

The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education

# Ministerial Students Training for Social Justice Leadership



**Birmingham England 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2011**

The tradition of protest through the use of popular songs goes back at least as far as Isaiah's song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-4. The Queen's Foundation in Birmingham has revived this prophetic practice and applied it to the contemporary financial crisis. 'Frosty the Snowman' becomes 'Frosty the Euro' and 'Angels from the Realms of Glory' becomes 'Bankers from the Realms of Money'. It seems appropriate to sing such subversive carols in the weeks leading up to Christmas for this has become a time of excessive consumption under the direction of the great god of the commodity culture, Father Christmas himself. In English legend, Robin Hood and his merry men stole from the rich to give to the poor. A proposal to impose a tiny tax on financial transactions, yielding funds to be used for community welfare, is therefore known as the Robin Hood tax.

On a cold December afternoon a crowd of students and staff went into the Bull Ring shopping centre, hoisted the Queen's banner, and launched into song. The tune was that of 'While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night' but the words were 'While Shoppers Shopped by Day and Night'. The old carol 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen' was heard as 'Slow Down Ye Frantic Shoppers'.



The German market, a regular feature at this time of year was in full swing and the singing was from time to time supported by the merry bells from a passing food stall. As the crowd swirled around us, stopping for a few moments to listen, 'Jingle bells' was transformed. It became

Profits here, profits there,  
profits everywhere  
Christmas time is funny  
we smell money in the air.

People smiled, some joined in, others asked for copies of the song sheet. In the middle of the singers was the tall impressive figure of Robin Hood, looking splendid in fancy dress with a red feather in his cap, and his two horn blowers, one on each side. Lead by Robin, waving their signs and placards, the party of about 25 processed to New Street where there is a line of banks.

We stopped outside the first of these, Lloyds TSB, the horns blasted their call for attention, Robin produced a scroll and in a voice which would have made a Medieval town crier eat his heart out proclaimed

I, hereby dressed as Robin Hood,  
Do call upon the government of this land  
To act for fairness, stability and the wellbeing of nation,  
To seize as tax one two-thousandth part of each Commercial Financial  
transaction –  
So small a part as barely to be noticed –  
And to use such funds for the good of those in need,  
So help me God (who cares for the poor, the marginalised, and the  
oppressed),  
And I call upon your support.  
Are you with me?

Robin's supporters then shouted in unison "We're with you, Robin!" and were joined by quite a few bystanders, some of whom clucked and cheered. A couple of young men protested at our protest one of them saying bluntly 'I don't wanna pay no more f\*\*\*g tax!' but his dismay turned to approval when one of our party explained to him what was meant, not more personal income tax but a tiny tax upon the financial markets themselves including the purchase of one currency by another.



Robin Hood with three or four supporters, all smiling broadly, then entered the bank itself, giving out chocolate coins wrapped in golden foil and leaflets describing the Robin Hood tax proposal. Smiling cashiers behind their counters accepted these graciously and so did good humoured customers waiting in queues. At the next bank, things seemed a little bit cooler, perhaps the news of Robin's approach had spread? Now some of the cashiers seemed a little nervous to accept the chocolate lest they might implicate themselves, and a bank manager was seen pointing at the door. Outside, the crowd seemed to grow with each proclamation of the scroll which was also greeted with the singing of the Robin Hood tax song

Robin Hood, Robin Hood, just a tiny tax  
Banks can share, show they care, let's just face the facts  
A change in the law could help the world's most poor  
Robin Hood, could do good, so we should.

Suspicious security guards asked us if we were the same lot as were singing the carols. They seemed satisfied when they found that we were, and walked away losing interest. At the last bank in the row, one of the young cashiers left her desk saying 'I'm going to get my manager'. The manager appeared,

looking rather annoyed. He pulled out his key intending to lock the front door of the bank, making Robin Hood and his merry men prisoners. He was doing his duty in an unusual situation. But while he fumbled to get the key into the lock, the little band in true Hollywood style deftly slipped through the doorway and made their getaway to the cry from outside 'We're with you Robin'.

The Church has a gospel to proclaim, it is good news to the poor and salvation to society. Congregations may be inward looking and clergy may seem to be unaware of the great line of prophet-priests who have announced the truth to a confused and puzzled world. It requires specific training and a deep understanding of Christian faith if clergy and lay people are to have the imagination and the courage both to denounce the false and announce the true.

In the Queen's Foundation, all students training for publicly recognised ministry, whether in the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the Church of God of Prophecy, the New Testament Church of God or the Wesleyan Holiness Church are required to become familiar with social justice or, as it is often called, prophetic witness. The demonstration drawing attention to the need for a Robin Hood tax was planned by trainee clergy and carried through by them.

This event was the climax of the social justice training programme for the Autumn term which had already included participation in the 'Bearing Witness' event in favour of the environment in Manchester on 1<sup>st</sup> October, the Fair Trade supporters conference in Birmingham on 15<sup>th</sup> October and the Stop the Traffik road show on 19<sup>th</sup> November. These events, planned alongside the more formal theological modules, help students to read the signs of the times in the light of the gospel of Christ.



Pictures by Steve Hood (no relation)

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