

Small chapel keeps 9/11 spiritual flame: A sanctuary for all

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The bells toll at 12:30 p.m. at the Episcopal chapel across the street from New York's World Trade Center site, but Gary Just of Glen Rock, New Jersey, is already praying in one of the scarred pews.

So are the honeymooners from Italy and a 12-year-old British Columbian. None are Episcopalian, but it doesn't matter; today's prayer service is Muslim. Tomorrow, it will be Native African.

At Ground Zero, tour guides and souvenirs recall the horror of September 11, 2001. But at St. Paul's Chapel, the historic little church that stood, the day is recalled with joy at the "extraordinary outpouring of unwavering spirit" by rescue and volunteer workers.

By default, St. Paul's has become the keeper of the spiritual flame ignited by the terrorist attacks three years ago. Dozens of other downtown churches and businesses joined St. Paul's in offering refuge to recovery crews for the eight months after September 11. But it was St. Paul's where thousands of artifacts were left: photographs, letters, teddy bears, flags, icons, patches, hats and eventually mass cards for the dead.

It was St. Paul's that decided to make the artifacts into a permanent exhibit honoring "the faith-affirming human response to the tragedy," chapel lay minister Allesandra Pena said. The exhibit opened earlier this year. St. Paul's also decided to drop its daily mass in favor of rotating prayers for peace from the world's 12 major religions because so many of the 1 million people who have come to the church in the past year are not Christian, let alone Episcopalian.

But now St. Paul's is struggling to maintain its mission as a church while acting as a museum and becoming a shrine. "People say, 'When will St. Paul's be a church again?' and we say, 'We never stopped,'" Pena said. "Right now, our mission is to

put this tragedy into human context.”

Added Pena: “We want people to say that what happened across the street should never happen to another mother’s child. Not from terrorism or a drunken driver or anything else. Let volunteerism be the legacy of 9/11.”

Filippo Amoruso didn’t even know he had reached Ground Zero until he walked through the oak doors of the chapel. “Across the street, it is so clean, so sanitized, I didn’t know what I was seeing,” said Amoruso, who is from Italy and included the pilgrimage in his honeymoon. “Here, I begin to understand what happened. Here I see the tragedy, but I also see the miracles.”

On the day the twin towers collapsed, windows all over lower Manhattan were smashed. Buildings two blocks from the site are still being repaired. But at St. Paul’s, which has stood since 1766, not a window was cracked. Not one crystal was lost from the 14 original cut-glass chandeliers hanging in the nave.

Of course, the chapel was covered with toxic dust, but church officials refused to close for cleaning until the recovery workers were finished. Since then it has been scrubbed and painted, except for the backs of the pews. They were scarred by the police and fire fighters who slept there. They weren’t allowed to remove their equipment packs, which gouged the 250-year-old wood.

“We had to come here,” said Aviv Tal, who came to Ground Zero from Victoria, British Columbia, with his 12-year-old daughter, Natasha. The pair are making a documentary film of their pilgrimage for Natasha to show at her school. “We felt an unshakable need to be a witness. To pray. To experience. To share. To feel,” Tal said. “This place has become a sanctuary for all humanity.”

A sanctuary but not a shrine, insisted Pena. She said the chapel closes every evening to care for ten homeless men, who found shelter at St. Paul’s long before September 11.

Though Gary Just passes by St. Paul’s on his way to work near the Brooklyn Bridge, he never felt compelled to enter the chapel until after that fateful day in 2001. Now he comes at least three times a week. He brings his own Bible.

Just thinks about the way people reacted after the horror. “People were so much nicer to each other right after 9/11,” he said. “But time passed and our priorities got skewed again. I pray for the caring to return.” *-Judy Peet, Religion News Service*