

Eyewitness to disaster: Churches open doors

by [Linda Bloom](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

After the twin towers collapsed, Washington Square United Methodist Church in Greenwich Village opened its doors and telephone lines to crying, shaken passersby. “Then the walking wounded began appearing—folks who had walked out of the ‘ground zero’ area,” reported Jacquelyn Moore in a widely circulated e-mail message. “Their injuries were not major, but many were in shock. We set up water and some food . . . broke out cots from our homeless shelter so some could lie down. We set up a TV in the corner of the sanctuary so folks could get information.

“We didn’t stop to count, but think that 150 to 200 folks came through. The staff and some community members of Washington Square Church are the best—they were here and worked and cried with folks.”

Washington Square is a few blocks from St. Vincent’s Medical Center, where both victims and rescue workers were being treated for injuries.

Another United Methodist Church, Metropolitan Duane on West 13th Street, is right next door to St. Vincent’s. The congregation, led by Takayuki Ishii, believes its most important role in the disaster “is to provide space to come in and pray.” As the tragedy unfolded, “many of the St. Vincent workers came in for prayer,” Ishii said. Since then, rescue workers taken to St. Vincent’s for treatment have come in to pray as well. Metropolitan Duane most likely will be used as a staging area for future United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) activities, such as grief counseling.

The United Methodist church just two blocks from the World Trade Center, John Street, marks the home of the oldest continuous Methodist congregation in the U.S., meeting since 1766. The present building at 44 John Street dates to 1841. The pastor there, James McGraw, was visiting a church member at St. Vincent’s when the towers collapsed. McGraw could not be reached by telephone, but it was reported that the church did not suffer any immediate visible damage, although it was filled with dust.

James Cardwell, a John Street trustee, wrote in an e-mail message, "Many members of John Street are not allowed into the area and communication is not good . . . We fear for the welfare of our members, many of whom live and work in and around the World Trade Center."

United Methodist churches further uptown also opened their doors on a day when many people were walking the streets because public transportation had been shut down. On the Upper West Side, James Karpen greeted people outside the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew. "We invited them in to stop and pray for a while and talk," he said.

A prayer vigil that evening with Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, a Jewish congregation that shares space at the church, drew 500 to 600 people, according to Karpen. Together, the two congregations are planning to set up a free trauma counseling center.

At Park Avenue Church on the Upper East Side, William Shillady, pastor, and Bryan Hooper, associate pastor, stood outside in ministerial robes, inviting those walking by to pray.

"People would stop in their tracks and say, 'Yes, that's what I need to do,'" Shillady wrote in a letter to his congregation. "We had a steady stream of people. One young man, with tears in his eyes, walked by, then reached out and hugged me. And a father, with his daughter's hand tightly in his, asked for a blessing for himself and his daughter. That day our open doors meant more than ever before."

[John Allen remembers](#)

[Rowan Williams remembers](#)

[Jon Walton remembers](#)

[Stephen Paul Bouman remembers](#)