

COMMENT

Ministry at Ground Zero and Beyond

by WILLIAM WREDE

William Wrede, a pastor of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, left his Queens parish for Manhattan on September 11, 2001, for some extraordinary ministry near the World Trade Center before, during, and after the towers fell, including months of pastoral aftermath. The full text of his eyewitness account and pastoral perspective is available on our website (www.lutheranquarterly.com) as “Grace at Ground Zero: Hope and Healing as Constants in Chaos.” What follows are sample excerpts from his moving account of ministry on an historic day and beyond.

It was while I was hugging one sobbing woman that the roar of the North Tower began as it, too, collapsed before our eyes. In less than ten seconds the 110 stories of steel, glass, concrete, and people were reduced to a nearly unrecognizable pile of rubble. Lord, have mercy.

I remember running just like everyone else did. We didn't make it very far before the cloud of dust and debris overcame us. We all bent down and breathed through handkerchiefs or T-shirts or whatever we had to put over our faces and felt the debris falling on our backs like a gentle rain. Soon, the entire area was painfully quiet. The number of people had thinned out dramatically and I felt horribly alone. Everything looked like something out of a horrible movie. Each of us was covered with the white dust that clung to literally everything. Cars, buildings, phone booths, trash cans, hotdog carts, and people were all grey. I came across an NYPD officer trying to shepherd the people away from the area, sending them north. Not hav-

ing an idea where I should go to help, he recommended I head to West Street where rescue workers were being deployed. Each time I looked south, toward where the Towers stood moments earlier, I saw nothing but fire, smoke, and an incredible pile of debris.

“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

Matthew 18:20 (NIV)

While walking toward West Street, I prayed with several small groups. The groups vowed to walk until they were all able to find help. Some were heading to the Brooklyn Bridge to get out of Manhattan at least. Others were headed to some unknown point; they were just heading north.

When I arrived on West Street, I came across an incredible gathering of rescue workers. I kept an eye out for other, official, “department” chaplains thinking I needed to honor their “turf” and to get some direction for what needed to be done. At that point, I saw no other chaplains near the Tribeca Pedestrian Bridge on Chambers and West Street. I was on my own.

Chaos. There was plenty of it. The remains of the buildings showed no sign of their previous splendor. There were remnants of the North Tower’s facade in sight but there wasn’t much more that was recognizable. There was some order to what the rescue workers were doing since, after all, they were at least used to doing one thing: responding. Yet no one ever wrote the book on how to be a chaplain in this very moment. No one ever wrote the book explaining what to do first when two buildings, 110 stories each, collapses and form a debris pile not much more than seven stories tall. All these thoughts consumed, literally, about one minute of my time as I stood under the Tribeca Bridge. It was then that I saw the first firefighter emerge from the site of the World Trade Center. I did not need to think anymore. What came next seemed to come almost naturally.

I am confident that much of what I saw and much of what I heard the rest of that day was truly only meant for the eyes and ears of God. The words from the liturgy, from the words of absolution spoken by the pastor, “. . . in the stead . . .” make a lot more sense to me having experienced what I experienced that day. God was present and I was his instrument that day. I looked into the eyes of this first man, “Carl,”

and I truly understood what is meant by the eyes being the windows to the soul. There, in the eyes of that firefighter, I saw his soul. Eyes, red from the dust and from tears, expressed the horror of what had just happened even before he spoke one word. Still, there were also the words. The words removed any doubt. Carl said, "Father, I saw so many parts but no whole bodies. We had to dodge the people that were jumping. My partner and I were running from the building when he got hit by one of them. He's dead, Father. He's dead!" I stood there, ankle deep in the dust of the buildings that had just fallen, embracing this firefighter as he wept. Time seemed to stand still. The wailing of sirens. The rescue workers shouting out orders. All of it seemed muted as my ears were filled with the words and the sobs of this man. Our tears mingled. We prayed. Other firefighters came and offered him support. They washed his eyes out with their water bottles. They said they would take care of him. A few minutes later, Carl came to me to be blessed and then he walked back down West Street, back into the debris. From nearly being a victim to now being part of the rescue and recovery. Carl and I had just a few minutes so I could offer hope and healing in the midst of the chaos.

The firefighters kept coming out as others went in. The ones coming out were sometimes just like Carl, and I would spend some time with them. Others, usually in a group, would see that I was with someone and they would simply make eye-contact or shout, "Keep praying for us, Father." As they walked by, they would put a hand on their brother's shoulder and on mine. When a group of firefighters would come out together, they would sometimes stop and ask for me to simply pray with them and for their lost brothers. They would stop, remove their helmets, and bow their heads and we would pray briefly. Lots of gratitude and lots of statements to the effect, "We're glad the church is here today, Father. We need you."

There were others who were not so easily consoled. They were usually the ones who most frequently demanded an answer to one important question, "Where is God in all of this?" Sometimes, I have to admit, I was spared the opportunity to say something wrong when a brother firefighter would say, "Hey, Ed. Father's here. We're here. We aren't doing this on our own today, brother. God's with us or we're screwed, man." Then there would usually be a request for

prayers and a blessing before they went for further orders or returned to the site. Those were the “easy” ones.

There were also those who demanded an answer and I did my best to assure them that God was literally there in the midst of all of us. How this was done seemed about as varied and unique as the men with whom I spoke and prayed that day. The “answers” usually were similar to quoting Matthew 18:20 as cited above. Another time I tried assuring them that God does not advocate evil, but good. Many received comfort and hoped knowing that their presence that day, and even the sacrifice of many, all occurred under the careful watch of a loving Heavenly Father. For some, the whole idea that they could be there serving God that day made them take ownership and encouragement from the thought of not being “just” some firefighter but a servant of God that day.

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. (Matt. 10:28-31; NIV)

True enough, there were those who cursed God that day. In their minds, God was absent on September 11. It was almost as if I could hear them literally speaking the same words Christ did on the cross, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” The voice of those whose faith had been shaken did echo such horror. Was this a time when there was not so much as a smoldering glow left in their faith? Was this bruised reed now broken? While that would not have been the will of God, apparently it could happen. Recalling my own sense of loneliness after the collapse of the North Tower, I hurt for these people. Many were literally inconsolable. Sometimes there were no words. Sometimes a man just needed to be embraced, to be assured that at least one other human being was alive that morning.

For some, they were never able to reconcile in their own mind how a loving God could ever permit such things to happen as they had experienced that day. Some literally saw my presence that day and the thought of praying as absolute nonsense. Statements like,

“What God do you work for, man? He left a long time ago.” *For* them I also prayed. Even in the midst of disbelief, some faithful Christians could pray and see that as an opportunity for them to offer hope to brothers who were hurting. Oh, New York, New York, how I longed to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing! What a message of hope, of the Cross, in the midst of all of this chaos was available to these people! How awful that some chose to suffer, even to suffer alone. Lord, have mercy.

So many rescue workers. So many prayers. So many blessings. Blessing? The desire of the firefighters and other rescue workers was to be blessed. “Father, will you bless me?” was all it took before the line of rescue workers would spontaneously form. When asked what their names were, about half responded with, “My baptism/Christian name is _____.” I wasn’t blessing anonymous rescue workers. I was blessing God’s children. I was blessing those who had already received the sign of the cross on their foreheads. These men, these baptized children, were asking for God to continue to be a part of what was happening that day. That was when I took the oil stock from my pocket. Inside was the oil I received at the chrisma mass during Holy Week of that year. After speaking their name, sometimes with a bit of difficulty given the diverse ethnic backgrounds of the men, I blessed them, pressing my thumb into the oil-soaked cotton in the oil stock and making the sign of the cross on their forehead saying, “(their first name), God bless you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” And then, placing my hands either on their head or on both sides of their helmet I said, “And may God’s holy angels protect you as you serve Him today.” Man after man. Rescuer after rescuer. Child of God after child of God. They kept coming.

Some of them came looking for more than just a quick blessing. When you don’t know if your city is still under attack, your values change. When you don’t know if they will destroy other buildings and kill more people, priorities change. When you aren’t sure if our fighters in the sky are keeping our air space clear or if they are going after someone, you think differently. When you aren’t sure if you will be alive at the end of this day, there is some business to be taken care of. I heard confession. I spoke the words that assured these men that

God absolved them of their sins. I sat on a cement planter next to a firefighter and heard his confession. He called it cheating on his wife. You speak bluntly when you are confessing in a war zone. He wanted to amend his sinful life but wasn't sure he was going to be alive at the end of the day to make a difference. It was hard spending such a short time with these men and then sending them on their way. In the end, it truly was okay since God promised to be with them, even to the end of the world. They knew that too. Go. Hope and healing planted in the hearts of many. (pp. 3-6)

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[A few months later]

We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we are alive and are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you. (II Cor. 4:5-12; NIV)

The smell of death is an amazing reminder that death was not in God's original plan. When the medical examiner would open the bag, pictures were taken and the remains were identified as to which part of the body they had come from. Even in the midst of the debris surrounding the body, there was much that could be identified. The most powerful moments came when identification was found with the body or when the medical examiner would tenderly pick up a hand and show the wedding band still in place. These were somber moments. These were real people. These were not numbers. These were not buildings. These were people, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, best friends.

Because we did not know much if anything about the people who were recovered, the prayers were usually generic. For the most part, that standard prayer I had written for this went like this. "In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. God of all creation, we give you thanks for the recovery of this individual. We give you thanks for the eyes of the workers who were able to locate this person. We give you thanks for the skill of the iron workers and others who removed the debris so this person could be brought from the site. Now we ask you to bless those who accompany this body/person/remain to the morgue. May we handle this,

your creation, with respect and dignity. Give wisdom and insight to all who will be part of identifying this person through dental records, DNA, or finger prints. Finally, Lord, prepare the hearts of the family members as they receive word of the recovery of their loved one. Bless each of us now as we depart in your peace. Amen. And then, speaking to those assembled: May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May the Lord look upon you with favor and give you His peace. Amen.” Then the remains would be returned to the body bag and transferred to a morgue vehicle that would take the remains to Bellevue Hospital. (pp. 12-13)

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[Four months later]

Christmas Day was quiet since there was a crew of reduced size working that day. There were remains found and prayers and blessings to be spoken but there was also time to visit the officers working the perimeter. These visits usually involved helping to answer the myriad questions the officers were being asked. This was one of only three day shifts I ever worked. During the evenings, there was more time to talk and support the officers one on one.

The visits to the perimeter also allowed time to pray with the occasional civilian who wished to pray the Lord's Prayer or wished to speak to the chaplain. One man (“Jim”) came up wishing to go to The Pit to pay his respects to his wife who had died on September 11. He had made no other visit to the site since the attack. I accompanied the officer who took the man to the edge of The Pit where he called out his wife's name several times. Before we left, the man asked if I would perform a committal as his wife was on one of the floors that had been directly hit by the plane and he assumed no remains would ever be found. He was certain this would be her final resting place. The man spoke fondly of his wife and their lives as a young, Christian couple. He was certain that this was the way he wanted to bid her farewell. The officer, the man, and I shared many tears and hugs. Even without knowing the final place where his wife would remain, this man was confident that God had taken care of her already. Hope? Healing? Yes. The Christ child, born in Bethle-

hem, was this man's Savior and his wife's Savior. A blessed Christmas be yours, "Jim." (p. 14)

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[Nine months later]

Nearly to the day, that's what happened over nine months. That was life for many of us at Ground Zero. While "normal" life was also maintained during this time, it was almost as if the two worlds, the "real" world and Ground Zero, tried to become a puzzle that would eventually fit together perfectly. Sometimes, that seemed to happen. Sometimes allowing the worlds to coexist was simply better, each influencing the other, yet both so extremely different that the fit is never going to be perfect. That is the way it should be. Terror should never be welcomed as an equal in our lives. Yet, in the midst of terror, in the midst of death, how beautiful that the love of God is so welcomed. Some have trivialized some of this by saying, "After all, there are no atheists in foxholes." I disagree. There are those who do not know God. There are still others who were more receptive than ever to the message of the gospel in the midst of all that happened and continues to happen in their lives. Christians became stronger, rallied around the cross. Marginal Christians had the opportunity to express their doubts and to wrestle anew with thoughts of spirituality. Chaplains had opportunities to mature and practice their vocation in a new and profound environment.

"O Lord, Thy little angel send, Whene'er my mortal life shall end, To bear my soul to Heaven! My body in its chamber sleep, All torment do Thou distant keep, Till Thy last call be given! And then from death awaken me, That these poor eyes their Lord may see, See, Son of God, Thy glorious face, My Savior and my fount of grace! Lord Jesus Christ, O hear Thou me, O hear Thou me, Thee will I praise eternally." *The Passion According to Saint John*, J.S. Bach, #38 Chorale. (pp. 18-19).