

Bishop's Online Diary Records Anguish, Ministry of Sept. 11
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(Ed. note: Photo to accompany this article is available from RNS Today. To download photos from the RNS photo Web site, call 800-767-6781.)

(UNDATED) At about 11:45 a.m. on Sept. 11, Lutheran Bishop Stephen Bouman posted a note on his Web page, closing with a verse from Psalm 99: "But I, O Lord, call out to you; in the morning my prayer comes before you."

He didn't intend to start a "disaster journal," but the online setting for the bishop's notes became a place of comfort, prayer and information in the hours, days and weeks to come.

In those first hours Bouman told the story everyone needed to hear over and over that day: "We watched in horror as both buildings fell into a cloud of smoke and ash. It is unimaginable what happened there."

Bouman heads up the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, with about 62,000 members in 228 congregations.

The synod office is on the 16th floor of a Manhattan building that houses a number of church-related agencies, just miles from the World Trade Center.

"We began to do what people throughout the metropolitan area were doing, trying to track down loved ones who work in lower Manhattan," Bouman wrote. "We have been calling the offices of people who work in the area. In some cases prayers have flowed across the phones."

Fifteen minutes later the staff of the Interchurch Center gathered in the chapel for prayer. Bouman asked people to name folks on their hearts and in their concern.

Later he wrote: "The chapel rang out with the precious names of loved ones working in Lower Manhattan, the names of fire and police personnel. We prayed for our neighborhoods and that the aftershocks would not set us against one another.

"We sang 'O God Our Help in Ages Past,' 'Precious Lord,' 'When the Storms Are Raging.' The chapel was filled with people not knowing the fate of loved ones and people who cannot get home as Manhattan is sealed off," the bishop wrote.

Bouman's Web notes gave the people of the synod and across the country a way to pray and a glimpse into terror-struck New York that was somehow more real, more personal than the pictures on television.

"Lutherans who work in Manhattan are calling our office, asking

where we are gathering to pray and what they can do. Folks are giving blood and pastors are going to hospitals. Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn is a major trauma center and is inundated at this point," Bouman wrote. "Pastors and people throughout the metropolis are worrying now about unaccounted-for loved ones and members. Thank you for your expressions of concern and prayer."

The next day "this horrid event became personal," Bouman wrote. He reported that Pastor Paul Britton of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Huntington Station, Long Island, had lost his sister in the hijack crash in Pennsylvania. The bishop spoke with other pastors waiting for Britton to finish a prayer vigil. "He did not know that his sister, Marion, was even traveling. Later, we prayed over the phone."

"Lars Qualben, president of Trinity Lutheran Church in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, is still missing. His father, Paul, is a (retired) pastor in (Brooklyn). Speaking with Lars' mother and pastor gave the thousands of similar stories heartbreaking immediacy," Bouman wrote.

The stories of ministry began to emerge. The bishop joined Pastor Randy Rottmann to lead a prayer vigil at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in New City, north of New York. "Lingering over coffee we heard the stories of people still awaiting loved ones, reliving stories of their own commute from hell on Tuesday. One woman told me that she was speaking on the phone to a friend in the World Trade Center who said, 'That's funny, there's a plane out there, it's headed toward this building.' Then the phone went dead."

It was a day to listen, Bouman wrote: "Pastor Gary Mehl from St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in East Northport held chapel for the parish school, attending to children missing parents, shocked and fearful. Gary said, 'You look for someone else, but it's you who have to do it. This is no time for pious B.S. This is real. I go to the Psalms, the Beatitudes ...'

"Pastor Robert Scholz of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan is a fire department chaplain. He shared his ministry at the neighborhood fire station where 11 are known to have died."

Then the church got on with its work. Bouman wrote, "Yesterday was a day to begin to organize the fabric of our communion and join it to the communal healing and consolation.

"Meetings with Lutheran Social Service, our synod's deans, Manhattan pastors, and our family of social ministry organizations are continuing this morning. As the plan is put into place we will let so many of you throughout the country who have offered support (counselors, pastors, kitchen workers, etc.) have a clear idea of how we can be drawn together in the Spirit's tether," he wrote.

After those meetings, Bouman tried to unwind: "The first two hours

was 'mutual consolation of the saints.' I will share some of the stories later. I'm numb.

"But we did lift up names known to us of loved ones missing. We prayed for them by name -- Father Nobeletti, John, Kevin, Keith, Lars, Paul, Eric, Paul, Kristin, Cami -- so many names, each dear to God and to all of us."

Two verses closed that Sept. 13 entry: "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people! How like a widow she has become" (Lamentations 1:1) and from Romans 8: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us."

On Sept. 16 Bouman wrote: "I leave you with an image shared by Pastor Jim Sudbrock yesterday. Those brave men and women who are attacking the rubble, looking to save lives, are an icon of the Good Shepherd relentlessly seeking the lost. In some way, here and in eternity, they have already been found. Your prayers and support are more dear to us than you can even imagine."

The bishop's diary emphasized the blessings of reaching out and connecting, keeping contact with the whole community.

"My name is Abdullah, but I'm really a nice guy," a Pakistani taxi driver told the bishop's out-of-town guests.

Bouman told this story: A 6-year-old Honduran child from a church in the Bronx was at MacDonald's with her mother when another woman began giving her dirty looks, then got up and spit at the child. The woman told the mother she didn't know they were Spanish. "She (the child) looks like one of the Arab people," the woman said. When the mother said that was no excuse, the woman replied, "Well, yes it is -- this is a war now."

On Sept. 26 Bouman reported the funerals of Pastor Britton's sister Marion and Lars Qualben, who probably worked in the part of the first tower hit by the jetliner.

He wrote: "We are not 'moving on' here in New York. There are still bodies in the ground downtown, there is tremendous pressure on caregivers and the church as this tragedy continues to unfold.

"Many of our pastors serve as police and fire chaplains. Pastor Tom Taylor of Grace Lutheran Church, North Bellemore, Long Island, is a fire chaplain who has been running hard. He personally knows many of the 300 who have died. He spoke of a (fire) captain who ... is going to a different firehouse each night for what they call "defusings," when firefighters talk about their experiences. One, a Vietnam veteran, told him he had seen nothing as bad as what they are experiencing as they attempt rescue and retrieval at the site."

He wrote of ELCA Presiding Bishop George Anderson and others joining him at the site of the tragedy.

"Very quickly we moved from being reluctant voyeurs to part of the spiritual infrastructure in that sad place. People were eager to ask for prayer, to converse, to thank us for showing up. It was sobering to be there. I tried to imagine faces of people I know who are buried there. I prayed the commendation: 'Into your hands ... we commend ... acknowledge ... a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock.'

"It is becoming clear to me that the church is at 'ground zero.' Every pastoral act, from weddings to funerals to anniversaries, occurs in the shadow of this tragedy. The world is so hungry to learn once again how to talk to its Creator.

"We have been baptized and ordained for a time such as this. What a comfort to know that our faith is not subjective -- it doesn't depend on how we feel today. When there are no words, we have been given the words, images, liturgical actions, exemplars of the great cloud of witnesses, of the church of the ages.

"It will be our ongoing task to find a language to convey the presence of Jesus in, with and under these treasures of the Church. And we must keep company with Abdullah, the taxi driver, and a little girl at McDonald's in the Bronx as we walk one another through the wreckage toward the light."

In an interview, Bouman said that in the first days of the tragedy his spiritual director advised him to stop talking so much, to spend some time in quietness. But Bouman didn't have time, and besides, people around the world urged him to keep writing.

"I can't move stone and rubble. Telling the story was the only way toward healing," Bouman said.

In mid-October Bouman wrote: "I never thought I would be in Yankee Stadium for a playoff game and experience a silence so deafening. It was a communal experience, this silence, as we remembered those who have died. For 'God Bless America,' voices raw with rowdy and raucous cheering gentled down into heartfelt singing. The silence and the song were communal, almost liturgical. It was the music of our hunger for connected-ness, the fullness of human contact reaching out through the sadness."

He told of an encounter that morning. "I had just finished my three-mile run in the neighborhood ... when I saw her approach, a Muslim mother with covered head pushing her baby in a stroller. She lives down the street from us but I do not know her at all. I looked at her eyes, cast downward as she approached me. 'Good morning,' I said. She looked up and her wary countenance relaxed. She smiled and returned the greeting. 'Are you all right?' I asked. Her eyes grew wide, and tears appeared. 'I will be,' she said and continued her walk.

"We're not moving on," the bishop wrote. "We're moving into the new

reality of lost jobs, protracted grieving, missing undocumented people, care-giving fatigue, uneasiness on subways and streets, pressure on churches and human care institutions and pastors, this obscenely altered skyline, the inertia of death and sadness.

"In the midst of it the church continues to sing its song, create safe space for the silence, and bear the `heaviest part of what we are feeling.'

"We are setting up a case management system so that we can immediately respond to the needs of our members and neighbors: money for respite child care for the newly single parents; culturally relevant counseling and social services for a synod that sings in 18 languages every Lord's day; partnerships with FEMA, Red Cross, and ecumenical and interfaith agencies to sustain compassion over the long haul; the beginnings of a plan for respite care of our pastors, teachers and caregivers. ...

At the end of October, Bouman posted an entry he called "Buried Alive: The Church at Ground Zero."

"This past week has provided opportunity for me to see what `normal' looks like here in New York. I have been meeting in each of our 18 conferences with a simple format: lunch with groups of pastors to ask the Marvin Gaye question: `What's going on?' One-on-ones with pastors asking, `How's your soul?' Evening sessions with lay leaders to hear how they are living the questions, telling and receiving stories, and seeking a faith which comprehends it all. The testimony is raw and vivid. The cruciform presence of Jesus is etched in the details," he wrote.

Bouman concluded saying: "At the site, staring at the unbelievable carnage, breathing through a mask, I had my own troubling thoughts and questions, but also this reminder. So many are buried here, but the first burial gives hope: `Do you not know that you are buried with Christ by baptism unto death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit, you too may walk in newness of life.' We are all in the rubble, buried alive."

After the Nov. 13 plane crash in Queens, Bouman wrote: "An appeal from the heart to the saints of the Metropolitan New York Synod: Stay in the dance. Stay connected to one another. Stay connected at the table where Christ feeds us and renews us. Keep putting yourselves in nearness to those with stories to tell of grief and rescue and spiritual hunger. We cannot endure this without the Lord, surely. But we can also not endure this without one another."

As the Advent season approaches, entries in the bishop's "disaster journal" slow and he uses his newsletter to tell a series of stories of light and hope in the congregations of the synod.

He closes it with these words: "These moments of prayer, witness, proclamation, storytelling, memorial, poetry, healing are joined by many throughout our synod and throughout the Body of Christ in the world. They are flickering Advent candles, fragments of Advent hope, sacred moments for which we have been baptized so that the world may join in Advent longing: `Even so, Lord quickly come. Come, Lord Jesus.'"

== 30 ==

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