

Missionary Group Plans Ground Zero Prayer

This week there will be a lot of retrospectives on 9/11. Few of us who were alive and mature enough to know what was going on will ever forget that infamous day—and the weeks, months and years that followed. It may have been the first time ever that most Americans—and even most of the world's populatio—witnessed a mass murder on an incomprehensible scale.

My memories of that Tuesday morning are etched forever in my mind and are nearly as vivid now as they were ten years ago. I can see my secretary bursting into my then Virginia office with a look of shock on her face. I can see my staff and I hovered around her desk watching the ghastly events unfold on her computer screen. In these mental pictures I am on the phone, calling my daughter, an intern on nearby Capitol Hill, and barking orders for her to get in the car and drive east—no questions allowed.

I feel the warm tears welling up in my eyes as victims jumped from the high windows of the Trade Towers. I hear the name of a woman I was acquainted with, Barbara Olson, announced as a victim of Flight 77 at the Pentagon. I see our somber procession of clergy just days after the attack, making our way down the hill behind the Navy Annex to an improvised memorial field opposite the charred cavity in the southeast wall of the hulking headquarters of the Defense Department. I can see the shape of a fuselage, two wings, a tail—as if a giant had plunged a cookie-cutter the shape of an airplane into the stone wall. Rescue personnel were still pulling out bodies.

I see us kneeling to pray the Lord's Prayer—and countless

tourists, reporters, and who knows who, spontaneously kneeling with us.

I see the Amtrak train I took to New York that Friday. I was frantic to know about friends—supporters of our ministry who worked on Wall Street —and a pastor friend whose home and church were in the shadow of the Trade Towers. There was still no phone or cellular communication. I walked from midtown to the south tip of Manhattan. I found them alive but deeply shaken. One of our faithful financial supporters was in a taxi when the plane hit. A human torso slammed into the hood of the car and the taxi driver—a Sikh man in a turban—screamed and forced her out of his vehicle. Debris and body parts rained down around her. She kicked off her high heels and ran three miles to her apartment, collapsing in sobs.

The pastor told me that on that fateful morning, he, his wife and six home-schooled children were packing their station wagon for a trip to a church camp. His young son looked up into the clear blue sky and said, “Daddy, look, an airplane.” Seconds later it plowed into the North Tower. The family scurried into their apartment for safety. As the pastor called other family members, he turned his head away from a picture window for a brief moment, only to turn back to see a second fire ball mushroom from the South Tower.

After I prayed with the family, the pastor and I headed to Ground Zero on foot to see how we might help. The images of that harrowing trek replay in my mind as if in slow motion. I see the narrow side streets lined with abandoned cars, some with their doors open as if the occupants had simply bounded out of them. As we draw closer to the epicenter, the air is filled with papers fluttering on the breeze. A heavy, acrid stench is in the air. Dust covers everything, as if we’ve just landed on the moon. We pass a cemetery in the backyard of a historic church where, just months earlier, I had led a Bible study for workers in the finance sector. Antique tomb stones now sprout from under a foot of debris—more papers, file

folders, a desk chair, shoes, computer monitors, a purse.

As we round a corner I see the monster's mouth—a burning fissure in the earth—surrounded by a heap of twisted steel girders, huge chunks of concrete, massive slabs of glass. Smoke still billows into the sky—and hundreds of firefighters, police and other emergency personnel, filthy and profoundly sad, comb the wreckage. Dumpsters are spray-painted with words: Airplane Parts, Personal Effects. A different kind of canister is covered but I can see the writing underneath: Human Remains.

My pastor friend and I make rounds, guided by a crusty, retired New York City policeman who at one point looks down at my shoes and says, "Parson, look at your shoes. See that dust. My buddies are in that dust. My buddies are on your shoes." He points to the burning cauldron and says, "That's a giant incinerator. There ain't nothin left of them."

We pray with the men and women who are exhausted—physically and emotionally. One blinks blood out of his eyes as he makes the sign of the cross. It looks to me like the man is crying droplets of blood. An EMT explains, "It's the airborne glass and other abrasives. It scrapes the eyeballs and causes that bleeding."

As excruciating as the scene is—as sorrowful, as unfathomable the scale of evil—it is eclipsed by the magnanimousness of the souls who work the pile, risking their own lives to find survivors or even what effects of the lost have survived the inferno. It is human generosity, kindness and love that is almost divine.

For as long as I live I will possess these memories and mull them around, mining them as a source for understanding the nature of both good and evil. It is these life-altering experiences that will be with me when I go to Ground Zero this Saturday, Sept. 10, to offer prayers with fellow clergy for

the fallen, for their loved ones, for those first responders, for all who loved and cared for them in the aftermath. The official dedication of the new and deeply moving National 9/11 Memorial leaves prayers and pastors out of the ceremony. I'm not sure why, but I'll give them the benefit of the doubt. Maybe the organizers see it as a solution to the controversies caused by the clash of religions in the public square. But if that's the reason, it's not a solution at all. The hole in the ground at Ground Zero may no longer be there, but the absence of prayer leaves a different kind of vacuum—a hole in the heart.

So, in an attempt to fill that hole, my good friend Rev. Pat Mahoney and I will lead this procession of pastors and other Christian leaders to the site and do what so many did impulsively as the towers burned and collapsed, as name after name was called out, as family after family grieved—we prayed. We invite you to join us from wherever you are in lifting up intercessions this Saturday in the morning hours.

This 10th Anniversary of 9/11, let us together remember, let us appreciate and let us pray.

Rev. Rob Schenck (*pronounced Shank*) is president & lead missionary of Faith and Action in the Nation's Capital, a Christian outreach to top elected and appointed officials. A minister of the Evangelical Church Alliance, he served as a volunteer chaplain at both the Pentagon and Ground Zero in the days following the 9/11 attacks.