

Episcopal clergy arrested at Occupy Wall Street protest

by [Sharon Sheridan](#)

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New York, December 19 (ENInews)--A retired Episcopal Church bishop and at least two other Episcopal priests were arrested on 17 December after they entered a fenced property owned by historic Trinity Episcopal Church in Lower Manhattan as part of an event to mark the three-month anniversary of the anti-corporate Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement.

Livestream video showed George Packard, former Episcopal bishop for the armed forces and federal ministries, dressed in a purple robe and wearing a cross, climbing a ladder that protesters erected against the fence and dropping to the ground inside the property, called Duarte Park. Other protesters followed, including the Rev. John Merz and the Rev. Michael Sniffen, Episcopal priests in the Diocese of Long Island (New York), Episcopal News Service (ENS) reports.

Police entered the area and arrested at least 50 people. Merz reportedly was arrested with Packard. Sniffen later confirmed that he had been arrested. The clergy were later released.

OWS had been lobbying Trinity to use the property for a winter encampment, following the movement's 15 November eviction from Zuccotti Park near the church. Trinity had refused, citing a lack of facilities at the site and its lease agreement allowing the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council to use it for periodic art installations. Packard had been trying to mediate an agreement between OWS members and Trinity.

"Trinity Wall Street would not meet with Occupy Wall Street. They refused," said Packard's wife, Brook, in a telephone interview on 17 December. "When Trinity closed its ears and refused to negotiate, the path of civil disobedience was clear."

Sniffen told ENS he entered the park with Packard and other Episcopal and interfaith clergy. Over the phone, the sounds of people singing "Lo, how a rose e'er blooming" could be heard in the background.

"As a matter of conscience and discernment, I felt that I had to enter ... in solidarity with these people who I've been supporting from the beginning and who are taking an enormous risk to force a conversation to happen about social and economic justice," he said.

Inspired by the Arab Spring demonstrations that sparked political change in the Middle East, the Occupy movement protesting greed and economic inequality has spread to more than 2,500 locations across the U.S. and the world. Officials in many cities have dismantled encampments, including New York's original site at Zuccotti Park.

Members of an OWS working group Brook Packard attended discussed how, in seeking to use Trinity's property, "they didn't want to make it against religion or people of faith" and wanted to make it clear that "the end goal was not to occupy this area," she said. "The end result was to get a home, so that from there they could occupy foreclosed homes for homeless people instead of banks" and take other actions.

Faith leaders have differed on whether Trinity, which has allowed use of other facilities for OWS meeting space and respite, should permit an encampment on Duarte Square and whether protesters should "occupy" the space without permission.

The Rev. Michael Ellick of Manhattan's Judson Memorial Church, one of the leaders in an interfaith group supporting OWS, wrote on 16 December in an e-mail to supporters: "Occupy Faith NYC has always supported the OWS ask of Trinity, and will continue to do so, but there is no clear consensus on actions like civil disobedience. Without this consensus, we will not be endorsing such actions, and individual faith leaders who may choose to go this route will be doing so autonomously. That said, I encourage all of you to join us tomorrow for this event."

Also on 16 December, Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori and Episcopal Diocese of New York Bishop Mark Sisk each issued statements criticizing OWS attempts to occupy the Trinity property without permission.

"The Trinity congregation has decided that the property known as Duarte Park is not appropriate for use by the Occupy movement, and that property remains closed," Jefferts Schori wrote. "Other facilities of Trinity continue to be open to support the Occupy movement, for which I give great thanks. It is regrettable that Occupy members feel it necessary to provoke potential legal and police action by attempting to trespass on other parish property."

Retired South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu praised OWS members as "a voice for the world," but said he regretted the impasse between the protestors and Trinity, "an esteemed and valued old friend of mine," and he discouraged law-breaking.

In a 17 December 17 statement, Trinity's rector, the Rev. James Cooper, said the church was "saddened that OWS protestors chose to ignore yesterday's messages" from Jefferts Schori, Tutu and Sisk.

"OWS protestors call out for social and economic justice; Trinity has been supporting these goals for more than 300 years," he wrote. "The protestors say they want to improve housing and economic development; Trinity is actively engaged in such efforts in the poorest neighborhoods in New York City and indeed around the world. We do not, however, believe that erecting a tent city at Duarte Square enhances their mission or ours. The vacant lot has no facilities to sustain a winter encampment. In good conscience and faith, we strongly believe to do so would be wrong, unsafe, unhealthy and potentially injurious. We will continue to provide places of refuge and the responsible use of our facilities in the Wall Street area."