

Lament and renewal: 9/11: Ten years later

by [Stephen Paul Bouman](#)

August 18, 2011

Read [more reflections](#) on the 9/11 anniversary.

After watching from our 16th-floor windows as both towers lit up, then fell into a cloud of smoke, we gathered in the chapel of the Interchurch Center in Morningside Heights to pray. Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset has said, "History happens when the sensitive crown of the human heart inclines to one side or the other of the horizon." I heard the American heart incline and new history unfold as the chapel rang out with the precious names of loved ones downtown. In the speaking of the names I heard the sensitive crown of the human heart incline from security to insecurity; from entitlement to vulnerability; from the veneer of secularity (disenchantment) to a yearning to speak to our Maker; from insularity to fleeting solidarity.

In those moments, the Bible became very relevant because it talks to us about the horizon facing all of us: death. People's spiritual DNA (Augustine: The soul was made for God and will never find its rest until it rests in God) moved them to gather, to pray, to go deep in their wrestling with God. As a chaplain anointed with oil some of the firefighters who rushed into the burning towers, there was the sense that we were baptized for this moment, that our lives mattered. Our hearts were broken, but they were broken open.

Before the events of 9/11, Salaam Arabic Lutheran Church in Brooklyn had been involved in organizing a community response to violence between Jewish and Arab kids. After the attacks, it became a safe haven for Arab families fearing a backlash against them. After the attacks, pastors became a healing presence in firehouses for those who were beleaguered and grieving.

A program called Project Life sought to help the economic victims of September 11. As is often the case, those made bereft had already been among the most

vulnerable. Many were immigrants. The case managers for the program included a Jewish hip-hop musician, an Arab Muslim arts major and an aspiring stand-up comedian. I watched the burgeoning of what today we would call an "emergent community." The terms of engagement were a community that enabled them to make a difference in the lives of others, a community where their own narratives were shared and taken seriously and where their work and struggle was recognized in ritual and reflection, a community infused by the Abrahamic narrative of faith.

I am more convinced than ever that a church in mission in these ways, a church that turns its face toward the poor and the stranger and to those hungry for a story and a vocation, a church that lifts up its voice in lament and that is rooted in community, will always be a church in renewal.