaplains”? Has anything like this happened before?
- In these kinds of highly charged and potentially volatile settings, what kind of role might a chaplain serve?
- What does a typical day look like for a Protest Chaplain?
- What was their formal chaplaincy training, and how well prepared do they feel for their current role? What skill set are they discovering they need?
- What guidance would they offer for others playing a similar role?
- What might a chaplain from a Buddhist background be able to offer that is unique in these kinds of settings?

## **b) Methodology**

In order to carry out research on this topic, I traveled to Boston during the last week of October 2011 to spend four days with a few members of the group of original Protest Chaplains. My intention was to shadow them during their work at the Occupy Boston site and to conduct qualitative interviews with them.

I took an ethnographic approach to this project, using fieldwork at the Occupy Boston site and participant/observer methods to collect data.

Additionally, I conducted in-depth interviews with four Protest Chaplains in Boston, including two who were part of the group that conceived of the idea in early September. Each interview consisted of seven open-ended questions (see Appendix I), and lasted from 45 minutes to an hour. Interviews were conducted with:

- Dave Woessner, second-year Harvard Divinity School graduate student, “Buddhapalian.” (Dave is an Episcopalian who has also extensively studied and practiced *samatha* meditation) Dave was my primary contact with the Protest Chaplains. We had a phone conversation prior to my visit to Boston and he helped me to connect with other Protest Chaplains during and after my stay.
- Heather Pritchard, second-year Harvard Divinity School graduate student, Lutheran/Agnostic.
- Robin Lutjohann, second-year Harvard Divinity School graduate student.
- Harrison Blum, third-year Harvard Divinity School graduate student, Buddhist.

I also had email correspondence with Marisa Engerstrom, another Harvard student although not enrolled in the Divinity School – Marisa is pursuing her PhD in American Studies. Dave connected me with Marisa because she was one of the original group of 10 people who came to New York City as the “Protest Chaplains” on September 17, 2011.

Back at home in Santa Fe in November, I began to explore ways that I might offer my presence as a chaplain to the Occupy Santa Fe group (who are holding a similar encampment on public space), and to discern how a Buddhist-based chaplain might be able to contribute to this movement.

All these experiences form the basis for the thesis that follows.

### **c) Overview of Thesis**

This thesis begins by reviewing the historical antecedents for the role of the Protest Chaplain. While the primary focus of this paper is on the role of the Protest Chaplains within the Occupy movement, I also provide some background on the movement itself in this section.

In the next section, I share findings from my data collection trip to Boston in October 2011, including fieldwork at the Occupy Boston site and material from in-depth interviews with four of the Protest Chaplains from Harvard Divinity School.

Finally, I explore some of the themes that emerged from this data, and the implications for chaplains who wish to serve in these kinds of settings including the unique contributions that chaplains from a Buddhist background might make.

## **II. Literature Review and Background**

### **a) Historical precedents of Protest Chaplains**

First, it may be useful to explore the definition of “chaplain” and to understand how a chaplain can be in relationship not only to an individual but also to a social movement.

At the most basic level, a chaplain may be defined as a representative of a religious tradition, usually ordained, who serves in a secular institution (such as a hospital, prison, police department, university, military unit, etc.) and provides spiritual and pastoral care in that setting.

On a more profound level, a chaplain is one who accompanies people as they grapple with issues of meaning and value in their lives.

In his teachings at Upaya Zen Center in August, 2010, Sensei Fleet Maull offered a vision for a new kind of chaplaincy that responds to a world in need of “wisdom-based ministry” (2010). Maull observed that we are dealing with an accumulated toxic level of internalized shame and violence that is perpetuated when we violate our own integrity, and any time war and oppression take root in a culture and system. This level of toxicity is so pervasive that we often don’t notice it – for example, the subject/object relationship and duality is built into our language and how we raise our children. Phrases like “you’re so good” or “you are bad” plant the seeds early in young people for seeing the world through this lens of duality, separation, and inequity.

According to Maull, the role of a chaplain is to be aware of this viral toxicity and to bring relief and comfort to those who are suffering from its effects. The chaplain’s role also includes learning and practicing how to interrupt the cycles of beliefs and behaviors that perpetuate this kind of violence.



So in this sense, a chaplain is one who ministers not only to individuals but also to systemic suffering. This type of suffering may take the form of injustice, inequality, and structural violence (Galtung, 1969). The term “structural violence” refers to the systematic ways in which a government or regime prevents individuals from achieving their full potential or having equal access to resources.

One could transfer the definition of chaplain to a collective of people who are struggling with issues of meaning and value as well as confronting systemic suffering.

While the phrase “Protest Chaplain” was used for the first time during the Occupy movement, the idea itself has an impressive lineage. The role of religion in social change has a long history, including the movements to abolish slavery and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Nhat Hanh & Berrigan, 1993; Smith, 1996; Marsh, 2006).

Religious figures who played a key role in social movements included, of course, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rev. James Lawson, who came to speak at the Faith and Spirituality tent at Occupy Boston in October 2011, at the invitation of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

In addition to these exemplars, there are several examples of chaplains who have been deeply involved in struggles for peace and justice. One prototype of a “Protest Chaplain” was the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. Born to a privileged family, in his youth Coffin was passionate about fighting fascism and communism. He served in the Army during World War II and later worked for the CIA. During this time, Coffin grew disillusioned as he witnessed the role that the CIA and the U.S. played in overthrowing governments in Iran and Guatemala.

After leaving the CIA, Coffin went to Yale Divinity School and was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in 1956. He went on to serve as chaplain at Yale University from 1958 to 1975.

Throughout this period of time, Coffin's life and his ministry became more radicalized as he got involved with the Civil Rights and nuclear disarmament movements, as well as efforts to end the Vietnam War. He became renowned for organizing busloads of "Freedom Riders" to challenge segregation laws in the South and encouraging young people to resist the military draft. Coffin was one of the founders of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, a coalition of religious leaders who questioned and actively resisted President Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the war.

In an interview two years before his death in 2006, Rev. Coffin shared this reflection:

*What this country needs, what I think God wants us to do, is not practice piecemeal charity but engage in wholesale justice. Justice is at the heart of religious faith. When we see Christ empowering the poor, scorning the powerful, healing the world's hurts, we are seeing transparently the power of God at work. (Abernathy, 2004)*

In essence, Rev. Coffin's words and lifetime of radical action created the foundation from which the Protest Chaplains emerged in 2011.

Another religious figure who used his pastoral authority to advocate for others was Father Jerzy Popieluszko who served as a chaplain to the striking workers of Warsaw in the 1980s (Zunes, 1999). Father Popieluszko held a monthly "Mass for the Fatherland" during which he spoke openly about human rights and nonviolent resistance. After he was killed by Polish state security officers in 1984, thousands of Poles mourned his death. In 2010 Popieluszko was beatified by the Catholic Church.

## **B) Background on Occupy Wall Street**

In one sense, the genesis of the September 17<sup>th</sup> action called "Occupy Wall Street," which evolved into a larger global movement, was an announcement from the Canadian magazine *Adbusters* that appeared on July 13, 2011. The

announcement was simple and yet graphically powerful – it portrayed the iconic bronze bull of Wall Street with a ballerina gracefully dancing on top of it:



The *AdBusters* website elaborated on this call to action:

*On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months. Once there, we shall incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices.*

<http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>

According to the magazine *Bloomberg Businessweek* (Bennett, 2011), from that point, a group called “New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts” did much of the on-the-ground work to organize the event. In June and July, the group had camped out across the street from New York City Hall to protest city budget cuts and layoffs, and they invested their energy in planning for the September call to action. At an August planning meeting, anthropologist and activist David Graeber entered the process. Graeber, who had done his field research and PhD dissertation on a rural community in Madagascar that was organized around anarchistic and egalitarian principles, immediately noticed that the group was

approaching this event with a top-down style of organizing. They were planning for a traditional rally, followed by a short meeting and a march to Wall Street, and then delivering a pre-determined set of demands. That night, Graeber met with a few friends as well as others who were dissatisfied with the NYABC organizing style, and they began to create a different approach to the September 17<sup>th</sup> event.

This was a pivotal moment, notes Drake Bennett (2011) in the *Bloomberg Businessweek* article:

*While there were weeks of planning yet to go, the important battle had been won. The show would be run by horizontals, and the choices that would follow—the decision not to have leaders or even designated police liaisons, the daily GAs and myriad working-group meetings that still form the heart of the protests in Zuccotti Park—all flowed from that.*  
(pg. 67)

From that point on, the September 17<sup>th</sup> event and the movement that followed from it took on the imprint of anarchistic values and methodologies. As we shall see in the remainder of this paper, this was also true for the Protest Chaplains.

While *Adbusters* could lay claim to being the spark that lit the Occupy fire, the impetus for this movement had actually been growing for a long time. Over the past 30 years in the United States, the gap between rich and poor has widened exponentially, while many corporations and those with wealth have benefited from tax laws written in their favor.

According to a report released by the Congressional Budget Office in October 2011, between 1979 and 2007 the incomes of the top 1% of Americans grew by an average of 275% between 1979 and 2007. From 1992 to 2007, the top 400 income earners in the U.S. saw their income increase 392% and their average tax rate reduced by 37% (Whorisky, 2011).

A second factor that contributed to the Occupy movement was public anger at banks. In the wake of the economic crisis of September 2008, the U.S. Congress

and the White House hastily put together a plan that authorized the U.S. Treasury Department to use up to \$700 billion to stabilize financial markets. In essence, “billions of dollars in taxpayer money allowed institutions that were on the brink of collapse not only to survive but even to flourish” (Barofsky, 2011). While this plan did achieve some amount of stability for banks and other industries, many U.S. citizens experienced the fallout in the form of home foreclosures and rising unemployment rates. In fact, one of the chants at Occupy gatherings was “Banks got bailed out, we got sold out.”

In a September 25 editorial in *The Guardian* (2011), David Graeber wrote:

*“We are watching the beginnings of the defiant self-assertion of a new generation of Americans, a generation who are looking forward to finishing their education with no jobs, no future, but still saddled with enormous and unforgivable debt, is it really surprising they would like to have a word with the financial magnates who stole their future?”*

In addition to these economic factors, Occupy Wall Street also built on the energy and momentum of the “Arab Spring” that had emerged in Egypt and other countries in that region of the world earlier in 2011.

All these conditions gave rise to the actual event itself. On September 17, nearly 1,000 people showed up at Wall Street (including the first group of Protest Chaplains, three of whom were interviewed for this thesis). They were diverted by NYC police and ended up, by fortunate chance, gathering at Zuccotti Park a few blocks away. Because the park was private rather than public property, police could not legally force protestors to leave unless asked to do so by the owners.

Somewhere between 100 and 200 people camped there that first night. From that point onwards, there was some kind of constant 24-hour physical presence at Zuccotti Park until the night of November 15 when the campers were finally (and forcibly) removed by police. But by then, the Occupation and its message was firmly rooted in hundreds of other cities, and more importantly in the minds and consciousness of millions of people around the world.

### **III. Findings**

#### **a) The “Creation Story:” How the Protest Chaplains Began**



*Protest Chaplains on Sept 17<sup>th</sup>, New York City*

The group of 10 students from Harvard Divinity School (HDS) that was to become the Protest Chaplains was present at Occupy Wall Street from day one. I asked Dave Woessner to tell me how it all got started. This is the story he shared with me:

It began with no intention [Dave laughs].... We heard about this protest on Wall Street, organized by *Adbusters*...It was just a complete and total word-of-mouth thing. Marissa [Dave’s friend and another Harvard student] and I talked about what we could do. It was real casual – I can’t really underscore how flash-in-the pan this seemed. She sent around a couple of emails to a bunch of our friends. We started talking about what we wanted to do there. We came up with this vague sense of protest and social justice action as liturgy. We started kicking around ideas, in a very casual way. A few people dropped out at the last minute, a few came at the last minute.

We had two cars, we went around and raided all the sacristies we knew to get albs [white liturgical robes]. A lot of us were Episcopalian, some with a church called the Crossing. We also had students from HDS, a Catholic, and a Lutheran-agnostic. Right from the get-go we were interdenominational. [Later on, Harrison, a Buddhist chaplain, would join the group.]

We drove down to New York and we found a great priest at St Mary's Church in Harlem, Earl Koopercamp. He said we could crash on the floor of the rectory. We left about 6 in the evening and got down there about midnight. A lot of us hadn't met before. We shook hands and said hello. We had a prayer group on Friday night, held hands around a circle, and said let's just see what hits us. I think it was in that moment that we had a sense of being something, doing something different.

We took the train down from Harlem on the morning of the 17th, wore albs the whole way, had a cardboard cross. When we got down to Wall Street, the police had already barricaded everything off. They had their riot gear on. The protest was called for out in front of the stock exchange, but because we couldn't get there, no one knew what to do. Our plan was to go to Trinity Episcopal church on Wall Street, and so we went there. At the beginning it was us and one guy from Veterans for Peace who was waving a flag. We started singing hymns and taize chants. Tourists were walking by and taking pictures of us.

Then a scruffy looking guy came up with a sign that said, "End corporate greed." They told us to come down to the bull statue because something was going to happen there. Within an hour, there were well over a couple of hundred folks there, and we all started circling around the bull. More and more people joined in....

We discussed how we were going to prepare for this. **We agreed it was all about love.** No one was coming from the point of view of trying to proselytize. It was all about going and protesting and being there with other people who felt called to act.

A lot of people [at the protest] thought we would be judgmental... But we were there for the same reasons they were: to say that corporate greed is killing our country, our world, and our soul. There's a simple point, a call for justice, to say that a lot of harm has been done to a lot of people, the most vulnerable people, who are also taxpayers who have bailed out these banks. And we haven't seen the appropriate castigation and follow through to make sure these practices don't happen again. That was the very basic call.

Then in a broader sense, as Christians we were called to say, "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the peacemakers." Where are these priorities in our international dialogue?

So our goal really was to do those two things: Anybody who believes those things, we are allies with, and then second, to be a visible presence for Christians looking from the outside, for them to say, "Oh yeah, those are my guys! Maybe I'm not in tune with this system that we've built." Just to

create that very dissonance. **One of the slogans that was there the first day was “Wake up!”**

Since that first day in September, both the movement and the need for Protest Chaplains exploded. The original group of 10 people who traveled to New York that day returned to Boston and became an integral part of setting up the Occupy Boston site. None of them had planned for this new role in their lives; in the ensuing months, each had to figure out how to balance the demands of their new role with the rest of their life – classes, study, jobs, and, in some cases family. Everyone seemed overwhelmed, and yet at the same time absolutely dedicated to their new ministry.

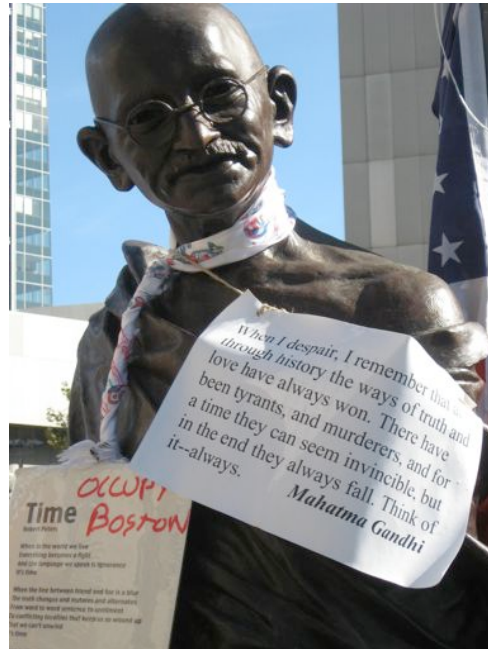
I asked each person I interviewed about their personal reasons for doing this and what being a Protest Chaplain meant to them. Heather’s answer was representative of what many of them said:

I grew up in the Lutheran Church, but solely identifying as a Christian isn’t something I can do any more, because I’ve seen the negative things that Christianity has done in the world. Sometimes I feel like I’ve got my foot half in and half out of the Christian tradition. Part of being a Protest Chaplain is trying to reclaim Christianity and what I would want it to be in the world. Getting the people out of the churches and into the streets to help impact change, and get people involved with social justice work....

Just going into the protest environment and listening to people when they’re frustrated, giving them a hug when they’re crying, praying with them when they want to pray. It’s fundamentally being with people in their struggles, their suffering, and their joy. Most simply, that’s what being a Protest Chaplain means to me.



## b) The Physical Setting: The Sacred Space Tent at Occupy Boston



Occupy Boston started at the end of September 2011, about ten days after Occupy Wall Street got its start in New York City. The organizers decided to follow in the spirit of OWS and chose Dewey Square as the site because it was situated in the center of the city's financial district. Right in front of the South Street "T" station (Boston's public transportation system), Dewey Square is surrounded by branches of all major banks as well as the federal reserve bank.

Skyscrapers tower over the Occupy tent city and businessmen and women are constantly walking by the site. A nine-foot statue of Mohandas Gandhi (donated by The Peace Abbey of Sherborn, Massachusetts) sits at the intersection of two of the 'roads' that make up the Occupy Boston village. If you turn right at the Gandhi statue and walk about halfway down this narrow lane, you run into the Sacred Space tent. This is the locus for most of the spiritually-based events and meetings at the Occupy Boston site.

The tent and the happenings in it are facilitated by the Faith and Spirituality Working Group as well as by the Protest Chaplains. While the F & S group and the Protest Chaplains are not the same entity, there is some overlap. Several of the members of the PC group, including Robin, were instrumental in setting up the physical space that became the Sacred Space Tent. However, in the spirit of the Occupy movement, there is no hierarchy or ownership assigned to oversee this (or any other) dimension of Occupy Boston. Rather, there is a lateral network of people who commit to being stewards for the Sacred Space, including the Protest Chaplains.

The space itself is a tent big enough to accommodate about 10 people at any given time. At the doorway of the tent is a sign that reads:

### **Sacred Space Guidelines**

*Respect others and the space*

*Remove shoes*

*Finish food outside*

*Be mindful when speaking: words carry vibration so please keep it positive!*

*Minimize conversations (unless otherwise agreed) and limit cellphone use/texting, etc.*

*Bring items to help co-create this sacred space! (tapestries, pieces of nature, incense, photos, totems, other beautiful/sacred objects)*

*Do not leave personal items in the space. Anything left is to be considered an offering to the space.*

A sign-up sheet at the front of the tent invites anyone to offer a workshop or ritual inside the tent during open time slots. One does not need to be a religious “expert” or “authority” to do so. Like everything else at Occupy, the Sacred Space tent reflects a participatory democratic process.

During the days I visited, there was a Bible study group led by a college student, a Tibetan Buddhist meditation group led by another college student, a journaling workshop offered by a writing teacher, and a talk “finding light in dark times” by a Rastafarian man from Haiti.

At the time that I visited Occupy Boston, the Protest Chaplains had committed to having at least one of them stay overnight at the campsite each night, either in the Sacred Space tent or in another tent. As the weather began to get colder, they were in the process of discussing how that presence might change and evolve through the winter months.

### **c) What Does a Protest Chaplain Do?**



*New York City, September 17*

This statement appears on the Protest Chaplains' website (<http://protestchaplains.blogspot.com>):

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. That's why we want to protest with all those who, like us, *know in the deepest places of our souls* that another world is indeed possible.

We also want to be of service to those camping with us. We draw strength from the rituals of prayer, song, meditation, and devotion that we have

inherited as the very best and brightest points of the troublesome Christian tradition. We're not out to evangelize anyone - seriously...

...we're bringing the spiritual practices and our sense of the world as sacred to Wall Street and we hope to be of use to everyone who's camping out. **Because protesters have souls too!**

This says something about how the chaplains envision their role. But I wanted to get a better sense of what a typical day in the life of a Protest Chaplain looks like, both from my own observations as well as speaking with the chaplains themselves.

As it turned out, I didn't get as much of a chance as I had hoped to watch the Protest Chaplains interact with individual campers at the Occupy site. During the four days that I was in Boston, all four of my interviewees weren't spending as much time at the camp as they had in the previous weeks because of a severe snowstorm and it was also a busy time in their academic schedule.

In our interview, Dave told me this about his experience of the need to offer pastoral care to individual occupiers during the first month of Occupy:

“When they found out that we largely agreed with what they were saying, they just began to pour out their souls and telling their stories. I'm here because I'm really sad about the direction our country is moving in, I can't pay my bills, we can't pay for medical care... I never had any idea that people from church would do something like this because in the church I grew up in, nobody talked about this.

We did services and everyone was invited. We did the inter- and no faith blessing at the first meal at Zuccotti Park. Some people came up to us and said this was the first time they'd done anything religious... some said they had never been invited to anything like this before.”

On one of the late afternoons that I visited Occupy Boston, Heather had organized members of a Lutheran congregation to come and offer a liturgy. I joined in as a circle of about 10 people from the congregation gathered at the Occupy site to light a candle, read from the scriptures, and offer prayers.

As it turned out, Protest Chaplains also had a role to play in serving to help people who might normally be turned off by protests to connect with the movement. Robin told me this story:

“[One day] I was wearing the white robe and the cross and being very ostentatiously some sort of Christian ministerial figure. An old lady came up to me and asked me who I was and what I was doing. Then we moved on to what the protest was about, what I believed, how my religion played into it. I honestly believe she wouldn't have come up to anyone else, but she came to me because I resembled something she was familiar and comfortable with, in this case, the Christian faith.... Our conversation broke through some of the chanting and shouting and signs that may have taken her aback.”

As a postscript, I received this information in an email from Marisa Egerstrom in January 2012, not long after the Occupy Boston site was finally evicted and dismantled in December 2011:

I've been doing a lot of counseling with people's grief [after the eviction] and also their fears around the NDAA [the National Defense Authorization Act, signed into law on December 31, 2011]. It's interesting, because I didn't spend time overnight at Occupy Boston, but have been focusing on strategy & outreach to churches, as well as coordinating with other faith efforts in other cities. What's come out of that is that I've built relationships with people who were never involved with the F&S tent, but when shit went down, they came to me.

I was sort of freaked out. I know how to be a good & compassionate listener, but I have no formal training. Yet they sought me out because these are folks who don't consider themselves religious, and yet recognized something religious in their grief and fear, and I was the person they trusted. So it's been an experiment in "revolutionary pastoral care" developed on the fly: as one woman said to me, "I have a therapist, but I can't talk to him about this stuff."

From my conversations with Dave, Heather, Robin, and Harrison, I compiled this list of the responsibilities that the Protest Chaplains, at least in their Boston iteration, have taken on since the start of OWS:

- Provide ministry/pastoral counseling to protestors. Help people make meaning of the situation, “being with” them in struggles and despair.

- Lead liturgies, services, and ceremonies at the Occupy site.
- Participate in the Faith and Spirituality working group and help to figure out the infrastructure and logistics to keep this group going, and to maintain a spiritual presence at Occupy Boston.
- Commit to an overnight presence at the campsite.
- Act as liaison to churches, congregations, synagogues to educate them on the OWS and to mobilize their involvement and support.
- Create an atmosphere of equanimity and safety for everyone in OWS; build a bridge for good relationships with groups that interact with the protestors and where this is potential for conflict, such as the police.
- Take part in GA (general assembly) meetings in order to bring a voice of nonviolence and spiritual grounding into the governance of Occupy sites.
- Connect with Protest Chaplains in other locations and share ideas and resources. This was primarily Dave's role and is being done in a very emergent way. There is not an organized network of Protest Chaplains, simply informal connections and linkages through social media, phone calls, and sometimes in-person visitors from other Occupy sites.

#### **IV. Themes: Qualitative Analysis**

There are five themes that I distilled from my exploration of the Protest Chaplains:

##### **1. The Importance of Creating a Positive Field of Action at the Outset**

Creating the field for whatever follows next is critically important, whether as a chaplain who is initiating a pastoral relationship with an individual, or as a movement that is starting to address societal suffering. The seeds that are planted at the beginning of an endeavor are the ones that will grow throughout its life-cycle.

My observation is that Occupy Wall Street and the ensuing Occupy Movement has had a very different tone from other mass protests over the past decade. There certainly are people expressing anger about corporate greed, but as a whole the movement feels less about anger and more about community and creativity. In fact, one sign from Zuccotti Park proclaimed,

*This is not a protest, it's a conversation!*

While there have been the usual markers of a protest – large groups of people, chants and slogans, signs – Occupy has been different. From the beginning, there was a sense of possibility rather than simply unrest, and a sense of vitality and optimism. In an October 27, 2011, article for *Harvard Divinity School News*, Dave Woessner wrote:

Occupation takes a lot of work and a lot of collaboration; occupation is an attempt to build a shared dream. This is an aspect of the Occupy movement that is most overlooked: first and foremost, occupation is a *demonstration* or *model*. People living in the village—the collection of tents in Dewey Square, where Occupy Boston is physically based—are *showing* the world the *example* of the just community in which they hope to live. (Woessner, 2011)

I found it fascinating that the Protest Chaplains were at OWS from the start (September 17<sup>th</sup>) with their commitment to “ground the day in love” (in Dave’s words) and to help create a container of inclusivity and safety for everyone present, including the police. I believe that their presence at the beginning of this movement (in both New York and Boston) has been one of the factors that has helped to give Occupy a more spiritual core. Heather shared this with me:

One of the defining moments for me was one of the first nights of Occupy Boston. We decided with some of the other protestors that there would be a faith and spirituality group and that we would have a space that would be our own. The first night of the protest we didn’t have a tent, but we had brought blankets and yoga mats and sleeping bags to put on the ground, and we had battery-operated candles and a few religious trinkets... Within our group, we had this protest prayer and song book we had put together and we sat down and started doing liturgies from the book. People came and sat with us. That was recognition and validation of the idea that something like the Sacred Space tent was really needed among protestors. **That night defined for me the kind of purpose that we were going to have in the movement, long-term.**

## **2. Protest Chaplaincy: A paradigm of participation rather than expertise**

The entire Occupy movement is based on a value system of democracy and participation. The movement proudly proclaims that it has no leaders, but rather each person is encouraged to develop their own leadership qualities and contribute to the effort. This has carried over into the way the Protest Chaplains have manifested.

While most members of the original group of PCs were graduate students at Harvard Divinity School, few of them were actually training to be professional chaplains. Of the four people I interviewed, only Harrison was formally trained in chaplaincy and pastoral care. I did not interview Protest Chaplains in other cities for this project, but from material I’ve read I surmise that few of them have professional training as chaplains. And yet they felt called to offer spiritual support to this movement in the form of chaplaincy.



Harrison had completed 2 units of CPE (Clinical Pastoral Education) and had experience working as a chaplain in a hospital setting. He told me how he found this training helped him to be a Protest Chaplain:

In my own case, doing some overnight shifts as a hospital chaplain, waking up at 3 in the morning going to an emergency room, dealing in my own body with my heart rate going faster, seeing a body in any state of injury or surgery, seeing what family members might be in the room... [prepared me for] the speed at which chaplains, at least in some cases, need to process their own internal responses and still be available to respond to others' responses and reactions across the whole spectrum.

A few nights ago [at the Occupy Boston site] I heard someone call for "Medic." I felt that training helped me to quickly get out of my sleeping bag—hearing the word "Medic" and realizing there could be something wrong—and then providing background support to someone who had a head injury, and then helping to prevent further escalation in a violent conflict that had happened earlier.

Harrison observed,

There are ways of being a chaplain that are somewhat universal. There are people who can be great at doing chaplaincy work who don't have training and there are people who do have training who aren't necessarily good at doing the work. I don't know if it makes so much sense to say you need to have done formal training to be a Protest Chaplain, and yet...there should be some things you should be good at.

Some of the qualities that Harrison noted as important for Protest Chaplains (as well as all chaplains) included focusing on listening more than speaking and not proselytizing. He said he agreed with all of the guidelines that the Protest Chaplains had developed and published on their website (see Appendix II).

The Protest Chaplains have made efforts to document and share their learnings so that there is some sense of shared values across these ad hoc chaplain individuals and groups. They have done a lot of this through their website as well as social media (they maintain a Facebook page and Twitter account), and Dave is in contact with Protest Chaplains from other cities to share experiences and guidance.

### **3. Dealing With Moral Dilemmas and Burnout**

Just like chaplains in other settings, the Protest Chaplains have had to face moral dilemmas as well as the specter of burnout.

During the time that I followed and documented the Protest Chaplains (mid-October to mid-November), the Occupy Boston site (as well as many other Occupy sites in colder climates) was dealing with colder weather that significantly changed the population at the campsite. Many who had come out in the early days of the occupation and stayed overnight had returned to their homes. The site was becoming a home to a more transient population, and that shift brought numerous challenges.

For the Protest Chaplains, one of the biggest challenges was how to find the balance between being inclusive with maintaining the integrity and purpose of the Sacred Space tent. Heather spoke of how she looked at this situation from a spiritual perspective:

“We have made a point of being radically welcoming to any individual who comes into the camp. The whole camp has said that if we’re going to be a movement that claims to be representative of the 99%, we need to let the 99% be here and be a part of the movement. If they want to be here and they’re being semi-respectful, they’re welcome. But with that has come a lot of things that we didn’t really expect.

Over the last week and a half, there have been a lot of drugs and alcohol brought into the camp. This is something that the camp as a whole doesn’t know how to deal with... We have people coming in who are seeking shelter in the Sacred Space tent, seeing that as a place of refuge. But then some people are disrespecting the sacredness of that space. People wake up in the middle of the night and don’t want to go outside to go to the bathroom, so they do it inside the tent. And when there are lots of people sleeping in the tent at 6 or 7 at night, then we can’t have the workshops that are supposed to be going on.

In a Christian context, it’s hard... you hear a lot of people ask, “What would Jesus do?” in this situation. You want to be welcoming of diversity and try to be compassionate to all people, but it’s hard when the people you’re reaching out to are disrespectful of what you’re trying to accomplish.

That's been the hardest thing for me to reconcile, and I still don't have the answers."

Robin told me how his perspective on the movement as a whole and its relationship with the police changed after a particularly brutal night when the Boston police force raided the second encampment and forcibly removed people. He shared what he learned about developing resilience as a chaplain:

"We've realized that, as individuals and as Protest Chaplains, we need to always hold our affiliation with the movement with a certain degree of lightness. That we don't equate the movement so much with our own ideology that once there is a dissonance between the two that we all of the sudden feel despair.... One of these days, let's face it, we're going to get evicted... the movement will, if not end, will at the very least take on a different shape. If we're not prepared to be flexible in our relationship with it, then it will be heartbreaking."

#### **4. How the Occupy Movement and the Protest Chaplains Embody "Being With Not Knowing"**

As I listened to the stories of the Protest Chaplains, I was struck by how the approach and attitude that they were taking echoed the first tenet of the Zen Peacemaker Order: "Being With Not Knowing." The Protest Chaplains are a kind of microcosm of the whole Occupy movement, and this willingness and even excitement to let a process emerge rather than control it can be seen there as well.

This shows up in all kinds of ways. In the Occupy movement, there are no leaders and no explicit demands, and participatory democracy is the basis for process and consensus is the decision-making method. Within the Protest Chaplains, I heard the first tenet embodied in Dave's story about telling his clergy colleagues in NY and Boston to simply go and visit the Occupation sites and see what they felt called to do. There was no imperative, no plan, no imposition of a schedule or hierarchy, but an organic process of seeing who felt called to be part of this movement and what were the needs of the people on the ground. As Dave noted, some of the clergy people felt immediately inspired and wanted to contribute in

some way to the movement, while others were turned off and left right away. Both responses were fine.

When I explained the concept of “Being With Not Knowing” to Dave, he nodded his head in agreement. “Right,” he said, “the approach really is, ‘Let’s show up here and see what we are responding to... and see what is called for as the next step.’”

Dave went on to tell me, “Keeping that alive and real as the connection is tricky when you think about how this grows, what’s the next step. This is where we are at now.”

## **5. Protest Chaplains, Occupy, and Systems Change**

In her seminal article on systems change, “Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System,” Donella Meadows (1999) offers a list of 12 points to focus on in order to transform a system. Her list may be roughly divided into three sections: the first four can be categorized as the physical components of a system, the next four pertain to information flow and control, and the final four have to do with our ideas and mental formations about systems. Meadows explains that the more that we can work in this last realm of ideas and paradigms, the more powerful an influence we can exert on a system.

In both the Occupy movement and among the Protest Chaplains, I witnessed people leveraging that third group of points related to ideas and paradigms.

The Occupy movement has been criticized by some for having no explicit demands. But as a number of people have pointed out, creating demands means giving legitimacy and tacit approval to the state and the current system. Instead, many in the movement resonate with this perspective from Charles Eisenstein (2011):

Occupy Wall Street has been criticized for its lack of clear demands, but how do we issue demands when what we really want is nothing less than the more beautiful world our hearts tell us is possible? No demand is big enough.

Protest Chaplain Dave Woessner spoke with me about how some people resist the Occupy movement because they feel, to use his paraphrase, “We have the best economic system possible now, given that people will always be greedy and self-interested.” Dave responds to them by asking, “Well, what would it take for you to think otherwise? If you keep telling yourself that, you’ll keep seeing that.”

Dave’s words reminded me of something that Acharya Fleet Maull spoke about in a teaching on how to transform the “Drama Triangle” (originally mapped out by Karpman, 1968) into an “Empowerment Triangle” (2010). Fleet noted that the role of “Persecutor” on the Drama Triangle can become the “Challenger” on the Empowerment Triangle. As chaplains, he suggested, we can practice being skillful challengers. We can explore how to not comply with unwise decisions that are driven by systemic fear.

In the case of the Occupy movement and similar social change movements, chaplains can play a role in challenging the stories that have been handed down to us and inviting people to create new stories and possibilities, both individually and collectively. As Dave put it so eloquently to me, “People live into the stories that they’re given.”

The Protest Chaplains have helped to cast the whole Occupy Movement in a more spiritual light and have contributed to a paradigm shift in how many of us now think about the economic crisis. Again, a reflection from Dave:

“From the very beginning... We thought that was key, to give people the courage to engage with this in a spiritual way, to use language like ‘my soul is hurting,’ to feel justified in crying out for justice and love and not to feel that it’s hokey or sentimental. To say that we tout these [justice and love] as priorities, but do we live that?”

## **V. What Can a Buddhist Chaplain Contribute to Protest Chaplaincy?**

Of the four chaplains I spoke with, Harrison was the only one who identified his primary faith tradition as Buddhist. He had recently responded to a call from the original group of Protest Chaplains in their efforts to branch out beyond Christian traditions and be representative of more faith traditions.

When I asked Harrison how he thought Buddhist chaplains could make a unique contribution to the Protest Chaplaincy movement, he responded:

Something that I aspire to and that I hope other Buddhists would be able to provide is allowing space for what is. I've seen this come up between myself and chaplains of other faiths I've worked in hospitals with. My approach when entering a room would be first to allow whatever emotions are happening, even if that means giving more permission for fear or more permission for sadness rather than starting with trying to make someone feel better. Maybe not even getting to the point of making someone feel better but trusting that allowing space for what is will lessen resistance, and with less resistance there is less suffering.

This echoes something written by Buddhist chaplain Jennifer Block in an article titled "Towards a Definition of Buddhist Chaplaincy" on the website [www.buddhistchaplains.org](http://www.buddhistchaplains.org):

In a classically Buddhist sense, there is not a lot of emphasis on hope or intercession from an outside source or deity, but more on how to use one's intelligence and basic goodness to be skillful and more at ease right in the middle of what is difficult.

Later in this same piece, Block writes:

...the role of a Buddhist chaplain is to accompany individuals as their awakening and freedom from suffering unfolds. This may mean simply being a good listener, or an encouraging companion, an intelligent guide, or a piercing truth-teller. Overall, the purpose of a Buddhist chaplain is to alleviate suffering in its many forms: physical pain, difficult emotions, and confusing or disturbing thoughts, more commonly known as agony, fear, anger, guilt, depression, loneliness, grief, and so on.

As I spent time with at the Occupy Boston site and then back at home with Occupy Santa Fe, one thing that became clear to me was how much everyone

involved in the movement could benefit from grounding in a contemplative practice that could cultivate more space for reflection and conflict resolution. During October and November, I attended several GA (General Assembly) meetings in Santa Fe and witnessed a number of tense interactions as participants disagreed with each other on goals and strategies. In a few cases, the dialogue fell apart completely as some members of the GA engaged in volatile arguments and could no longer find a way to work together.

I also witnessed how quickly unexamined privilege could get in the way of people's participation in the Movement and interactions with others from marginalized groups. At the Occupy Boston site, I spoke with a woman camper who was also homeless. She felt that there was a growing divide between people like her who were "housing challenged" (the term she preferred to "homeless") and those who didn't have that life experience. From her perspective, many of the non-homeless people were prejudiced against the homeless campers, carried stereotypes about them being irresponsible, and excluded them from discussions and decisions related to the campsite. This, too, is an area where a Buddhist chaplain could make a contribution by reflecting back to participants where divisions seem to be taking place, and inviting people to consider that what brings them together is more powerful than the social structures which have kept us divided for so long.

I suggest the following ways in which a Buddhist chaplain could contribute to the Occupy movement as well as similar social movements:

- Create an on-site space dedicated to meditation, schedule regular meditation periods as well as offer basic instruction to those who wish to learn more about this practice. Have a physical presence at this site on an on-going basis to build relationships and trust with movement participants. (This is similar to what the Faith and Spirituality working group did at Occupy Boston with the Sacred Space Tent.)

- Volunteer to facilitate GA meetings (or other kinds of organizing meetings) and integrate some accessible contemplative practices into the flow of the meeting. For example, invite everyone to take a moment of silence at the beginning of the meeting, or when a tension begins to mount in a discussion, again invite a moment to return to the breath before proceeding. Remind everyone of our shared values and goals, even when we have different ideas of how to achieve them.
- Offer skills training in Nonviolent Communication that can help facilitate more productive conversations when people have divergent viewpoints on goals and strategies.
- This is an important one – the Buddhist chaplain (or chaplain of any faith background) should be well-versed in the dynamics of structural violence and able to intervene at this level when they observe incidents of unconscious racism or classism taking place. In a movement as diverse as Occupy, which has drawn people of many backgrounds together on the basis of a shared concern about economic injustice, it is critical to create safe spaces for people to reflect on how we have been divided by institutionalized oppression (such as racism, sexism, and classism), and how we can become allies to one another rather than re-create these divisions.

In this regard, I particularly appreciate what the late Erica Sherover-Marcuse wrote in a piece about “Liberation Theory” on a website titled *Unlearning Racism*:

*The perpetuation of oppression is made possible by the conditioning of new generations of human beings into the role of being oppressed and the role of being oppressive. In a society in which there is oppression, everyone (at one time or another) is socialized into both of*



*these roles. People who are the target group of a particular form of mistreatment are socialized to become victims; people who are the non-target group of a particular form of mistreatment are socialized to become perpetrators -- either in a direct, active form or in an indirect, passive form. Neither of these roles serves our best interests as human beings...*

*Liberation is possible. It is possible to recover the buried memories of our socialization, to share our stories and heal the hurts imposed by the conditioning, to act in the present in a humane and caring manner, to rebuild our human connections and to change our world.*

## **VI. Conclusion**

During the fall of 2011, the Protest Chaplains served as a living example of chaplaincy as a vehicle of not only personal change but of social change as well. This can only be possible, however, if in addition to all the other basic qualities a chaplain should possess, he or she has a working knowledge of systemic suffering and systems change, and is willing to look at his or her own privilege in the context of social inequity and injustice.

I want to end this paper with a potent reflection from Marisa Egerstrom, the Harvard student who along with Dave Woessner was one of the ‘founders’ of the Protest Chaplains. I wasn’t able to meet Marisa in person during my Boston visit, but in our email correspondence in January 2012 she shared these words with me that I feel eloquently describe the revolutionary space that a chaplain can occupy (so to speak) in a social movement such as Occupy Wall Street:

[This experience with Occupy has] planted in me the conviction that true pastoral care IS revolutionary, in the sense that so much of what people experience as depression is a cognitive recognition of the overwhelming reality of just how out of balance, how unsustainable, and how unjust Life As We Know It actually is, without the emotional/psychological/spiritual capacity to deal with that reality.

It's a tall order, and I don't think any of us really have that mastered, because, hey, samsara is what it is. But then, that's the whole reason for the Protest Chaplains experiment.

I constantly call on clergy to help move people through the transition from denial to recognizing that our government, the police, etc., are not, actually, there to protect or help us, but to defend the concentration of wealth. It's a terribly difficult thing for people who have been pretty comfortable their whole lives. But ordained or lay, whatever tradition you're in, if you're not helping people cope with this and find hope in a sense of the goodness of God who is alive in us or whatever your equivalent is, I am now convinced that you are only an agent of illusion.

Maybe that's harsh, but I've seen too much in the last three months to deny it. The whole "wake up" paradigm is kind of cliché, and yet it's still entirely apt. And believe me, I wish it was otherwise. Crying has become an integral part of my own spiritual practice. It kind of has been

accidentally, but I'm more intentional about it now. Real grief is one of the most healing powers I know. And it's actually a strategy of psychologically breaking down detainees in Guantanamo to keep them from crying. If torturers understand that crying is emotionally necessary in times of stress, then I'm going to cry as often as possible.

So I hope that the experiences of the Protest Chaplains, as we bring stories of our experiences out into various faith communities, will spark a new theology of grief and powerful hope that overcomes the denial-laden pseudo-optimistic think-happy-thoughts crap that so often passes for spirituality in numb, consumerist America.

Then again, I'm a Christian, so I'm somewhat accustomed to the idea of the power of failure. I've tried to explain this to other Protest Chaplains when nasty stuff has rattled them at camp. We're going to lose, things are going to get worse, maybe even horrific. Lots of people may die - in fact are dying from hunger, sickness, homelessness - before this chapter of history is over. That doesn't change what we have to do. And you're so right - we don't know. It is being without knowing. I really think it's been the influence of my Buddhist therapist/teacher/guru/consultant who's helped me see this. "Anything worth doing is worth doing badly," he reminds me.

So, we'll show up, and figure it out as we go. And have faith enough to be wrong, to change courses, and to keep looking for life in the midst of the rubble.

## **Appendix I**

### **Interview Questions**

1. What inspired you to become a Protest Chaplain?
2. What does being a Protest Chaplain mean to you?
3. Tell me about a “day in the life” of a Protest Chaplain.
4. What’s been the most meaningful experience for you so far?
5. What’s been the most challenging experience so far?
6. Did you have training in chaplaincy prior to taking on this role? Given your experiences over the last month, how would you define “chaplain” now?
7. What is your vision of the change that would come about through the Occupy movement?

## Appendix II

### From the Protest Chaplains website (posted October 8, 2011)

#### WHAT WE'VE LEARNED SO FAR

The big lesson we've learned is that **showing up matters**. Here's how we see that working.

**1. Religious symbols are still amazingly powerful.** If you're clergy, wearing your gear and showing up is basically all you need to do. Some folks might think it's a "costume." This is both hilarious and sad: one guy told us in New York that we were the first Christians he'd ever seen at a protest - at least, on *his* side. Then be prepared to listen. (See more about listening below.)

**2. Every city is different.** What you & your group can & can't do is going to depend a lot on the physical space. In New York, where no tents are allowed and the cops are always cracking down, the Chaplains' presence had to be mobile: we wore albs, carried a cardboard processional cross, and sang. In Boston, we have an interfaith spirituality tent, which functions as organizing center and opportunity for silence amidst the city noise. Consider what's most useful in your city.

**3. Humor covers a multitude of sins.** Plenty of people have been burned by religion. Many of us have too. One of the ways people will figure you out and decide whether you're "OK" or not is by poking at you a bit to see how you'll react. Please don't get all weird and authoritarian. Get your Beginner's Mind on. Religious folks have more to learn from OWS than OWS has to learn from us. If you don't take yourself too seriously, you'll build trust. Which leads to #4:

**4. YOUR JOB IS NOT TO DEFEND YOUR RELIGION, SO DON'T.** Even in the most aggressive, unfair criticisms of any particular religion, there is a legitimate concern underneath. If this comes up in conversation, acknowledge it. You probably agree anyway. If someone tries to engage you in an argument, don't take the bait. Practice nonviolent communication and active listening. Ask the person how they describe their most closely held beliefs, hopes, griefs. Focus on practice. How do they find quiet and recharge when they get burned out? We've found these conversations to be incredibly moving. You'll hear a lot of "how religion screwed me over" stories. You might be the first "religious" person to ever listen compassionately to these stories. We've been stunned at how intense a need there is for this kind of listening. It's a huge gift you can give.

**5. Sing, don't shout.** It's almost impossible, especially if you're organizing as Christians, not to sound like an angry lunatic even if you try to do even the gentlest of "readings." Unless, of course, you're able to organize a service. For services, have one person volunteer to be the greeter as people come by and want to know what you're doing. That way everyone will be welcomed and the service can go on uninterrupted. Oh, and SMILE. This is fun, remember?

**6. DO NOT PROSELYTIZE.** That's not OK. That's not what chaplains do. The Occupy movement is about working together despite the fact we all have our single issues and existing organizational work etc. Not only is proselytizing obnoxious, it's detrimental to the movement. (And we won't claim ya.)

**7. Be a resource.** Do you have info for mental health crisis resources/shelters/foodbanks? That will be helpful. People who are disoriented/lost/high/upset etc will quickly get referred to you if you have a visible presence. Make friends with the medics - you'll need to work together.

**8. Let what happens, happen. We have a word for this anyway: faith.** The first night of Occupy Boston, before we even had a tent, we hadn't even finished laying out some camping pads and battery-operated candles before random people sat down & started meditating. If you build it, they will come. It's beautiful. Give thanks. And don't pretend for a second that you have any control over any of this. Enjoy the ride!

**9. Chaplains don't work alone.** Neither should you. Can't find anyone? Try posting on Craigslist. Or, just show up with a sign, and see who finds you. Let the Holy Spirit do her thing.

**10. Be rhetorically sensitive.** Try to consult people who have done interfaith work about language for God/the sacred/what you hold dearest. We did an Inter-And-No-Faith Dinner Blessing in NY and even that bit of irreverence made it not scary for people who can't stand religion. After that, one woman approached us and said this was the first time she had seen religion do something positive. It's about the welcome. We're not trying to create divisions, but **un**create divisions.

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