

Eyewitness to disaster: Lonely city

by [Jon Walton](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

These past days the church has been open. People have come flowing in bearing pictures of “the disappeared,” sent by St. Vincent’s Hospital two blocks away, where the chapel was overwhelmed and the need had become too taxing for a staff readying for the arrival of the victims—victims who never came in anything like the expected numbers.

They are people who claim they have no faith, whose faith is now in question, whose faith is all they have left, who haven’t prayed in years but have found a voice for prayer nonetheless. They have stopped and waited, watched and listened, asking God questions that have no earthly answer and lifting up laments that heaven alone can bear. Some come in just to get away from the smell of the smoke and the burn of the smoke in their eyes. But the smoke is in the sanctuary too. There is no refuge from the reality of what has happened.

Five of our church family are missing. Our church secretary’s husband was on the 105th floor of the World Trade Center’s north tower, the first to be attacked. The nephew of our receptionist, a building engineer on the 45th floor, was described as someone “who would never leave his post in an emergency.”

Another is a church-school teacher, the mother of two children. One is the father of a child in our nursery school. And there is the mother of a 14-year-old and a nine-year-old. The tragedy is not barely understood in knowing that more than 6,000 died, but in knowing that each one who died had a name, and were known by God.

I understand now Jeremiah’s lament, “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations!”

[John Allen remembers](#)

[Rowan Williams remembers](#)

[Stephen Paul Bouman remembers](#)

[Linda Bloom remembers](#)