

Investing in the Common Good

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Earlier in the summer, students at Trinity College in Dublin blockaded the library where the Book of Kells is displayed and set up an encampment of tents on the central lawn of the campus. They were protesting the College's connections to Israel, in the light of the on-going slaughter in Palestine. The students were particularly upset that Trinity had invested some of its considerable wealth in firms associated with the onslaught on Gaza, including an engineering firm, a bank, and an electricity company that developed a site on occupied land in the Golan Heights. All three firms are on the UN blacklist. They were all delivering healthy dividends to the university, however.

The protest attracted a lot of attention, but it was admirably peaceful and the students were articulate and convincing in their argument that there is no need for Irish universities to make such investments. Within a few days of setting up camp, they prevailed. The administration of the college agreed to reconsider its investment policy and the students agreed to pack up their tents and end the blockade.

This is an example of a new kind of social activism called 'divestment'. It uses the power of money to achieve

just political change. The pop band Abba used to sing about how we live 'in the rich man's world'. Divestment tactics take that song literally and suggest that if we don't invest our money in firms that are causing harm, those firms will fail. And more importantly, competing firms will be put on notice that they must avoid grave injustice in their pursuit of profit.

Of course, Christians understand this principle as a biblical teaching – Jesus said where our money is, there we will find our hearts (Mt 6:21). If our heart is for justice, then we will be sure to invest our money in companies that are on the side of good.

The place where this strategy has been most effective is in environmentalism. Since Pope Francis published his ground-breaking environmental letter, *Laudato Si'* in 2015, there has been a concerted effort to remove investments from fossil fuel companies. This is a global movement, but Christian Churches have been at the forefront of it including the Church of England, the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, many Catholic religious orders and dioceses have gone through the process of ensuring their wealth is dedicated only towards the production of sustainable energy.



Protestors gather outside Trinity College demanding the college cut its ties with Israel, May 2024

This campaign does not just starve the worst polluters of the money they need to continue their harmful practices, it redirects wealth towards the companies working on the emerging solution. Solar power continues to be an astonishing miracle, getting cheaper and cheaper every year. Globally, we are now making solar panels faster than demand for electricity is growing. That would not have been possible without responsible people shifting their investments from oil firms to solar companies. And in the coming years, one of the most important changes facing Irish society is the development of our own off-shore wind energy capacity. Huge windmills will be built far from shore, making the most of the great gift of perfect conditions for wind-generated electricity we have. Presently we have to import much of our fuel and electricity. If all

goes to plan, soon we will have so much we will have to export it!

For most of us, the closest we get to an 'investment portfolio' is our employer-provided pension. We have no real control over how that is invested. That seems unfair. In this age where choice is meant to be such a high value, why can't I ensure that my little nest egg is invested so that I am not underwriting weapons, gambling, pornography, or any of the other industries that are technically legal but certainly immoral?

But we can raise our voices and let those in control know that we want our money better aligned with our hearts. We want to not just invest in profit, but invest in the common good as well. The young people at Trinity understood the power of such a move. Maybe we can learn from them?