

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ July 2003

Hope from Ground Zero

Mary Sudman Donovan

For the last year, I've been working with R. William Franklin on a book about the spiritual response to the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11. We interviewed people who responded to this tragedy, trying to sort out the spiritual aspect of their responses. What led people to volunteer to help the victims and the rescue workers? How did religious faith help people cope with the losses they experienced? Where does God fit in all this?

Along with being a compilation of individuals facing cataclysm, however, this book is a story of the church — an amazing account of how the church was able to create and sustain a multifaceted ministry that really mattered in individual lives. And that is what I want to describe for those of us who have spent so many of our working years within the Episcopal Church. Let me outline a few of our learnings, highlighted with quotes from people we interviewed.

Episcopalians have internalized the Baptismal Covenant. Again and again in the weeks after 9/11, laity and priests simply appeared and began to work. As Mary O'Shaughnessy revealed, "The baptismal covenant was something I meditated on throughout my experience in ministry at Ground Zero, reflecting on different pieces of it at different times. Respecting the dignity of every person, which is a phrase in the covenant, was for me the way of expressing 'get out of the way and let other people give their gifts.' In the baptism of a child, there is a phrase about joy and wonder in all God's work. There was joy and wonder in the work of God and the people coming together, and when you are open to that, you find it in places you would never have expected."

The sacraments worked. At a time when words failed, people inevitably turned to the "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace." The Eucharist was at the center of this ministry. Kenneth Leonczyk, a divinity student from Yale, talked about "watching chaplains in line handing out the food or the water. That was more of a Eucharist to me, the way they did it. You could see in their eyes that they were there handing out the Body of Christ, not just a sandwich. . . . The sacramental aspects of the church were abbreviated, they were different at Ground Zero. Almost everything became sacramental because life became so precious there."

The Episcopal Church knows how to be involved in the city. Undoubtedly, this has something to do with our Anglican heritage. The concept of the church and the state as two functions of the body politic is part of the fabric of Anglicanism. As New York architect Paul Byard reflected, "Saint Paul's is a public building, and has a connection with the public which is more than one we've created, it's sort of bigger than all of us. And that connection is something that we ought to continue to try to understand, and see what we can make of it. For our own purposes and for the city's purposes, and for the world's purposes, what can we do with this little powerhouse? We're right there, and we're tied into it, by being a symbolic vessel, obviously for reconciliation. Obviously for thinking about the serious things, but also for history, because of that amazing connection with the founding of the Republic."

We found great strength in our openness to multiplicity. In this crisis, all kinds of people were welcomed into the responsive community. The Rev. Chloe Breyer remarked about “going down and finding that the barriers that usually exist between all kinds of people based on social and economic or racial or what-have-you — I mean New York is filled with strata — had completely disappeared. That kind of sense of camaraderie and there being more similarity between people than differences was present throughout the whole time that the rescue and clean-up operations were in full swing.” The Rev. Jean Smith echoed Breyer’s observation and added, “I think there has been a gain, a sense of ‘intentionality’ about refusing to fear everyone who looks so different or may have a beard or may wear a turban, an absolute refusal and a willingness to speak up and say, yes, we must be concerned about our security, but that’s not all that we need to be concerned about as citizens of the world and as the people of God. I think this is a gain.”

This ministry plunged us into a deeper understanding of the incarnation. As the Rev. Lloyd Prator testified, “I’ve been compelled to take a more expansive view in terms of the incarnation. I could see God working through the hands of those men who rushed into those buildings. I could see God working through the hands of those guys I’d see sitting on those old rickety old chairs blown out of the collapsed buildings and staring at the pit while they were on their break, before they got up to go back out there to dig up body parts. It seems to me that I became more convinced than ever of the presence of God in the unfolding of human history, even the most dreadful parts of it. I think, in the sense that Anglicans commonly use this language, I have become more radically dependent upon God. The human condition is usually such that we think we can sort of get along pretty well and we call God in whenever we can’t fix something. God is like the Maytag repairman. But now it seems to me that my need for God, my need for an immediate, immanent, available God, is much sharper now than it was. As I reflect upon the way I have been praying since then, I act as if and pray as if God was more available to me than God was before this.”

Working on this book, I have felt affirmed by the many people involved in the spiritual response to this disaster. I have come away from this experience with a strengthened conviction that faith matters, that the spiritual dimension of our lives is critical and must be nourished and strengthened. And I have come away with a renewed appreciation for many of the things that are good about the Episcopal Church. We often get so mired in controversy and criticism that we don’t see the positive aspects of this church in which we live. For me, it has been a privilege to witness the power of the ministry at Ground Zero.



Mary Sudman Donovan teaches World History at Hunter College, CUNY. With R. William Franklin, she has edited *Will the Dust Praise You? Spiritual Responses to 9/11*, available from Church Publishing, Inc. She and her husband, Herbert (Bishop of Arkansas, retired) live in Dobbs Ferry, New York, where Mary is creating a container garden and knits sweaters for their ever-growing grandchildren. Mary serves as President of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society, as her commitment to preserve local history.