

Eyewitness to disaster: At Trinity Wall Street

by [John Allen](#) in the [September 26, 2001](#) issue

When the first aircraft hit New York's World Trade Center during the morning rush hour on Tuesday, September 11, young children were arriving at Trinity Wall Street's pre-school, staff were on the streets around the center, and Archbishop Rowan Williams of Wales was preparing for a videotaping with Trinity Television. Daniel P. Matthews, rector of Trinity Parish, and a group of colleagues were in a meeting in the parish's office tower three blocks from the WTC.

"We were on the 24th floor, which has a view of the World Trade Center, when we heard the sound, and looked up to see a ball of fire coming from one of the towers. A few minutes later, we saw the second plane hit, and again a ball of fire erupted," Matthews said. He was soon down in the building's lobby, reassuring shocked staffers as security staff sought guidance on the safest response.

Before the first blast, staff on the streets around Trinity heard what to some sounded like military jets carrying out a low flypast before hearing the blast. Within minutes, pieces of paper were raining from the sky onto the church, the churchyard and the surrounding streets.

In Trinity Television's studio a small group of shocked visitors gathered as Trinity's director of television, Bert Medley, asked Archbishop Williams to lead the group in prayer.

Gay Silver went to minister to the teachers and pupils at the preschool. Lyndon Harris, who heads the ministry at historic St. Paul's Chapel across the street from the World Trade Center, set out for the chapel to see how he could help there. Before he arrived, the second aircraft hit the center and he was forced to return to Trinity to avoid flying debris.

Stuart Hoke, Matthews's executive assistant, was among those in the church leading prayers and hymns for shocked passersby some time later when a tower at the WTC

collapsed. The power was cut and much of the congregation fled screaming into Broadway. Trinity's office tower shuddered and dust began to penetrate the building down elevator shafts from the top.

Staff who tried to leave the building found the lobby filled with dust, and were forced to return to upper floors to breathe. Outside, the pall of dust that had settled over the financial district with the tower's collapse made it dark as night. Staff designated as fire wardens gathered at the preschool to evacuate the children to the basement. Other staff searched the building, looking for places which were both as low down in the building and as dust-free as possible. Once breathing masks had all been handed out, towels in the preschool were torn up and soaked in water for people to breathe through.

When the order to evacuate the office block came, Trinity staffers and preschool children filed out under the direction of security staff and fire wardens. They streamed down Greenwich Street at the back of the building, heading through the gloom and holding masks or towels to their faces, to the south end of the island of Manhattan. When they heard the sounds of another collapse from the World Trade Center, they dashed for cover in doorways and under alcoves.

[Rowan Williams remembers](#)

[Jon Walton remembers](#)

[Stephen Paul Bouman remembers](#)

[Linda Bloom remembers](#)