

God at Ground Zero

Five years after September 11 attacks, Christians are still sharing the hope of Christ's love with a broken city.

Reliving the events of 9/11, evangelist Sujo John visited Ground Zero in the fall of 2005. Peering into the 16-acre cavern where the seven-building complex of the World Trade Center (WTC) once dominated the lower Manhattan skyline, he sensed fear in the faces of tourists gathered around him. "It was a very humbling experience seeing that hole in the sky and the hole in the ground," he says.

He prayed for the protection of God upon New York City and for a spiritual awakening.

John can still smell the smoke and fire from when the south tower of the WTC imploded above him. He was in the underground shopping mall after escaping from his office on the 81st floor of the north tower. "Every day of my life I think of 9/11," he says. "It's so fresh, as if it happened yesterday. I and my wife still live it."

He remembers a frightening roar. Seconds later clouds of debris engulfed the mall area. Rushing to a wall and huddling next to 20 fleeing workers, he was sure he would die. In a move that he says was prompted by the Holy Spirit, John shouted, "Jesus!" and exhorted the others to call upon Christ and claim Him as Savior.

"I heard them cry: 'Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!'" John says. "And then there was the deafening noise of the building going down. I prayed with them before they died. Only eternity will show how many people had eternity on their lips when they died."

The experience changed his life forever. He jettisoned a fast-track business career to become a full-time evangelist. "I realized that day you can have all the wealth and worldly treasure but die and leave everything behind," he says.

In 2002, he founded Sujo John Ministries, now based in Lantana, Texas, and has preached to thousands all over the world. "God's mercy has given me a specific purpose [for] why I have been spared," he says. He estimates that more than 100,000 people have come to Christ through his ministry.

Observers say revival hasn't hit New York City since the WTC towers fell five years ago this month, and the church attendance that surged in the months after 9/11 has leveled. Yet the horrors of the terrorist attack have helped churches unite—and survivors' testimonies have brought many to Christ.

Clarice Franklin, an employee of Aon Corporation, fled the south tower minutes after American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the north tower. "I escaped by the grace of God," she says.

Known as the employee who was always ready to share her faith, Franklin is particularly saddened when remembering those who rebuffed her entreaties. "We don't have time to make a decision about Christ," they would tell her. "Here you are again with your Jesus."

"I had a lot of friends who died in the tower," she says. "I try to block it out. They were people I was speaking with about the Lord."

John S. Picarello, a New York City Fire Department (FDNY)

fireman, was in the Marriott hotel between the twin towers about to help supervise fire operations in the north tower when debris from the collapsing south tower ripped through the hotel. Saved from that first calamity, he escaped the north tower implosion 29 minutes later by diving under an abandoned truck.

He has shared his testimony at events all over the United States, including the Greater New York Billy Graham Crusade in 2005. "God didn't spare me for nothing," he says. "There is a purpose for me that has not been completed."

As pastor of the independent Pentecostal House on the Rock Christian Fellowship in Staten Island, Picarello has developed more relationships across denominational lines. "There is a growing acceptance among ministers to work together," he says.

Picarello's experience meshes with other pastors and evangelical leaders in New York who have witnessed a more cooperative spirit in the Christian community since 9/11. "I see an amplification of unity of the church in New York City," says Duane Durst, superintendent of the New York District of the Assemblies of God (AG). "There seems to be a greater sense of urgency of ministry to the city, and a greater sense of the need to be cooperative. Since 9/11 spiritual fervor has continued to increase. Churches are more passionate about evangelism and missions."

Durst says the AG has joined the Church Multiplication Alliance (CMA), a coalition of 20 denominations and independent churches who seek to plant 700 new churches in New York City within the next 10 years.

Mac Pier, president of the Concerts of Prayer Greater New York, has led a prayer movement in the city since the late 1980s. He worked tirelessly after 9/11 for several months, connecting churches and social programs that helped New Yorkers cope with the aftermath of the tragedy.

“I realized the brevity of life and how fragile the city is,” he says. “We were not fully prepared spiritually and emotionally.”

Today he serves as a catalyst to link diverse denominations. He is involved in the CMA church-planting effort and citywide mass prayer events.

On June 3 more than 5,000 intercessors hit the streets in New York City’s five boroughs to pray for revival. Next year Concerts of Prayer Greater New York will help celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Third Great Awakening. Birthed in lower Manhattan from a noontime prayer meeting among business leaders, the nationwide revival claimed 2 million conversions.

Pier estimates that 300 to 400 new churches have been planted in New York City since 9/11. “God has taken an event meant for evil and turned it into something for good,” he says. “There is a new sense of urgency among people.”

In 2004, Gateway Cathedral in Staten Island formed the first church-sponsored Community Emergency Response Team, reports pastor Paul Schooling, leader of Gateway’s pastoral care ministries. Consisting of 46 church members with professional skills, the team traveled to the Gulf Coast to help Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. “We use the team as an evangelistic tool,” Schooling says. Gateway also provides counseling for

9/11-related issues, which are still surfacing.

Tony Carnes, director of the New York-based International Research Institute on Values Changes, sees unity growing between Pentecostals and evangelicals. "There is more reaching out and networking among church leaders," he says. "I feel a sense of urgency. We need to be bringing God's presence into people's minds to fill that vacuum left by the terrorists."

Anger and Sadness

Not everyone believes there has been an enduring spiritual impact in New York City. Although new seekers flooded many churches immediately after 9/11, attendance dropped back to normal after a few weeks.

"I don't think the desire for spiritual things is that strong anymore," says Leighton D. Smith, pastor of Faith Evangelistic Ministries, located two blocks from the New York Stock Exchange. "Wall Street is back to business—it's money, money, money."

On the other hand, Smith is praying for a massive outpouring of God's Spirit in the area. "I'm believing for another Wall Street revival [like the one in 1857]," he says.

Although FDNY will never forget the tragedy of losing 343 firefighters in one day, the department is back to business as usual, Picarello observes. Many older FDNY members have retired, and more recent employees do not relate personally to the event. "The younger men have no sense of what it was like," he says.

Images from that day are seared in Doreen Galente's memory. "I

will never forget the sound," she says. "The tremendous explosion and debris falling. People screaming and taxi cabs smashing into each other. I saw bodies falling."

She made a snap decision to buy a cup of coffee instead of taking the 7:45 a.m. Staten Island Ferry to her job at Fred Alger Management Inc., a mutual fund firm. Waiting for the next ferryboat put her outside the World Trade Center when the first plane hit the north tower.

Thirty-five of her co-workers died that day. Galente still searches the sky when she hears a plane flying overhead. "I look at the world differently," she says. "Life before 9/11 was innocent. In the good old days you only had to worry about being mugged on the subway. Now you worry about being blown up."

Returning to Ground Zero this winter, she shed tears reliving the incident and admits that she felt "a little angry." Nevertheless, she holds fast to her faith. "Sometimes we don't understand some of the major events in our lives," Galente says. "I know there is a purpose and plan. Someday we will understand. Jesus gives me peace that all of this insanity is under control."

Other Christians were not spared. Alfred J. Braca, 54, a corporate bond broker with Cantor Fitzgerald LP, died on the 104th floor of the north tower. Co-workers called him "the Rev" because of his strong Christian witness. Trapped with other employees, he jumped on a desk and tried to calm everyone.

Sharing the hope of Christ, he asked, "I'm going to heaven,

who is going with me?" At the end, someone reported through a cell phone message that he was praying with co-workers holding hands in a circle. Cantor Fitzgerald lost 658 employees, the largest number of casualties of any twin tower tenant. "I thought my husband would come home," Braca's wife, Jean, recalls. "He didn't call."

Miraculously her husband's body was unearthed in the rubble one week later. "It was very important to me that they find the body," she says.

She tried drowning her grief the first year in a whirlpool of activities—public events, financial matters, travel, media interviews and speaking engagements. "Grief was slow in coming; month by month, year by year, it got worse," she says. "I relied on the Lord more than anything else. I was able to witness to people about God's love and grace. God's faithfulness gets us through no matter what."

Despite missing her husband deeply, she has determined to renounce any bitterness. "I was never angry at God," she says. "I decided to forgive the terrorists and Osama bin Laden because Christ forgave me."

William Vazquez thinks often about his brother Arcangel, who died in the second attack. He laments the political squabbling over the planned memorial site.

"It's sacred ground," he says. "Every once in a while I get brokenhearted. When I go downtown to work it's creepy to me. If it wasn't for God I would go crazy. I can't understand why my brother's life was taken."

Yet his loss has strengthened his commitment to live a godly life. "I am more resolved to seek the Lord more," he says. "I've been praying more for our country. There will be more terrorist events."

Vazquez still fights bitterness and admits: "I haven't forgiven the terrorists. Maybe God has to work on me more."

'Never Forget'

At the Pentagon, retired Adm. Vern Clark, former chief of Naval Operations and a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was presiding over a budget meeting when American Airlines Flight 77 slammed into the west facade—about 500 feet from his office. The crash sounded like a naval gun firing.

"I could not tell if the building was hit or the plane crashed into the ground," he says. The plane struck near the Navy's operations center, ultimately killing 125 in the Pentagon.

Clark immediately launched into a crisis mode directing the Navy's coastal response on the Eastern Seaboard. The next day President Bush addressed top military officials. "I will never forget that meeting as long as I live," Clark says. "The president said, 'Don't ever forget what has happened.'"

Familiar with life-and-death situations throughout his long career, Clark has relied on his faith for support. "Jesus has always been my source of strength," he says. "He meets us at our point of need; 9/11 was another incident like that."

Retired Air Force Col. Gary West, former executive assistant

to the Joint Chiefs' J-3 staff, was busy in the National Military Command Center at the time of the attack. Evacuation alarms blared, and smoke and toxic fumes filled the hallways.

An experienced combat fighter pilot, West was no stranger to dangerous situations. Still, he says the experience was a life-confirming event. "It led me to trust God in a more profound way and live a lifestyle more dependent upon Him," he says.

In the months following the attack people prayed and asked what it all meant. But these days, West says, "My fear is that it's much like business as usual for many."

Five years after 9/11, fear and concern about the next attack on U.S. soil lingers. "Cops and firemen have a sense of not if, but when?" Picarello says. "It's always there, and it's probably going to happen."

Clark stresses, "We need to understand that there is an insurgency going on in the world—a jihad with a methodology of perpetuating the events of 9/11 forever."

Yet some church observers see a silver lining. "Out of all the adversity, we have seen a growing cohesion among key church leaders," says Jeff Beacham, director of Firepower Ministries International in Toms River, New Jersey, and chairman of the regional leadership council of the City Covenant Coalition.

"I am not going to allow fear to stop me from what God has called me to do.," he adds. "My times are in the Lord's hands and not some terrorist's hands."

Peter K. Johnson is a freelance writer based in Saranac Lake, New York.