

**Vergers' Guild of the Episcopal Church
13th National Conference - 25-28 October 2001**

The President's Perspective

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New York City New York

Friday, 26 October 2001



First I want to say publicly, how important and necessary this conference is for all of us. It is exceedingly good that we are together here and at this time. It would have been easy and perhaps prudent to postpone or even cancel this year's conference in the light of the events of September 11. However, I want to thank the people of Christ Church and Joanne Forster particularly on your behalf for having the courage to stay the course and extend richly the amazing hospitality of the heartland of America.

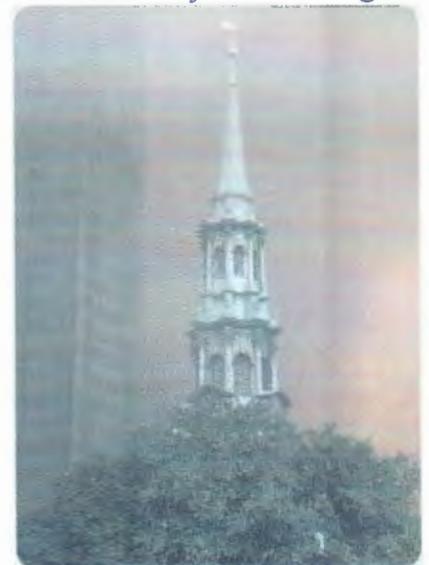
Though I do not intend this report to be offered as a sermon, I do want to begin with a text. This passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is part of a banner prepared by the youth of a South Carolina parish now hanging across the front gate of St. Paul's

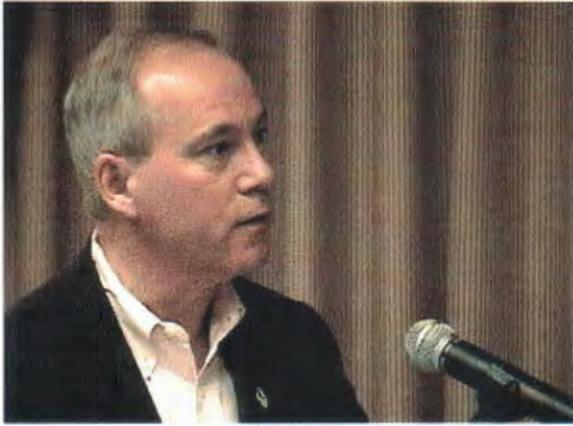
Chapel yards from ground zero. It reads: "Love bears up under anything and everything that comes; its hopes are fadeless under all circumstances and it endures everything." These words welcome thousands of emergency personnel working twelve hour shifts through the day and night at the scene of the World Trade Center as they enter Manhattan's oldest continuously occupied building. This sacred space has stood through every event in the history of New York City and now at the beginning of the 21st century stands as the entry point to the scene of an act of human destruction in the United States second only to the 1862 battle of Antietam when Americans butchered each other in rural Maryland marking the bloodiest day in American history.

It is a tenet of our faith as Christians that God blesses each of us with free will. From the moment we enter the world until our death we are free to choose the direction of our life. We are Christians because we choose to be Christians.

We rightly pray for God's guidance and for discernment of God's will but finally the decisions are ours alone. For some this free will leads to the use of jet aircraft as guided missiles to destroy skyscrapers and the people they contain. For others, this same free will is exercised to choose the paths of faith, hope and love.

On the morning of September 11 walking through Battery Park on my way to Trinity, I, and hundreds of people around me witnessed the second jet screaming over our heads at low altitude on its way to





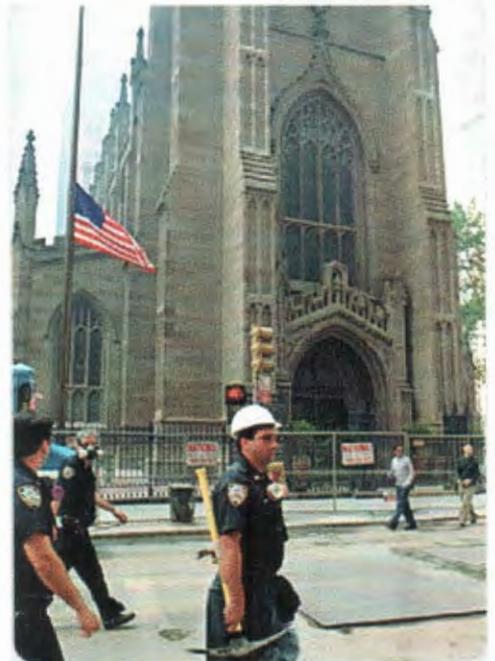
intentional collision with the south tower of the World Trade Center. In the confusion, I managed to run the rest of the way to Trinity, cursing the fact that I am no longer 25. Everyone in the church was safe and I was able to call my sister in Vermont as well as many others. The fright each of us experienced as in turn the two World Trade towers collapsed probably cannot be adequately described. In all honesty I did not fear for my life. I simply waited following the shock waves, and expected Trinity to crumble around me. The thirty or so of us gathered across the front of the nave waited, prayed, held hands. Owen Burdick our organist and I

provided water and wet towels to those struggling to breath through the heavy smoke entering the church. The air cleared about noon allowing those remaining to make their way home. Owing to the courage of teachers and clergy alike, the 135 children in our preschool were all reunited with their parents by the end of the day. Both our church buildings, Trinity and St. Paul's Chapel escaped unharmed. Some have declared this a miracle as though God intervened to save these two historic buildings. I cannot accept this notion as though God cares more for stone and glass than 5000 innocent people. Perhaps the will of God is for us to use these structures for good, as a means to express God's love amidst death and destruction.

Just as the attack was beginning, Rowan Williams the Archbishop of Wales, was preparing for an interview to be video taped from from the Trinity television studio. As a leading theologian he was to be asked questions on pressing questions before the church today. He never gave the interview. The next day Archbishop Williams was to deliver the annual John Henry Hobart lecture at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. He declined to cancel preferring to comment on the events of the previous day. In part this is what he said: "I want to suggest that ultimately all authentic pastoral activity has to be activity in the face of death. All authentic pastoralness is activity in which with God's grace somehow or other a space is made, a breach in the wall of our anxiety and our urgent longing to get on top of things; When that breach is made, and there is room, death teaches us." He goes on, "across the torment and violence upon which the whole history of the world turns is the effect of making strangers neighbors. We know that when we do face catastrophe in life, we are drawn together by it. I think we were aware of it yesterday morning. We're aware of it as we see rescue services moving into operation, and see the selfless courage and skill that goes into that work. We know at some point that tragedy does build bridges. And the immense challenge of pastoral work, and perhaps the challenge of the Christian fellowship itself, is to make known that avenue of discovery."

We have all seen evidence of this bridge building in the last few weeks. Is there a parish or cathedral represented in this room that has not come together in response to these horrible events? The words of Isaac Watts' noble hymn, O God our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope for Years to come, have never rung so true. The language of liturgy has never been more relevant and uplifting. All of our worship has done much to bridge whatever separates us as creatures of God.

One such bridge I have been privileged to assist in operating is the ministry going on right now at St. Paul's Chapel. Because the Chapel is within the perimeter of ground zero it is closed to the public by order of the City. Enter opportunity. The pastor





of St. Paul's Fr. Lyndon Harris working with the Seaman's Church Institute and the General Theological Seminary converted the entire building to the relief of those laboring to remove the tons rubble covering the remains of the thousands of people killed on September 11. Before long food, medical supplies, and an assortment of clothing and boots began arriving supplied from people and businesses all over New York. By the end of the first week a large group of massage therapists, podiatrists and chiropractors were also on duty providing much needed assistance to those in physical discomfort. The food has been donated by local restaurants and distributors. Just this week a jumbalaya truck from Louisiana arrived to provide 5000 meals free of charge. A restaurant owner who lost his business in the attack now works at St. Paul's organizing thousands of meals a week. None of this could happen without the

diligence and hard work of many volunteers offering their services around the clock. In no time in its history has St. Paul's been open continuously for such a lengthy period of time. The needs are so basic: food, a cup of coffee, an ace bandage, new work boots, a quiet corner for a nap, a place to pray; the faces of these people express as sincere a gratitude as any words of thanks. These strangers are now truly our neighbors. Jesus teaches us that the resources from which we give are never exhausted. This truth is born out every day in Lower Manhattan.

The elegant grace of St. Paul's classical revival interior has been enhanced with thousands of printed messages and drawings mostly from young people sent to us from around the world. Some are poster size and hang from the galleries or outside on the fences surrounding the chapel. Some are sealed notes to firefighters or police personnel that we leave on the pews.

One group of cards was sent from the youth group of Christ Church, Overland Park. Here is a sampling of the hundreds of messages we have received

"To our heroes – thank you, The University of the South."

"To New York City and all rescuers – keep your spirits up – Oklahoma loves you."

A large American flag with *"Tennessee cares"* printed underneath.

"Dear policeman, thank you for helping the people, your friend, Marshall from England."

"God bless the fireman from the tiny tots of West Virginia."

A 19th century memorial on the Chapel's south wall, to a departed vestryman contains the inscription, *"blessed are the meek thy Father who seeth in secret shall reward thee."* Under which is posted a small note *"awesome city, New York."* From Hobbs, New Mexico. And my favorite, *"From the home of the Braves to the home of the brave you are New York's and America's finest. God bless you from the people of Atlanta."*





Never has the church been more well, the church! In the midst of all the activity someone is always praying, quietly in a pew, maybe with a priest. I will never forget a firefighter in full battle dress lighting a candle. All are welcome to participate in the Eucharist celebrated daily. Somehow our normal routine will never be the same and maybe we're discovering a new normal for changed times. Believe me, my vocation as a vergers has been renewed and given new purpose. I give thanks daily for each new challenge and for the opportunity to serve in anyway I can.

Vergers are perhaps by nature or to extend the theological point, trained to make the choices to be there when organization is needed; when a makeshift altar needs a decent linen or candles; when someone in trouble needs to find a priest to make a confession, to encourage a shy acolyte and to welcome the stranger as a friend or to help build that bridge Archbishop Williams spoke about.

Another small banner is posted just before entering the Chapel. It contains a quote from St. Teresa of Avila, whose feast was celebrated just a few days ago. Teresa is writing in the midst of war and chaos in 16th century Spain. She writes, "For those working amidst the dust of angels: God has no body on earth but yours; yours are the only hands with which he can do his work, yours are the only feet with which he can go about the world, yours are the only eyes through which his compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world."

During the national day of prayer service at the National Cathedral the Friday following the attack, I couldn't keep my eye off Larry Keller, one of the cathedral's vergers graciously and quietly directing the cathedral's guests to their places. When it was time for Billy Graham to speak, Larry with such care and love, helped the frail evangelist into the pulpit. My prayer for the Vergers' Guild of the Episcopal Church is for eager hands, eyes, and feet to carry out the ministries entrusted to us. I ask God to bless our fellowship, to fill us with the will to choose the way of faith, hope and love as we seek God's guidance all the days of our life.

Amen.

