

What were you doing when the New York Towers fell?

By Gordon Laird

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We often remember exactly what we were doing at the moment of a monumental, often tragic, event. When President Kennedy was shot I was tending my accounting office in White Rock. At hearing the news I went out to the parking lot to share the shock with Glen Baker, the lawyer in the adjoining building.

When the Challenger went down I saw it on TV and was soon busy with phone calls to Denver and Texas to arrange, with others, a Memorial Service over a computer network.

Last Tuesday morning, September 11th, I awoke to a wake-up call in Cabin E1908 on the Ms Volendam, somewhere around Prince Rupert. I turned on my TV to CNN and saw and heard the news. Over and over again the two planes destroyed Towers 1 and 2 of the World Trade Center in New York.

At breakfast and again on our 4 laps of the deck for our morning walk I was wondering what, if anything, needed to be done. I thought immediately of the Chaplain, a retired Roman Priest whom I had seen at the introductory show on Monday night. I needed to talk with him about whether a special service was in order. Certainly the mood at breakfast in the Lido Restaurant had all been about the tragic news.

When I phoned Information and asked for the Chaplain I received a puzzled response. Why did I want to talk with him? When I explained my concern the response was, "It is the Cruise Director who looks after special shows."

"May I speak with him?"

Jay Bernard was very concerned and had received one previous call from another Protestant pastor. I shared my opinion that the service should reflect as many faiths as possible and if there were someone in Jewish leadership as well that would be preferable. He would confer with the Cruise Chaplain, Monsignor George Hastrich about scheduling a special service.

Father Hastrich phoned me back and arranged that Dr. Walter Beebe, he and I would meet in the Java Bar between the first and second dinner service.

We introduced ourselves: Dr. Beebe - an "Evangelist" from Stockbridge, Georgia, Father Hastrich - a retired Priest from Madison, Wisconsin, and myself, a United Church Minister (retired) from Vancouver, B. C. Our time together planning was as sweet as it often is when people from different strands of our faith are brought together by common cause.

Father Hastrich had prepared the order of a brief service: scripture, short meditation, prayer and a "Patriotic Hymn" and was open to any changes or additions. He would be happy to do the prayer as he would have already presided at an earlier Mass and given a message. I was happy to bring the scripture, as I strongly felt that it was appropriate for an American to bring the message. Dr. Beebe agreed to bring the message and also volunteered his wife Winifred to play the piano. Our friend Lonnie could be asked to do a solo. Father Hastrich would arrange for the cruise hymn books to be brought to the Frans Hals Lounge, the main lounge of the Ship. Father Hastrich had already thought about the patriotic hymn, and suggested "My Country 'Tis of Thee" rather than any of the others. He believed that it was more appropriate to a religious service, as it mentions God in the fourth verse. We didn't know at that time whether the words would be available, or if indeed we would get to the fourth verse. As a Canadian it was good that I would at least know the tune. It is the same as "God Save the Queen"!

We concluded our time together, the three of us from widely different Christian expressions, with a beautiful and heartfelt prayer in the public Java Bar. Wonderful.

The service was to begin Wednesday, September 12th at 9:00 a.m. in the Frans Hals. When I arrived at 8:30 a.m. the hymn books were set out and a mike and podium were provided on the floor level of the lounge. The piano, however, was imprisoned behind the curtains. I asked one of the cleaning staff about using the piano. He said he didn't know, but he thought that had to be arranged the day before! So I went to the Front Office, adopting an assertive attitude which would not hear a "No Piano!". I had to assert with two more people before a young man came forward and introduced himself as the "stage manager". He pulled back the curtains and there stood a beautiful Grand Piano resting at the back of a

revolving section of the stage. He would bring it around front for us. So I rode the circle around as the piano presented itself in a convenient spot.

People were beginning to fill the lounge, but there was time for Lonnie to practice a verse of "Amazing Grace" with Winifred at the piano. I didn't have time to practice my saxophone for the postlude, so realized that it would be a matter of trust! Winnifred, with 46 years at the side of her evangelist husband, had no trouble setting the mood of the service with beautiful piano tunes, without any printed music, of course.

As the first speaker I introduced the topic, using a phrase that I had heard that this was a more profound moment than even the bombing of Pearl Harbour, but that in this case the identity of the enemy was unknown. I introduced the three officiants and then read two pieces of scripture: Romans 8 (selected) and most of John 14.

Dr. Beebe then gave a short address, which was most appropriate. He talked about Fear and Faith and asked ourselves to examine our fearfulness when we watched the news on CNN. The message seemed appropriate and I joined many in expressing our appreciation.

Lonnie sang "Amazing Grace" beautifully, accompanied by Winifred.

Monsignor Hastrich led us in heartfelt prayer. Then we sang: "My Country 'Tis of Thee", which seemed appropriate for most everyone. Marilyn and Lonnie had no trouble singing it. I was able to tune up my Saxophone as we reached the end, so I was playing it rather than singing. Yes, we did sing all four verses! Then the Monsignor concluded with a blessing.

For the Postlude I stood with my saxophone beside Winnifred at the piano. We had not had time even to agree on a key, but I started in on "Just a Closer Walk with Thee". Winnifred figured out the key in two bars and from then on we stayed in the same key. I asked her to segue into "What A Friend" and when we concluded that my mind was a blank, so I asked her to play something else. She led into "The Old Rugged Cross".

Even though we had given the sign for people to leave after the Blessing, and about one-half did leave, half the audience stayed to hear the three hymns.

I would guess that the Frans Hals Lounge was filled to about 2/3 capacity, including the balcony - a couple of hundred people. Brian asked me, "Was that the largest service on the Ship?" I responded, "It may have been".

A number of people surrounded each of the participants expressing their thanks for the timely service. Furthermore later in the week people would come up to us almost anywhere - walking the deck, eating on the Lido deck, and thank us for the service.

PS: about the singing of "My Country 'Tis of Thee" - this contrasted sharply with another event later in the week. A group of "Sweet Adelines" (female barbershop singers) ended their program with three patriotic songs: "This is My Country", "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "America the Beautiful". This led to a standing ovation of all but a few Canadians and perhaps some Aussies. Even though the Mistress of Ceremonies told us that we were all welcome to join in to honour America, this did not feel inclusive and I was even more appreciative of the Father Hastrich and his choice of hymn.