

## **Occupy Wall Street: 'Protest Chaplains' Shepherd Movement's Spiritual Side**

By Jack Jenkins

Religion News Service

BOSTON (RNS) 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."

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 lead 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."

## **Jedis And Pastafarians: Real Religion Or Just A Joke?**

By Jack Jenkins

Religion News Service

(RNS) When congregants of West Side Church and the Christian Life Center in Bend, Ore., awoke in June to news that their churches had been vandalized, they expected to be frustrated.

What they didn't expect was to be confused.

In addition to the anti-Christian slogans scrawled on the walls of the two buildings, the words "Praise the FSM" were painted everywhere. Churchgoers were left scratching their heads.

"We were pretty much in the dark," said Jason Myhre, a staffer at West Side Church.

But after a Google search, they learned "FSM" stood for "Flying Spaghetti Monster," the noodly appendaged deity of a fictitious religion called "Pastafarianism" that's popular among some atheists and agnostics. Suddenly, it looked like atheists were on the attack.

"It was obviously sad," Myhre said. "It was more sadness that people would destroy the property to communicate their belief."

But mere hours after news of the vandalism broke, the story changed.

Bobby Henderson, the head of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, publicly condemned the vandals; Hemant Mehta, author of the Friendly Atheist blog, posted an online plea for donations to help fund repairs. In less than 24 hours, he had raised more than \$3,000.

"We think (atheists) can win in a civil dialogue, so there is no reason to resort to violence or vandalism," Mehta said. "We said, OK, look, we've raised money for other causes before. Why don't we raise money to help clean up the graffiti? This is not what (our religion) is about."

But while the vandalism seemed to be an isolated incident, it and other developments have spurred a discussion among atheists about the usefulness of so-called "joke" or "invented" religions in the nonreligious movement.

Some are wondering: has the joke gone too far?

Pastafarianism was founded in 2005 when Henderson, then a physics student, sent a letter to a Kansas school board satirically critiquing the theory of intelligent design by citing "evidence that a Flying Spaghetti Monster created the universe."

The joke grew into something of a cultural phenomenon for atheists, especially online and on college campuses. Adherents brandish Pastafarian bumper stickers ("He Boiled For Your Sins"), clutch Flying Spaghetti Monster holy books (the "Loose Canon"), and even celebrate holidays such as "Ramendan" (a parody of Muslim Ramadan), all in the spirit of poking fun at religion.

For many atheists like Mehta, the satire is a positive part of the atheist experience and provides a safe haven for nonbelievers.

"If I go to a Christian church, some people have a habit of speaking 'Christianese.' Atheists don't have that," Mehta said. "But you can say 'I'm a Pastafarian,' and people will say, 'Oh, you're one of us.' It gives us a way to bond over our nonreligion."

But Carole Cusack, professor of religious studies at the University of Sydney and author of the book "Invented Religions," notes that members of the eclectic and diverse atheist communities view the sarcasm in different ways.

"The first is as fellow warriors in the ongoing campaign to make religion look ridiculous," she said. "The second is as a nuisance, muddying the waters by proposing parody religions instead of calling for the end of religion."

Others, however, think the whole silly discussion is, well, kind of silly.

Greg Epstein, the Humanist chaplain at Harvard University -- a group of mostly atheists and agnostics who insist ethical behavior doesn't require religion -- expressed concern over how much airtime the banter gets.

"The Flying Spaghetti Monster ... may be hysterically funny, but just cracking ramen jokes ... does not constitute a meaningful alternative to traditional religion," he said.

"If we can take the energy that goes into cracking jokes and put it into positive acts, we could really change the world for the better."

Epstein is not alone: Atheists in Australia are also divided over another parody religion called "Jediism," based on George Lucas' "Star Wars" film franchise.

Jediism gained attention after some 500,000 people listed "Jedi Knight" as a tongue-in-cheek religious affiliation on 2001 census forms in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

As Australia readied for its 2011 census, however, some atheists called for an end to the wisecracking. Arguing that many who listed their religion as "Jedi" were just atheists making a joke, the Atheist Foundation of Australia launched a campaign urging nonbelievers to "Mark 'No Religion' and take religion out of politics."

Their reasoning, they said, was practical since "Jedi" gets counted as "not defined" instead of "no religion," which only serves to undercount the nonreligious population.

"It was funny to write Jedi once, now it is a serious mistake to do so," the organization wrote on its website.

But despite the group's efforts and similar campaigns in the U.K., not everyone agreed. Henderson posted a message on the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster website urging Australians to embrace their Pastafarianism, calling it "a reasonable and legitimate choice."

Ultimately, even Epstein admits the allure of humor is a powerful one.

"When (religious) people try to dominate public discourse and dominate the political landscape," he said, "sometimes the humor you find in things like the Flying Spaghetti Monster is a very subtle and powerful way of pushing back."

## **Churches seek new life under new names**

By Jack Jenkins

(RNS)For Living Faith Lutheran Church, the name change was as much about the future as the past. On the last Sunday of June, the Rockville, Maryland, congregation formally bid goodbye to its old name, Crusader Lutheran Church.

"We're not saying [Crusader] was a bad name," said Sandra Cox Shaw, the church's pastor. But now "our name will no longer be a stumbling block for people who want to visit us and get to know us."

Comments about the church's "militaristic" and "non-Christian" name reached a "critical mass" last year, said Michael Lidell, a former parish lay leader.

Concerned about the church's reputation, Lidell suggested a name change at an administrative meeting in May 2010.

But the process of changing the church's name—or "renaming," as church leaders call it—turned out to be complicated. Few local churches had changed their names. So leaders learned as they went along, hosting town hall-style meetings, learning how to file for a new charter and how to change the church's website.

After a yearlong process, the 140-member congregation, affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, celebrated its new name. "We affirm that we go on into the future a newly named entity but with the same mission," Shaw said on June 30.

While Living Faith's story might be uncommon, it is not unique. The seemingly mundane topic of a church name has become a flashpoint for U.S. congregations, with many renaming themselves in recent years for pragmatic, theological or cultural reasons. Some Baptist churches have removed Baptist from their names. For example, what was once Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, attracts 1,000 worshipers each Sunday to the Fellowship at Two Rivers.

It's not just a megachurch phenomenon, and some Baptist churches remain Baptist even if the word is not in the name.

Name changing "is an epidemic," said Bill Leonard, professor of Baptist studies at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, citing the success of nondenominational churches and the lack of Southern Baptist loyalty as driving the trend.

Leonard also noted that the Baptist brand has been tarnished by controversial congregations like the antigay (and independent) Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas.

"A number of churches on the left and the right are concerned that people are turned off by the Baptist name," Leonard said. "They believe that in the public square Baptists have looked shrill, unwelcoming, sectarian."

Church name changes can also mark a shift in the outlook or message of a congregation. When the First Reformed Church in Allendale, Alabama, voted to change its name to Lighthouse Community Church in 2004, large sections of the congregation resisted.

"It didn't go over well," said Steve Demers, who became the church's pastor shortly after the change. He added that the church lost about a third of its congregation over the renaming.

More recently, the Lighthouse congregation decided on yet another change—to break away from the Reformed Church in America, a move that Demers said was tied to the earlier name change. "We wanted the name to say something. Many people won't attend [Reformed churches] based on preconceptions of what Reformed means," Demers said. "The whole stigma of denominations has proven divisive."

The renaming process at Living Faith Lutheran Church in Maryland also sparked differing opinions in the pews. "People felt very passionately on both sides of the issue," Shaw said. "Some felt tied to the name of the church in which their children were baptized and married, . . . [and some] understood 'crusade' as a crusade against poverty and oppression."

Still, the lure of a new name often wins out: Lidell said Living Faith's new name "much better reflects what's happening within our church."