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Study guide

15 years later

9/11 remembered

By Robert C. Blezard

Sept. 11, 2001, dawned as an incredibly beautiful late-summer day in the Northeast—sunny, dazzlingly blue skies, mild temperatures, low humidity. But what happened in New York, Washington, D.C., and western Pennsylvania is seared into the American psyche. We felt horror. Shock. Amazement. Disbelief. Anger. Now 15 years later, how have we healed? What have we learned? And as Christians, how are we to think of the day and go on?

Exercise 1: Where were you?

As a study group, share stories of what you were doing and where you were on 9/11. How did you learn of the attacks? What did you think? What did you feel? How did you react?

Exercise 2: Your community

Most every community was impacted in some way by 9/11—especially those in Metropolitan New York or Washington, D.C., as well as western Pennsylvania. How did your community respond? How did life change? Looking back, are the changes for the better or worse?

Exercise 3: Where are you now?

Between 2001 and now, many events connected to 9/11 have taken place in the national and global arena. Which ones were the most important to you? To your community? To our nation? Our world? Why?

Thinking about your experience, have your thoughts about 9/11 changed? How? Why? Has your life changed because of 9/11? In what ways? Why?

Exercise 4: Our country

Because of 9/11, we now endure much more security at our airports, we have become accustomed to less personal privacy in the interests of national safety, and we have an increased awareness of our vulnerability.

What other changes can you think of? Have our lives together changed for the good or not-so-good?



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Exercise 5: Paralyzed?

In the article, Stephen Bouman, who was bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod in 2001, says that since the 9/11 attacks our nation has become “paralyzed by anger, fear and scarcity.” Do you agree? What evidence do you see that Bouman is on target with his comments for us as a nation? To what degree do you see anger, fear and scarcity playing a larger role in your life?

Exercise 6: Middle Eastern wars

The attacks of 9/11 led the United States into wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Looking back, do you think that was an appropriate response? What have we gained? What have we learned?

Exercise 7: Church response

Some people recall that our churches saw a surge in interest after 9/11. What was the experience at your church? How did your congregation respond? Were there any special prayers, services or events? How would you describe the mood of your congregation and community?

Exercise 8: Remembering well

How would you describe the process of “remembering well” as a step in healing and grieving? What distinguishes “remembering well” from “remembering not-so-well”? Ideally, what would it entail? How has remembering well worked in your life, say in the case of a family member’s death? For your church after a trauma? For your community?

Does your church or community do anything special to remember 9/11? What could they do or do better?

As a study group, brainstorm ideas for remembering 9/11 and give them to your congregation’s leaders for consideration. They could include the following elements:

- Remembering by name and story the people from your congregation (or known by your congregation) who were lost in the attacks.
- Honoring by name or story people from your congregation or community (or known by your congregation or community) who were first responders or who made significant efforts to help.
- Post large sheets or a roll of newsprint in a prominent spot in your church. Invite members to write a message, story, memory, prayer or something else they wish to share.
- In memory of those who served after the attacks, many of whom were lost in 9/11 or succumbed to illness later, honor the first



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responders who are today serving your community. Invite a representative from your local police or fire departments to be present.

- In prayers for that day, ask that God would help us as a nation to heal, to learn, to be wise and to trust in God.
- During a service, sing Marty Haugen's wonderful hymn "Healer of Our Every Ill," which he wrote in a time of national crisis.

Exercise 9: Trust in God

Faithfulness and discipleship compels us to turn to God in all things and trust in God's grace. It's hard to do, especially if we are upset, angry or grieving. To help us heal and learn from 9/11, we can all look to Scripture for inspiration and guidance. For instance, here are several verses:

- Joshua 1:9—"Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."
- Proverbs 3:5-6—"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

Meditate and pray on these passages, and look for others from your own Bible knowledge or by finding them with an online study tool or keyword search. Talk about how the passages and how God can help us heal and grow. Share them with your friends and congregation.

15 years later

This month Lutherans around the country will reflect on the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks in New York, Washington, D.C., and Shanksville, Pa., remembering where they were and what they did when they heard the news. The stories from that fateful morning live on today with no less significance than they had 15 years ago. Following are six stories of faith summoned amid tragedy, a faith that promises resurrection and gives hope for today.

The tragedy isn't the end

While a lot has changed in the 15 years since 9/11, some things are still too familiar for Daniel Nigro, commissioner of the New York City Fire Department and member of Church of Our Saviour Lutheran, Manhasset, N.Y.

"We are still attending funerals on a regular basis," Nigro said. "We've lost 127 people since 9/11 to 9/11-related illnesses. We are regularly dedicating plaques in firehouses. It has never ended for us."

Nigro was appointed chief of the New York City Fire Department on Sept. 16, 2001, after former chief Peter Ganci was killed in the collapse of the second tower on Sept. 11. Nigro retired as chief in 2002 and was appointed by New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio as commissioner in 2014.

"For all too brief a period of time, the city and country came together because of this tragedy and it was very heartwarming," Nigro said, reflecting on the days immediately following 9/11. "It wouldn't hurt for us to be unified again in that way today."


Regarding the 15th anniversary of the attack, Nigro said there is uneasiness in the fire department every year surrounding Sept. 11.

"Every anniversary is pretty much as sad as the last," he said. "There's a certain anxiety that comes over the summer for most of us who had a personal involvement as the anniversary approaches. Tension rises as the date comes close. I don't think that will change for the 20th or 25th anniversaries either."

Nigro's faith and church community have helped him stay strong amid the tragedies he's witnessed and his changing leadership responsibilities.

"It's always comforting to be around other folks who care about you, and the church is a good place to find those people," he said. "I have faith that there is something bigger than us, better than us, even in terrible times. The tragedy is not the end. The end will be something much better than that."

As the head of the largest fire department in the country and the second largest in the world, Nigro's leadership comes with immense responsibility, which is especially prominent during 9/11 anniversaries.

"As tough a day as it is, for me I'm proud to now be the commissioner of this department and I will do the best I can this year to get us through it," he said. "I think that each year we should try to concentrate not on the awful tragedy but the families who suffered loss, those who still lived that day and are still deeply affected by it. Tell them that we care, that we are there for them and that we have not forgotten them." 



"We have an optimistic faith. Easter is our big day, celebrating rebirth, which is a good thing to think about when times were as bad as they were after 9/11," said Dan Nigro, New York City Fire Department commissioner and member of Church of Our Saviour Lutheran, Manhasset, N.Y.

By Megan Brandsrud

Brandsrud is a content editor of *Living Lutheran*.

9/11 remembered



Tom Taylor, a counselor and pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Lindenhurst, N.Y., continues to work with people who are dealing with 9/11 post-traumatic stress disorder.

Photo: Krista Kennell Photography

The work isn't done

It's 15 years later and Tom Taylor, a counselor and pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Lindenhurst, N.Y., still works with first responders and families affected by 9/11.

Taylor was a fire department chaplain on Long Island when clergy were requested to volunteer at ground zero. He spent several months blessing body parts and comforting those who found them.

"I still counsel people," he said. "Interestingly enough, about six months ago someone came to see me who worked near Wall Street. He didn't develop 9/11 PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)-like symptoms until 2007 and it's been all downhill from there, both physical and emotional issues."


Why some people still feel trauma and pain while others have moved on is puzzling, Taylor said, but one thing is certain: everyone responds differently.

"Anyone down there was traumatized to some degree," he said. "Why do some get PTSD and others don't? That depends on us."

"I can say this with confidence: 15 years later there are many responders, New York City residents and people who worked at ground zero who still have not been able to face the traumatic stress of that day and the months after. The work is not done."

Taylor, too, still gets emotional, especially when he thinks of the thousands of first responders who have since died from cancers, lung diseases and other illnesses.

He will mark the 15th anniversary with a service at St. John that will memorialize Lindenhurst's seven residents who died. The congregation is planning to exhibit the drawings of John Coburn, a Canadian artist whom Taylor met at St. Paul's Chapel near ground zero.

"The effects of 9/11 are ongoing," Taylor said. "It'll be interesting to see the dynamics of 15 years later." 

By Wendy Healy

Healy is a member of Trinity Lutheran Church, Brewster, N.Y., and author of *Life is Too Short: Stories of Transformation and Renewal After 9/11* (iUniverse, 2011).

Building on the spirit



Khader El-Yateem, pastor of Salam Arabic Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, N.Y., is proud of the work he and his congregation have been a part of in uniting people of different faiths in their community following 9/11.

After 9/11, Salam Arabic Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, N.Y., led the efforts to unify its diverse Bay Ridge neighborhood of Christians, Muslims and Jews.


Today, Khader El-Yateem, pastor of Salam Arabic and a Palestinian native, said the congregation is still a unifier in the community, which is home to three of the largest mosques in New York City and a large Jewish center. The church started making 9/11 anniversary plans in early summer with its partners on the Unity Task Force, an interfaith group that formed after the attack.

"After 9/11 our church played a major role in the community," he said. "We brought everyone—Christians, Muslims and Jews—together in the spirit of unity with the police to care for the community."

Fifteen years later, El-Yateem said the Unity Task Force is still at work. "We've been meeting regularly and we organize activities. We have a unity breakfast where we invite all religious leaders and other major events. We strategize," he said.

El-Yateem also does presentations with local rabbis at public schools about the message of acceptance. "I'm very proud of that," he said.

The 9/11 anniversary commemoration this year includes an interfaith prayer service and candlelight vigil, perhaps at Pier 69 near ground zero where the Unity Task Force has met every year since 2001, drawing close to 1,000 people.

El-Yateem's wish for the 15th anniversary? "To continue to come together as we responded together on 9/11," he said. "That day affected each one of us. Our country needs us more than ever—a voice of reason, of justice and of peace to our communities. We need to build on the spirit of unity and generosity." 

By Wendy Healy



Martha Jacobi, a pastoral psychotherapist and a pastor of St. Luke Lutheran Church, Manhattan, uses what she has learned counseling people post-9/11 to help families affected by the 2012 school shooting in Newtown, Conn.

9/11 remembered


Trauma connections

Martha Jacobi, a pastoral psychotherapist in private practice and a pastor of St. Luke Lutheran Church, Manhattan, is an expert in trauma.

Today she still helps New Yorkers post-Sept. 11, as she did right after the attack. She also consults with an organization that helps families heal from the 2012 school shooting in Newtown, Conn., a suburban community 80 miles from ground zero. Jacobi was invited by the Resiliency Center of Newtown, an organization related to Tuesday's Children, a group formed in the aftermath of Sept. 11.

"A noticeable number of people in the Newtown area also have a connection to Sept. 11," Jacobi said. "In both cases this is complex existential trauma. It's the kind of deeply personal, deeply communal tragedy that rattles people to their core, that shakes up any and all previous assumptions of how life should be."

"9/11 was on a large scale and affected people all over the world. If you take that energy and compress it, it's the same type of energy but held within a small town. The people who died there were young children and their teachers, and there's a profound feeling that this is not how life is supposed to be."

Reflecting on her counseling vocation, Jacobi said: "This is my calling. This point has stayed with me since 9/11 and keeps me grounded. I stand on Christ and in Christ—this is who I am, who God has called me to be. In the parish and in the therapy office, my entire ministry has been focused on helping people heal from trauma." 

By Wendy Healy

Grace at ground zero


"It changed my life and my ministry. It's with me every day, wherever I go," said Stephen Bouman, who was bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod on 9/11 and is now executive director for ELCA Domestic Mission.

"For the last 15 years I've been trying to say thank you for this beautiful church," he said. "What I bring with me to my current job is that I know in my bones what it's like when this whole church works together."

Although he moved to Chicago in 2008, Bouman considers himself a New Yorker for life and believes that what he witnessed and learned post-9/11 is relevant today, which he has written about in his book *Baptized for This Moment: Rediscovering Grace All Around Us* (Acta, 2016).

"Now in the world, which I trace to 9-1-1, our public mood is that we are paralyzed by anger, fear and scarcity," he said. "My book is about a place for grace-based witness in this world when we can't even talk about refugees without talking about walls."

In his book, a sequel to *Grace All Around Us: Embracing God's Promise in Tragedy and Loss* (Augsburg Books, 2007), Bouman calls people "to re-engage the soul of faith in the public arena, to accompany public society with the most graceful and irenic and communal commitments of our traditions."

On this 15th anniversary of 9/11, Bouman wants people to see the church as God's answer to ground zero. "I want people to stop and remember that this isn't a token; those were real lives, real people who died and risked everything following their vocation to rescue," he said. "In the same way a city came together in ways it never had, so did this church. Where hatred, violence and bad religion tried to take over our turf, God's love conquers all." 

By Megan Brandsrud



Photo: Will Nunnally

"I've always been an activist, but I learned after 9/11 how shallow that is apart from prayer, liturgy, sacraments and Scripture," said Stephen Bouman, who was bishop of the Metropolitan New York Synod at the time of 9/11.

Healing with stories

John Scibilia was asked to lead Lutheran Disaster Response New York (LDRNY) two weeks after 9/11. He helped the organization lead many projects, including supporting a respite center at St. Paul's Chapel, helping form an Unmet Needs Roundtable and assisting the September 11th Family Association, which opened the 9/11 Tribute Center.

Today he looks back with gratitude at having been part of the work the church did in the wake of 9/11, but after five years as LDRNY director, he knew he needed to make a change. "The disaster work was emotionally draining, and I needed to get a total break from it for a while," he said.

It wasn't until recently that Scibilia felt comfortable talking about 9/11 again, which he says is due in part to his first visit to the 9/11 Tribute Center in September 2015. "I was invited to go see the pope there because I was part of the New York Interfaith Disaster group," he said. "I was able to reconnect with two leaders of the Tribute Center, and I now feel ready to gather stories of what people experienced and maybe volunteer at the center."

Since he spent significant time at ground zero in the weeks and months after 9/11, Scibilia was admitted to the World Trade Center Health

15 years later

"As this anniversary falls on a Sunday, I hope every place of worship recognizes this day with more than a note in the prayer, but rather by looking back at how that day informed who we are today," said John Scibilia, who was director of Lutheran Disaster Response New York following 9/11.



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9/11 remembered



Program, which provides screenings and treatments for people who spent a fair amount of time at the site.

"I go to Mt. Sinai hospital twice a year for this checkup," Scibilia said. "I'm always greeted with someone thanking me for what I did. It causes me to break up just thinking about it. The program has its own section of the hospital and one thing that always strikes me when I'm there is what I share with those who are sitting in the waiting room with me—construction workers, firefighters, volunteers—we all share that experience of having been at ground zero right after 9/11."

Scibilia, who is now executive administrator of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, hopes the 9/11 anniversaries don't lose their significance over the years. "There are many stories yet to be told, and if we continue to remember, we will continue to help people heal," he said. 

By Megan Brandsrud

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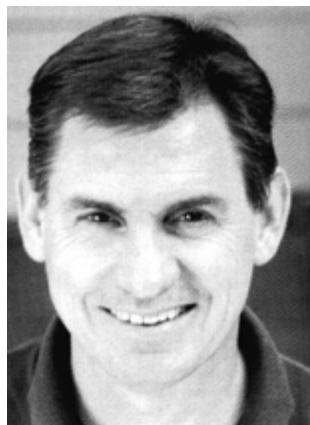
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