

Faith groups aided Occupy as winter, police moved in

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As Occupy camps nationwide dealt with police crackdowns and the inevitable onset of winter temperatures, religious communities of all stripes stepped in with offers of shelter and solidarity.

Soon

after police forcibly evicted the original Occupy Wall Street camp in New York's Zuccotti Park on November 15, many of the protesters began sleeping and gathering in church buildings, including Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village.

"The eviction . . . really shifts what happens here, and it really boomed the movement, because immediately there was this network in place that we'd developed of communities throughout New York that were willing to open up their doors and house the movement," said Michael Ellick, a pastor at Judson Memorial.

Ellick and his colleagues got involved early on, marching to Zuccotti Park with a golden calf fashioned to look like the iconic Wall Street bull statue. After that, phones were "ringing off the hook" with churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and monasteries wanting to get involved in some way, he said.

Various religious

groups have held services at Zuccotti Park, which in turn have "reradicalized" their congregations, Ellick said. "Initially it was just sort of a few churches who work a lot together on these issues," he said. "Now it's actually a pretty hefty power base in New York City."

A

recent poll by the Public Religion Research Institute and Religion News Service found that fewer than a third of Americans say the Occupy movement represents their concern over the widening disparity between rich and poor, but the police evictions seem to have boosted religious support for the movement.

According to Ellick, more than 1,400 faith leaders from around the country signed a pledge of solidarity with Occupy protesters, many of them jumping in only after police cleared Zuccotti Park.

In the nation's capital, about a dozen Christian activists started an ecumenical Occupy Church at Washington's Occupy K Street encampment. The Occupy Church held a prayer service every Saturday at noon and tried to establish a full-time, rotating chaplaincy for the protesters. An interfaith coalition calling itself "Occupy Faith DC" hosted a free Thanksgiving meal at a historic Washington church for about 300 of the protesters.

On the West

Coast, a network of religious communities sprang up in Portland, Oregon, to support Occupy Portland after police cleared the camp on November 13. Since the eviction, the city's First Congregational Church and First Unitarian Church have hosted meetings of the movement. While many of the campers search for places to stay, First Unitarian has been housing their gear and the media tent, making the church Occupy Portland's unofficial hub.

About 25 clergy and religious leaders spent the night before the eviction at the camp, praying and providing nonviolence counseling. They included Chuck Currie, a United Church of Christ minister, who said a number of young people thanked or prayed with the religious emissaries. That was "astounding," especially because only one in four Oregonians identify with a faith tradition, Currie said. "A number of people expressed surprise that we were there. They did not realize that the church had an interest in these issues."

In

the somewhat milder climate of Los Angeles, a shifting number of protesters had camped out on the downtown Civic Center lawns since October 1. City council leaders had welcomed the protesters, though health and safety concerns led to a previously announced police sweep to disperse the area in the early hours of November 30.

A protest

was registered by members of the Occupy L.A. Interfaith Leaders Support Network, which said that there had been "an unacceptable level of violence" as police arrested 292 protesters. Clergy leaders, including two Episcopal priests, objected to rough treatment after two months of peaceful occupation.

Legal observers and clergy were invited by the police to witness the sweep and to help defuse tensions. Rabbi Jonathan Klein, who was involved in Occupy L.A. from its start, cheered fellow protesters who cooperated with the police.

After a meeting

November 29 of Interfaith Leaders Support Network with Police Chief Charlie Beck and Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a statement issued by the group reflected on common goals of faith leaders, protesters and civic officials. Villaraigosa, the current president of the National Conference of Mayors, expressed his appreciation for the protesters and "echoed clergy leaders in highlighting the power of nonviolent civil disobedience for the sake of righteous causes."

A New York Times

article noting the closing of major Occupy gatherings quoted David S. Meyer, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, on what might be the movement's legacy: "Occupy takes its name from the occupation. If Occupy continues without occupations, what provides continuity with those people in Zuccotti Park? The slogan 'We are the 99 percent.'" —RNS, other sources