

# Faith Amid the Flames

**Embraced as national heroes since the 9/11 attacks, firefighters are finding and sharing God in the face of danger.**

The fire was spreading quickly. Already most of the large home had been swallowed by flames. Inside, where the heat was 10 times that of the hottest summer day, several men were carefully but quickly making their way through the inferno. They had seen situations like this before. They knew it was the kind in which disaster is only a step behind.

“We had fire underneath us, fire on top of us and fire behind us,” says Jerry Sillcocks, a New York City firefighter and lieutenant at Engine Company 48 in the Bronx. “My ears were burning and the ceiling temperature was 1,100 degrees.”

He was attacking a raging fire in a private house with his hose team when the second floor stairway collapsed under their feet. Tumbling backward through a smoky haze to the first floor, the men picked themselves up, regrouped and continued shooting water on the flames engulfing all three floors.

For members of the New York City Fire Department (FDNY), this was just another typical day. Which is why every time the alarm rings in his firehouse, Jerry Sillcocks prays.

“I don’t ever go into a fire before I rely on the Lord,” he says. “I pray for the men’s safety, and the competence and courage to do the job that I’ve been entrusted with.”

Sillcocks is one of more than 1 million career and volunteer firefighters in the United States who calmly risk their lives

every day to save people and protect property. Currently, an average of 100 firefighters are killed and 100,000 are injured per year in the line of duty. Yet they eschew being labeled heroes.

“I’m not a hero,” Sillcocks says. “This is my job. How can I say that I’m a hero? It’s what I love to do. There is a lot of danger, but we are highly trained. Our training has helped me in life-and-death situations to keep my head.”

Firefighters are tough, self-reliant professionals. They bunk together like family and share hearty meals around the firehouse kitchen table.

They stake their lives on one another’s skills and bravery. Loyalty prevails. A raucous, prank-loving camaraderie masks their devotion to service and caring attitude. They reflect the Maltese cross—the traditional badge of the firefighter—a symbol of honor and protection. Fighting fires is a team effort.

“To be a firefighter, you got a desire and a love to help people,” says John S. Picarello, of Battalion 21 in Staten Island, New York. “I work with some tough, rough guys, but underneath the whole thing there’s a heart.”

FDNY currently has 11,000 firefighters. Starting pay is \$32,724. The department has 228 firehouses that are home to 203 engine and 143 ladder companies. It covers New York City’s five boroughs, which include 321.8 square miles, and responded last year to 51,563 fires.

Teamwork is critical to success. Engine companies pump the

water to extinguish fires. Ladder personnel find the fire and search for survivors. Sillcocks' engine company handles from 18 to 25 runs in a 24-hour period.

"We rest," he says. "We never sleep."

He normally works a nine-hour tour and a 15-hour tour back-to-back, gets two days off, then returns for another double tour, capping off a 48-hour workweek.

Living the Christian life in this close-knit community is no wimpy task. The born-again Christians among them are on the front lines sharing their faith whenever possible. Sillcocks became a Christian in 1986 through the witness of another fireman who never missed a chance to share the gospel.

"Jerry, how are you going to heaven?" his friend had asked.

"Because my mom says I'm a good person," Sillcocks had replied.

After examining the Bible with his friend, Sillcocks was convinced he was a sinner. He asked God for mercy while he lay in bed that night.

Since then the Holy Spirit has sparked a desire in him to share his faith in the firehouse. Sometimes he's razzed and called "Father Jerry" or "Jesus Freak," but he lets it roll off his back. He doesn't curse, tell dirty jokes or go partying with the guys.

Co-workers have tried to shock Sillcocks with foul language and by taping pornographic pictures in his locker.

"I don't take it personally," he says. "I'm a good fireman. And whether I'm a Christian or anything else doesn't make a difference. They may make comments, but on the whole they know my performance, and that keeps the camaraderie together."

Sometimes they listen. Sillcocks shared the gospel with John, a friend who rotated to a firehouse on Staten Island. In June 2001 while on duty at 3 a.m., John prayed with another Christian fireman over the telephone to accept Christ. Three months later John was killed in the collapse of the World Trade Center.

"I believe John is in heaven with his Savior, whom he acknowledged before he died," Sillcocks says.

## **In God's Hands**

Christian firefighters who talked to Charisma say their faith is put into action every day. Warren Haring, a retired supervising fire marshal, says God has protected him numerous times. "You're in God's hands and try to do the best you can and be led by the Holy Spirit," he says.

Picarello is an unusual firefighter. A 17-year veteran of FDNY, he also pastors a thriving Pentecostal church on Staten Island with his wife, Elena. They started the House on the Rock Christian Fellowship in a former dance studio in 1996 with nine people. Today the ministry rents the top floor of a factory building and has 100 members.

A kindly shepherd, Picarello mixes easily with his multiracial congregation. He preaches with gusto, without notes, challenging his flock to a week of prayer and fasting. "We need the power of the Holy Spirit so we can be Jesus to this community," he challenges.

Picarello tells his firehouse buddies: "This ain't your mother's church. It's not orthodox. It's all about Christ."

He admits that it's tough evangelizing co-workers. They hide behind a hard exterior, are mum about spiritual matters and face intense peer pressure.

Yet some have come to him late at night when everyone was asleep, asking, "Is this God thing true?" "Will God help someone like me?" Picarello was blown away when a man known for his jesting bared his soul and confessed, "I'm afraid to die."

New York isn't the only place where God is moving among firefighters. George Rabiela, captain of Tower Ladder 14 on Chicago's west side, was a hard-drinking man until he gave his life to Christ 12 years ago during a Church of God service.

Today he says that he's "not ashamed of the gospel," and an incident in 2002 proved it to his fellow firefighters.

Rabiela was returning to the firehouse with his men after dropping off their ladder truck at a maintenance garage when one of them spotted a minivan that had just crashed into a building. Stopping their vehicle, they found a man slumped over in the front seat.

They called an ambulance and learned he was a driver for a pizza-delivery business. He had been robbed and shot several times.

Rabiela, a Mexican-American, prayed in Spanish for the victim and jumped in the ambulance with him. While racing to the hospital Rabiela prayed with the man to receive Christ as Savior. The man died in the emergency room. Rabiela attended his funeral and followed up with his family.

Jose Medrano, firefighter-paramedic at Station 44 in Duarte, California, is fortunate to work with four born-again believers. They witness many heart-wrenching tragedies, especially when children are hurt or killed.

"Without the Lord it would be very depressing," he says.

Medrano prays for victims and shares his testimony when he can, encouraging believers of all stripes to "be the real deal."

"It's all about Jesus living in you," he says.

Tommy Neiman, firefighter-paramedic with the St. Lucie County Fire District in Fort Pierce, Florida, travels across the country giving his testimony to community groups and in churches. His book, *Sirens for the Cross*, describes on-scene fire and rescue calls.

"I'm sensitive to doors God will open to share His love to victims in crisis," he says. Working an overtime shift at Rescue Station 8, he responded to a call that a young man had

jumped from the seventh floor of a condominium building.

He found the despondent victim still alive and sprawled on the pavement. "His mangled legs, from his mid-shin down, were covered with blood," he says.

After providing medical help, Neiman shared the hope of Christ with the young man on the way to the hospital. About two weeks later Neiman prayed with the young man in his hospital room to receive Christ as Lord and Savior.

Firefighters for Christ ( ) and Fellowship of Christian Firefighters International ( ) are targeting the fire-service community with the gospel.

Founded by John White in Los Angeles in 1976 , Firefighters for Christ (FFC) is an all-volunteer group with 8,000 members and more than 60 chapters. It sponsors outreaches and distributes 1 million tapes annually as well as thousands of New Testaments.

"Our mission is encouraging firefighters to live their lives for Jesus Christ," White says. "We want our members to be faithful, and the first to start work and the last to quit."

FFC encourages closet Christians who fear a backlash as a result of sharing their faith. "We go alongside them and give them the courage to stand up for Christ in their firehouses," Sillcocks says.

The Fellowship of Christian Firefighters International (FCFI), based in Fort Collins, Colorado, supports a similar mission

with 2,400 members in chapters in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Germany and China.

FCFI and the International Bible Society recently compiled a New Testament titled Answering the Call that includes color inserts, study guides, a salvation message, and testimonies from firefighters and EMS workers.

## **Models of Sacrifice**

The tragedy of 9/11 has recast the role of firefighters in the national psyche. They are deemed heroes like never before. The sacrifice firefighters make to enter a burning building while civilians rush out reached a new level of awareness in the public mind after 343 FDNY members died saving lives at Ground Zero. It underscored the fact that many others die in the line of duty in every state.

The events of 9/11 also created unprecedented opportunities for Christians within the firefighters' ranks to share the gospel. Sillcocks was asked to pray with 100 men before going to Ground Zero for a search-and-rescue operation.

"I prayed for safety and security and for God to put His blessing over the men that night and to watch over us as we worked," he says. "Everyone wanted to hear the gospel after that. It was an awesome time of witnessing."

Both FFC and FCFI staffed ministry tables around the clock on a side street near Ground Zero. Members distributed tracts and Bibles and prayed with rescue and clean-up personnel.

“That prayer table was anointed by God,” Sillcocks says. “Many people came to Christ—cops, firemen, Army personnel and civilians.”

FCFI Director Gaius Reynolds notes that “no one refused prayer.” Tommy Neiman flew in from Florida to help. He participated in the ceremony at Liberty State Park, presenting urns to victims’ families, and shared his testimony on an oldies radio station.

However, the spiritual temperature of firefighters since 9/11 has cooled. Christian firefighters have been knocked for proselytizing and mixing religion with work. Apathy has returned, but FFC and FCFI members aren’t backing off.

“Without proselytizing, who is going to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ?” Sillcocks questions. “[We can’t stop] sharing the love of Jesus and letting [firefighters] know that they need to hear it. Because if something happens in their life, the next tour we go in, a terrorist incident, a biological incident or nuclear incident, where are they going to be when they stand before God?”

---

## A 9/11 Hero

### How one New York firefighter survived disaster

John S. Picarello arrived at the World Trade Center after United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the South Tower. He rushed to the staging area in the Marriott hotel between the Twin Towers, where 100 firefighters and rescue workers were

waiting for assignments. His mission was to help supervise fire operations on the 75th floor of the North Tower.

Suddenly a rumbling started to reverberate through the hotel lobby. Within seconds the building was vibrating and shaking.

Taking only a few steps, Picarello dove or fell to the floor near a wall. He cried out: "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" Then everything came crashing down around him.

Expecting to die, Picarello thought: I hope this doesn't hurt. Let it be over quick. An eerie silence and darkness took over.

Moving his limbs he realized he was still alive. He heard groans and saw flashlights being switched on. Chunks of concrete and twisted steel were piled to the ceiling less than 36 inches from him. Thirty-four firefighters were killed that morning when the South Tower collapsed on the hotel.

After digging out survivors, Picarello and his comrades found an open corridor that exited the building. They stumbled into a murky maze of fire, smoke and rubble at the foot of the still intact North Tower.

Picarello was ordered to report to the FDNY command post and request four ladder companies and a rescue company. After passing under the North Tower bridge he heard the same rumbling sound again. He looked up and saw the huge aerial on top of the tower swaying.

"My heart was in my throat," he says of witnessing the collapse of the North Tower. "I had no doubt in my mind this

was it.”

Running like a madman he scurried under an abandoned truck. Then everything turned black and he began choking and vomiting. He escaped but still suffers from the shock of 9/11. How he serves Christ has changed.

“There’s a compassion I didn’t have before. If you don’t have an intimate walk with God when times are good, there’s no way you’re going to get a hold of Him when all hell breaks loose.”

---

Peter K. Johnson, a freelance writer based in New Jersey, regularly covers the city of New York for Charisma.