

America at prayer: The church's prosaic heroism

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

Campus chaplains are reporting that special worship services have been filling their sanctuaries these days. Pews that often gather dust have been crowded with students who usually pass the churches by. They meditate, cry, pray. Meanwhile, public figures invoke the name of God and bless the nation—all legally because all voluntarily, things done as “acts of free will,” not “by law.”

Downtown churches in cities unharmed by the September 11 terrors that devastated parts of Manhattan and Washington, D.C., did not lack worshipers.

African-American churches recorded large numbers of worshipers. Mosques sheltered Arab-Americans, who feared they would be targets of unjust discrimination. America, flawed America, was at worship.

Meanwhile, in innumerable broadcast interviews survivors and those who sought survivors told of their private prayers. If there are no atheists in foxholes, there did not seem to be many in the stairwells, corridors and streets where panicked people cowered or ran. Some struggled for words, saying they found the language of prayer distant. Others drew on rich vocabularies nurtured in sanctuaries. America was at prayer.

It is trite but valid to compare September 11, 2001, to December 7, 1941, when churches half-full on Sunday morning filled that evening after news of Pearl Harbor came in. Or to November 22, 1963, when praying crowds flooded churches after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Or January 28, 1986, when the space shuttle *Challenger* disintegrated, and campus chapels were again crowded by a new generation.

It would be easy to deride these acts of worship and prayer as superficial, ungrounded, unfocused, generic, “civilly religious” and more. These weeks, however, when we are gathered together benumbed and in need of each other are

not the moments for critical analysis. Who has the credentials to measure the value of particular prayers when civilization is threatened?

Instead I want to point to the people whose year-in, year-out steadfastness tends to get overlooked by the postdisaster worshipping crowds. Does it occur to the crisis churchgoers that someone must be paying for the pews they occupy, the lights that are ready to be turned on, the doors that open, the buildings where the language of prayer takes on special meaning? Does it occur to them to become part of worshipping communities, to take part in this sustenance? Do they remember that such communities keep alive the vocabulary of prayer, the stories that give meaning? The state doesn't pay for the church—thank God!—and for-profit organizations cannot do much to support it. Who will?

David Bartlett of Yale once preached a memorable sermon on Luke 17—on the ten lepers who were “made clean” by Jesus (it's coming up in the lectionary cycle). One “turned back praising God aloud,” threw himself down at Jesus' feet, and thanked him. (“And he was a Samaritan.”) “At this Jesus said: ‘Were not all ten cleansed? The other nine, where are they? Could none be found to come back and give praise to God except this foreigner?’” Bartlett proposed that the faithful leper that day was “the church.”

Credit the heroic firemen, police and rescue workers; praise hospitable friends and comforters. But think of the usual loneliness of the church—on campus, downtown, in suburbs and in small towns—a church quietly, patiently, prosaically heroic in prayer, worship and acts of love in times when there is no crisis. That prosaic heroism in the face of neglect allows the church to welcome all who seek sanctuary in times of crisis.