

God at Ground Zero

Christians working near the site of the Sept. 11, 2001, tragedy say the Holy Spirit is moving in special ways to soften a city known for spiritual resistance.

The morning it all changed, Rick Del Rio was at a breakfast meeting with friends at a midtown Manhattan hotel. When he learned of the attack on the World Trade Center he jumped on his motorcycle and rode to his Lower East Side home as fast as he could.

There he took out his hooped gold earrings and found a black shirt and clerical collar to replace his more usual street clothes so that he would look more like a typical pastor, if anyone should ask. Then he headed for the horror.

Although it is not something he boasts about, Del Rio was commonly held to be the first minister on the scene—which was to become his virtual second home in the coming weeks.

He helped people scramble away from the ruins, hunted for survivors and hugged rescue workers devastated by the carnage that confronted them. Only later did he reflect that if his meeting had been any closer to the Twin Towers he would have arrived in time to be lost in the collapse with some 3,000 others.

After 20 years of unnoticed and unassuming ministry among some of New York's toughest—those he affectionately calls “knuckleheads” plucked from the streets—Del Rio soon found himself unexpectedly thrust into the public spotlight.

The hard-charging 50-year-old with several tattoos and more than a passing resemblance to singer Billy Joel won the nickname “Father Harley” from rescue workers for his bike—whose screen proclaimed “Clergy.” And he became an unlikely symbol of hope in a city whose spiritual climate was

changed by the terrorist attacks as markedly as its physical profile.

He stood near President Bush as the country's leader visited Ground Zero and promised the rescuers that those responsible would hear from them soon, and he visited the Capitol to tell government representatives how churches had a vital part to play in the post-September 11 operation.

"There is a heaviness and a grief and a despair, but in it people have turned to God, and there is a sensitivity, more of an awareness that they need God—need something greater than themselves," he reflected in late October at the command center of the Ground Zero Clergy Task Force he established with other city church leaders, not far from the wreckage. "For the church, I think if we seize the moment, men and women are really ready to hear the good news."

Forever Changed

Six weeks after the terrorists struck, pastors, counselors, relief coordinators and volunteers across the city agreed that New York was still open to hearing about God and receiving His comfort in ways previously unheard of in the city renowned for its take-no-prisoners approach to life.

"The Big Apple is ripe for picking," said Robert Festa, a former New Yorker who returned from Seattle as one of several thousand Christian volunteers from across the country who arrived to help with the relief and recovery effort. "It's a kinder, gentler city," he observed.

It was evident near Ground Zero, where crowds gathered solemnly to stare beyond the barriers still blocking many streets for a glimpse of the yet-smoldering site. The city of ever-present cell phones also became untypically quiet near the ad hoc shrines that had sprung up, clusters of fading "missing" posters declaring unfulfilled hopes on walls and outside the city's police and fire stations.

Typical were the scenes outside Battalion 9, the Broadway fire station whose sign boasts “never missed a performance” and that lost 15 of its men when the Twin Towers came down. The walls and sidewalk were covered with flowers and messages of thanks and regret. Passers-by stopped to add their condolences to the 400 pages of prayers and gratitude already offered or to light candles and pause quietly for thought.

Not that New York’s wisecracking humor was entirely absent. “Wanted Dead or Alive: Osama Bin Laden” posters could be found in the windows of police stations and adult bookstores alike near Times Square.

Nor had the city’s entrepreneurial spirit been entirely lost, either. Stores near Ground Zero had window signs saying they sold cameras and film, while street vendors offered patriotic pens and caps, and open-air artists replaced their usual offerings with pictures of the World Trade Center and heroic firemen.

At Harvest Christian Fellowship on West 56th Street, Randy Miller urged some 90 newly arrived volunteers to “walk softly, be respectful.”

“We don’t want to look like we are taking advantage of the situation,” the veteran of relief operations in Kosovo, Bosnia and El Salvador cautioned. “It’s not, ‘Let’s get as many souls as we can.’ We are saying, ‘Let’s share the love of God.’ We are not here to be over-the-top. We are here to be under the door.”

Miller’s plea for discretion was echoed across the city by leaders seeking to balance sensitivity with holy boldness.

“There has never been a time when the Spirit has prepared people more to receive the gospel,” said Fred Baye, director of the Billy Graham Prayer Center, which was set up to offer telephone counseling and comfort. “But we need to do it very politely and diplomatically. And through the guidance of the

Holy Spirit, only do it when we have established a level of comfort with that person.”

At the same time, many encouraged a clear presentation of the gospel. “These holes in people’s souls will be filled with something, and if we don’t fill it with the nobleness of God’s message of hope, it will be filled with something else,” said Tim Clinton, president of the American Association of Christian Counselors. He spoke as more than 1,200 people filed into Calvary Baptist Church near Central Park for a free two-day training seminar for pastors and lay members that drew participants from across the city.

“Sorrow never leaves you where you find it,” said Clinton as attendees headed for workshops on trauma, children and grief, and biblical perspectives on suffering. “There will be and is an effect. These people are forever changed—traumatic events either move you toward God or away from Him.”

Ray Giunta saw how frequently it drew people closer. He told of leading a weary fireman to Christ on The Pile—as the twisted wreckage at Ground Zero became known—after affirming the man’s anger and directing it toward the spiritual source of the evil behind the attack.

A veteran of responses to the Oklahoma City bombing and school shootings through years of work with We Care Ministries in Sacramento, California, Giunta observed: “People will find an answer, true or false. They will not stop until they find an answer.”

That “answer” for one despairing woman he met on a ferry crossing had been a plan to take her and her daughter’s lives. Giunta was able to lead her to find hope in Christ.

Long Island pastor Jim Sullivan led church members to man one of the Prayer Stations near Ground Zero, where Christians offered to pray for passers-by.

"People in the thick of it don't care if you talk about Jesus," he said of the uncommon openness to spiritual talk on the sidewalk. "They want to hear." But he warned his people against offering pat explanations for why the events of September 11 happened.

"Christians who are...[saying] things like, 'You are going to hell,' are not hitting home," he said. "If they want hell all they have to do is go down there and look at that burning pile," he added, gesturing a few hundred yards down the street. "I embrace the message of repentance but not judgment. Jesus calls us to comfort the brokenhearted."

Seeing a small army of Scientologists among the crowds with their "chaplain" vests within hours of the attacks spurred Nashville pastor Rice Brooks to action. Within a month the senior pastor of Bethel World Outreach Center and leader of the Morning Star International church-planting network began traveling to New York each Sunday after morning services in Nashville to help form a fledgling congregation.

"The openness will become closed if somebody doesn't do something," he said after the new church's second service, held in a church-run theater close to Times Square. "They won't get saved while we watch the news. In Japan at the end of World War II, General MacArthur asked for 100,000 missionaries, and just a handful responded, so the openness was really lost."

As hope of finding survivors faded and the rescue effort became a grim search for remains and evidence, churches and Christian organizations began to get a clearer picture of the massive scale of the challenge—and opportunity—they would be facing for years to come.

From the rubble of Ground Zero, the ripples of grief and trauma spread out in ever-widening circles, across the five boroughs and beyond—the families and friends of the victims,

the survivors and their loved ones, the countless thousands who witnessed their city under attack, the 25,000 or so forced to leave their homes for weeks, the 100,000 estimated to have lost their jobs, the untold numbers whose sense of security was shattered.

While much of the early focus was understandably on the needs of those most immediately affected by the attacks, congregations across the city realized that they would be dealing with members and neighbors less obviously impacted.

"We encouraged our people to open up their homes and start inviting their neighbors in, so they could learn to listen, and comfort them, and also identify what the needs are," said Del Rio of his Abounding Grace Church congregation, "because the big concern we have is that a lot of people are going to fall through the cracks."

As the magnitude of the long-term effects of the terrorist attacks became clearer, evangelical and Pentecostal churches encountered a new openness from authorities historically leery. The work of Del Rio and his associates through their Ground Zero task force helped win a newfound level of respect and opportunity for influence.

Before September 11, Del Rio reflected, churches in the city had been infected to varying degrees by the driving spirit of competition that powered the financial district that made New York "the capital of the world."

"Competition is fueled by independence and then a [sense of] survival, to keep what we have. That is the spirit that permeated the churches, so they became fragmented," he observed. "The enemy thought that by tearing down those two towers he could strike a blow not only to the city and its financial strength in the world but to the church as well. But what happened was the opposite. Unity came."

In a city used to dealing on official business with clearly

defined, large religious institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church, the typically independent and small evangelical and Pentecostal churches had been easy for authorities to overlook or dismiss as irrelevant. But as they came together in groups, overburdened officials realized that those churches were an invaluable resource.

The efforts of several ministries were noted in the Congressional Record, which recognized their "good by their faith in God and love for their fellow man."

Among those cited was the Christian Cultural Center in Brooklyn. Pastored by A.R. Bernard and the largest single church in the city, the center hosted a widely applauded memorial service a month to the day after the attacks. Live satellite broadcasts were held at more than a dozen other churches around the city to enable congregations to reach out to people in their neighborhoods. Several conversions were reported.

Also commended was Glad Tidings Tabernacle, a small Assemblies of God church a stone's throw from Madison Square Garden, which provided chaplains for Ground Zero, sent prayer teams onto the streets and offered free grief workshops.

"This is not a church-membership drive," co-pastor Donna Keyes told a Capitol Hill press conference. "This is not a move by us to convert people. This is about meeting needs, plain and simple."

Even as the media focus shifted from Manhattan to Afghanistan and New Yorkers tried to respond to then-Mayor Giuliani's admonition to get back to normal, there were reminders of the city's wound. At an October Sunday service at Glad Tidings, Mark Bruner dressed up as the prophet Ezekiel to try to take the congregation back to faraway Bible times—but his words about the valley of dried bones from chapter 37 inevitably turned their thoughts to the present-day ruins nearby.

Nor was that sensitivity likely to fade soon, according to Donna Edwards, a counselor with Scope Ministries in Oklahoma City. She joined with the Billy Graham Prayer Center to offer her insights from having worked with another community that had suffered appalling, unexpected violence.

Six years after the attack on its federal offices, her home city, she said, was still dealing with heightened incidents of depression, family breakdown and suicide prompted by an event only a fortieth of the scale of New York's. And she warned that the absence of "real closure" in New York would make it even more traumatic.

"We had a Timothy McVeigh we could pin it on," she explained. "First it was finding who did it and then the sentence, and then his ultimate death. People kept looking for closure." But the New Yorkers she was offering a listening ear to were facing not only the absence of bodies but also the likelihood that those responsible would not be brought to justice.

Yet Edwards had "never seen a place that is more ripe for revival." Christians should be ready to present the gospel as well as offer practical help, she said, because "this is the time for the church to give a message of feel helpless and hopeless."

By late October about 3,000 volunteers had traveled to New York from across the country to offer help. One couple scrapped plans for a luxury cruise so they could help pass out a memorial brochure produced within days of the tragedy by Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC). More than a million copies were distributed.

Other volunteers helped staff the rest stations at Ground Zero, visited police and fire stations, attended memorial services, and even helped residents close to the World Trade Center clean up and decorate after they were allowed to move back into their homes. Workers with Bill Wilson's Metro

Ministries offered food and money to families of illegal immigrants in Chinatown who either lost their jobs or stopped going to work for fear of visits by immigration officials.

Lamb's Manhattan Church of the Nazarene, which opened its doors to Rice Brooks' church, also gave command-post space to CCC and Youth With a Mission (YWAM) teams and turned one of its floors into a dormitory for some of the out-of-town volunteers. Crossway Christian Center, an Assemblies of God congregation in the Bronx, sent teams into local housing projects to share the gospel with anxious children.

Churches in the city forged a new network to coordinate the efforts of visiting teams and also made plans for an adopt-a-church program through which congregations outside of New York could be linked long-term with one in the city to offer personnel, practical support and prayer.

Many New York churches also found another tragic opportunity for ministry—through funeral and memorial services. In one Chinese congregation the mother of a woman killed in the attack gave her life to Christ because of the care she received.

A Christian police officer told Brooklyn Tabernacle pastor Jim Cymbala that many of his colleagues wept for the first time as they “melted in the Lord's hands” at a service at the church for one of its members.

Chaplains at Ground Zero listened to and prayed with the civilian construction workers called in to dismantle The Pit and who had been exposed to horrors they had never experienced before. Police officers and firefighters reluctant to open up among themselves for concern that any weakness might be logged in their personnel files let down their guards and wept with the visiting ministers.

In the early days after the attack, YWAM leader Nick Savoca, who sent prayer station teams out across the city, said people

were “virtually falling into our arms in tears.”

A few weeks later they were “a little less emotional but still very tender,” he added. The rough-and-tough New York mentality was gone.

“This is the hour of impact like we have never seen,” he observed. “If we miss this opportunity, the body of Christ should never, ever complain about our city again because God gave us here an opportunity. No one knows how long that door will be open. God is not a dirty word, and He is welcome and wanted. We just need to rise to the occasion.”

As Bill Wilson’s children’s teams prepared to fan out across the city from their Brooklyn base for their Sidewalk Sunday School programs on a mid-October Saturday morning, the Metro Ministries leader urged his workers to let September 11 spur them to greater efforts.

“Remember,” he told them, “you can wake up one morning, and it all looks real normal. The next thing, your whole life can change.”

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