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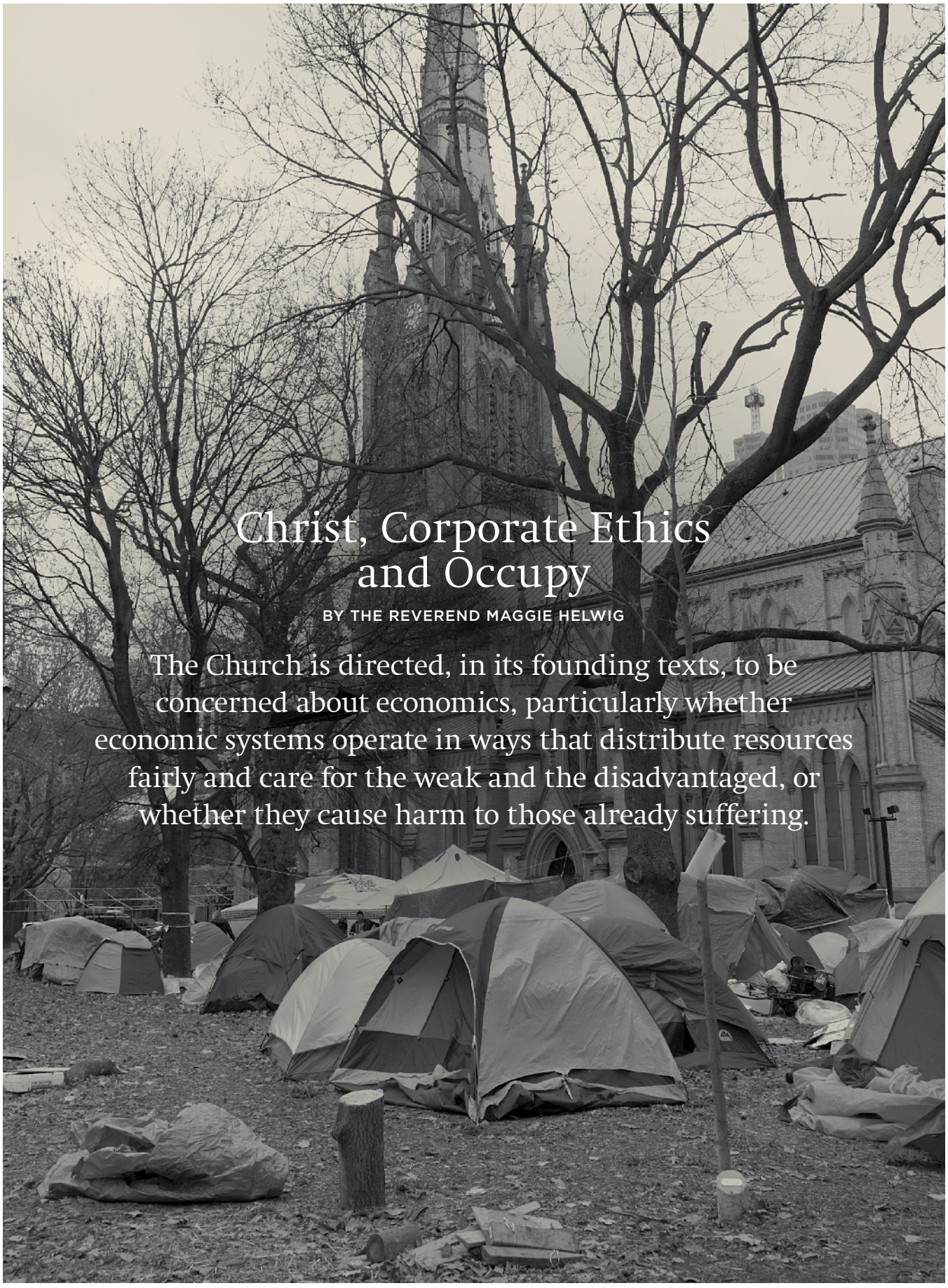

Christ, Corporate Ethics and Occupy

BY THE REVEREND MAGGIE HELWIG

The Church is directed, in its founding texts, to be concerned about economics, particularly whether economic systems operate in ways that distribute resources fairly and care for the weak and the disadvantaged, or whether they cause harm to those already suffering.

The legal code of the ancient Israelites is remarkable in part because it is the earliest written document to lay out the equivalent of corporate ethics for the time and culture—directions to landowners to leave the edges of their crops un-reaped so that the poor and the migrants could gather from them, to pay tithes toward the welfare of the poor, and to forgive debts in a seven-year cycle. Throughout the Old Testament, it is made clear that the moral health of a society is measured by its treatment of the most vulnerable, exiles and widows and orphans.

The New Testament, too, is strikingly forthright about ethics and economics. Mary, upon hearing that her child will be the Messiah, declares this a sign that God "has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Jesus tells a "rich young man" that he must sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor. The Epistle of James castigates Christian communities for favouring the wealthy, and the First Epistle of John tells us that the love of God can only be expressed by serving and giving to those in need. A fundamental metaphor that underlies Christian thinking is that of the body. We are, according to our scriptures, all members of one body, which is, ultimately, Christ's body—and so, no one of us can be whole or healthy or saved alone. We exist in relationship, and can only thrive when all the body's members are well; harm to any member of the body is harm to each one of us, and to Christ's own self. Economic inequality, poverty, homelessness, exclusion—these are wounds on Christ's body, and on our own.

In recent Canadian history, the Anglican Church of Canada has acted out of this belief when, for instance, we were one of the early voices calling for corporate disinvestment from the apartheid regime in South Africa, or when we played a part in founding the Taskforce on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility in 1975. The Anglican Diocese of Toronto has been active in advocacy on issues relating to poverty and economic inequality, working together with other faith communities and with secular groups; we have met with MPPs and provincial cabinet ministers on housing policy, fair taxation and social assistance rates. We have submitted a brief to the Social Assistance Review Commission and taken part in Toronto's municipal budget debate.

We have immediate reasons to be concerned about these issues, because our churches see the cost of poverty every day. Men and women come to us for help when they can't think of where else to turn. They come for grocery vouchers or subway tokens, for soap and shampoo, a sandwich or a cup of soup, a pair of mittens in the winter—basic, simple needs. Nearly every parish in Toronto is now involved in providing food for hungry people, whether through food banks, community meals, "deacon's pantries" or other initiatives. Many also provide emergency shelter. Our congregations include vulnerable seniors, single parents, new Canadians and people with disabilities. People tell us about how they cannot afford dental care or clothing for job interviews, about how they "ration" their medications by taking them half as often as prescribed. People who are working long hours at low-wage jobs come between shifts for a hot meal, so they can stretch their paycheques through a bit more of the month. People who are unable to work because of severe, permanent disabilities sometimes sleep on our floors in the winter because they can't find appropriate affordable housing. We see the wounded body, daily.

"BY NOONTIME ON JANUARY 3, 2012, THE FIRST OFFICIAL WORKING DAY OF THE YEAR, CANADA'S TOP 100 ELITE HAD EARNED $44,366—THE SALARY THAT AN AVERAGE CANADIAN WORKING FULL-TIME EARNS OVER THE COURSE OF A WHOLE YEAR."

Our anecdotal sense that the situation is becoming increasingly serious is borne out by statistical evidence. Income disparity is now growing much more quickly in Canada than in the United States, according to researchers at Ryerson University. A report released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives in January 2012 revealed that Canada's top 100 highest paid CEOs now earn 189 times more than the average Canadian. By noontime on January 3, 2012, the first official working day of the year, Canada's top 100 elite had earned $44,366—the salary that an average Canadian working full-time earns over the course of a whole year. And, of course, the gap between the elite and those working for minimum wage, or living on social assistance, is far greater. We are increasingly becoming a society of sharply divided income classes, with fewer and fewer in the middle.

Many minimum-wage workers live well below the poverty line. In 2008, one-third of all Ontario children living in poverty (as defined by the federal Low Income Cut-Off Before Tax measurement) were in families with full-time, full-year hours of work. Statistics Canada reports that Ontario's poverty rate had risen to 13.1% by 2009, and that

poverty increased most sharply among single adults and seniors. All social assistance recipients in Ontario live far below the poverty line.

Economic inequality costs society at large; societies with higher levels of economic inequality pay for it in higher levels of infant mortality, a deterioration in overall health, higher rates of crime and incarceration—all of which carry heavy costs, both socially and economically. But we need to seek greater equality not only because it is in our own interests, but because it is morally and ethically right to do so. For those of us who are Christians, it is also a theological imperative.

So when Occupy came to camp in the yard of St. James' Cathedral in Toronto, many of us recognized them as conversation partners, as people with whom we shared common aims and dreams. There were devout Christians who lived in the Occupy camp, and many others who spent days or nights there, came to talk or to pray or to bring food and blankets to the Occupiers.

The most common criticism of Occupy, of course, is that it didn't propose practical measures to reduce or eliminate the economic inequality it was protesting. This is only partially true. It may be more true to say that there were so many different ideas that none were able to emerge clearly in the public discourse. It is also true that Occupy was about big dreams, great visions. A society in which all are equally valued, in which resources are shared so that no one is disadvantaged, no one hungry or unsheltered, is very far from our grasp right now. And yet, it is something which we can all have a share in creating. Occupy has, among other things, opened up space to talk about taxation policy, and to question whether our current tax system is in fact working to ensure the health and well-being of all Canadians. Indeed, an OECD report from last year agreed with Occupy on this point, and recommended that the Canadian government consider revising the tax system so that "wealthier individuals" are paying more of their "fair share." We, too, agree with this. In a recent brief to the Government of Ontario, we suggested a number of incremental steps towards fairness, including indexing social assistance rates to inflation, introducing a housing benefit and increasing the minimum wage, while at the same time bringing in modest increases in personal income tax for those in the highest income brackets, eliminating the tax break on stock options, and freezing corporate income tax.

If corporations were willing to lend their support to such measures, and to express to governments their willingness to behave as responsible parties in society by paying their fair share in taxes, this would be a powerful statement of social solidarity. Corporations should also consider their own pay rates, refrain from paying excessively high salaries to CEOs, and look at what their lowest-paid employees are earning and whether it is possible for them to live a dignified life; they should examine the increasingly common, and damaging, practice of hiring on contract, without benefits or security, for far too many, mostly low-paid, positions. These are not big dreams; these measures will not take us all the way towards a society of justice and compassion. But they are a beginning at least, and it is our hope that we can all work together to create a society in which, as our scriptures insist, the well-being of those now poor and vulnerable is made the measure of our collective health.

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