

A habit of ministry

From the Editors in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

We've heard the question, as have pastors around the country: Where is God in the death and devastation that struck September 11? One clergyman reported that a New Yorker who noticed his clerical collar stopped him on the street to ask exactly that shortly after the World Trade Center towers collapsed. According to the Christian faith, however, God is known through the words and deeds of those who follow Jesus. In light of that conviction, what could be taken as a purely metaphysical question becomes much more practical: Where is the church in these terrible events?

When terrorists struck, the church was where it has always been, witnessing to Jesus' message that God is love, feeding the hungry, giving sanctuary to the weary, tending to the sick, comforting those who mourn. In the recent crisis, however, church leaders—like those who fight fires and work in hospitals—had to rise to the challenge of their vocation. Pastors everywhere overcame their own shock, grief and anger to minister to the shock, grief and anger of others. On the edge of the catastrophe, St. Paul's Chapel and Trinity Church dug out, opened their doors, and got on with the business of discipleship. The same return to the church's irreplaceable habit of ministry occurred whether congregations found themselves physically near to or distant from the carnage. In recent years many have expressed concern for the future of pastoral leadership, but seldom has its importance stood in such high relief.

The church was also present in Yankee Stadium on September 23 when some of its leaders stood side by side with representatives of other faiths—Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh. Together these leaders underscored a commitment to one of the boldest and most important of this nation's experiments in freedom—that the U.S. will be a place where all may worship in the integrity of their own religious traditions, and where all will endeavor to live together in peace as they practice their faith in their day-to-day lives. The Yankee Stadium event also demonstrated that Christians are among those who look for ways to press that experiment yet further. The gathering joined together people of distinct faiths into a common act of mourning.

In a time when imaginations may strain to recognize the neighbor in Middle Eastern and West Asian faces, and some find it legitimate to wonder whether favoring peace is an act of treason, it's appropriate to remember that the Christian church is active in places like Pakistan, Iraq, Gaza, Israel and the West Bank. The realization that no place on earth is godforsaken should not dissuade the international community from seriously countering terrorism, but surely that realization should weigh heavily upon those who decide the measures to be taken.

Perhaps the most theologically compelling answer Christians can give to anyone who asks where the church is in this particular time of travail is that it is with the victims and those who mourn their loss. The church's identification with the circle of victims rests in its witness to a crucified God who suffers with us all to the very end of our darkest, most desperate moments. As it happens, this identification is strikingly symbolized in the fate of St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church, which until September 11 stood in the shadow of the World Trade Center. For the time being at least, it lies entombed beneath the rubble along with the thousands who remain buried there.