

Eyewitness to disaster: A day to listen

by [Stephen Paul Bouman](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

At noon on September 11 the chapel of the Interchurch Center at 475 Riverside Drive was filled with people who didn't know the fate of loved ones, and people who could not get home, as Manhattan was sealed off. We sang "O God Our Help in Ages Past," "Precious Lord," "When the Storms Are Raging." The Interchurch Center and the Metro Synod office of the ELCA remained open as an emergency shelter. In the chapel I asked people to name folks on their hearts and in their concern. The chapel rang out with the precious names of loved ones working in lower Manhattan, the names of fire and police personnel.

We prayed for our neighborhoods and that the aftershocks would not set us against one another. I reminded the group of the Christmas service in Brooklyn, when Jewish and Arab leaders prayed at Salaam Arabic Lutheran Church for each other and then worked with young people in the neighborhood to bring peace from street violence.

Anthony Harris, the acting CEO of Lutheran Social Services, whose office is a block and a half from the World Trade Center, said the explosion sent debris through the fifth floor roof. The people of the agency calmly evacuated the five floors of all people and walked every one of them safely north and out of the area to St. John's on Christopher Street.

On Thursday I joined a prayer vigil at St. Paul's in New City. Lingered over coffee we heard the stories of people still awaiting loved ones, reliving stories of their own commute from hell on Tuesday. One woman told me that she was speaking on the phone to a friend in the World Trade Center who said, "That's funny, there's a plane out there, it's headed toward this building . . ." Then the phone went dead.

It was a day to listen. Pastor Gary Mehl, along with Pastor Lyn Mehl from St. Paul's in East Northport, held chapel for the parish school, attending to children whose parents were missing. He said, "You look for someone else, but it's you who have to do it. This is no time for pious b.s. This is real. I go to the Psalms, the Beatitudes."

It was also a day to hear signs of hope. Pastor Bill Baum of Howard Beach, Queens, said: “I’ve got 50 international flight-stranded people from JFK staying in my parish hall here at St. Barnabas. We found them sleeping on the floor of the subway station. It’s been remarkable how the community has provided far more in food and bedding than we can use.”

[John Allen remembers](#)

[Rowan Williams remembers](#)

[Jon Walton remembers](#)

[Linda Bloom remembers](#)