

A Hope Dealer at Ground Zero - September 11, 2001



A Hope Dealer at Ground Zero - September 11, 2001 A Hands On Account of Police and Fire Chaplain, Michael K. Haynes, Ph.D.

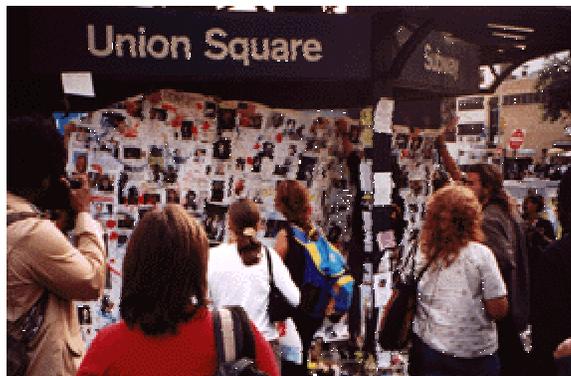
There are some things that happen during the course of our lives that we will never forget where we were and what we were doing. For example, almost without exception, if we are old enough, every one can remember where they were when President Kennedy was shot. The same thing will certainly be true about September 11, 2001 when terrorist attacked the World Trade Center Twin Towers in New York City, the Pentagon, and other attempts such as Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania.

The Faith Based Counselor Training Institute was conducting an anger management certification school in San Antonio when the attacks occurred. My wife, Marj, came through the back door of the training room and said, to turn on the TV quick! She said that America had been attacked by terrorists. We were all dumbfounded. There were two TV's in the room and we immediately turned them on. All 70 people left their seats and gathered around the front of the room gaping and gasping at the breaking news in horror. I will never forget how my heart hurt. I felt the deepest sense of emptiness I can ever recall apart from a couple of major tragedies in my personal life. I asked the class what they wanted to do about the rest of the day. Some had come from a great distance and wanted to go ahead with the course, but needless to say, we had their hands full keeping even the professional counselors who were enrolled focused. We stayed close to the evolving events during the breaks and finally finished the training at 5:00 pm. Marj and I rushed to our motel room and glued ourselves to the news for the evening. More photos were becoming available and our tears fell every time we saw the towers fall.

In spite of the fact that our training had involved anger management, I sensed an intense surge of anger beginning to surface in my soul of souls. It was a profound sense of righteous indignation toward the literal personification of evil carried out by the misguided lunacy of a few men who were actually deceived to the point they believed they were doing something for God.

**We will never be the same.
New York will never be the same.
America will never be the same.**

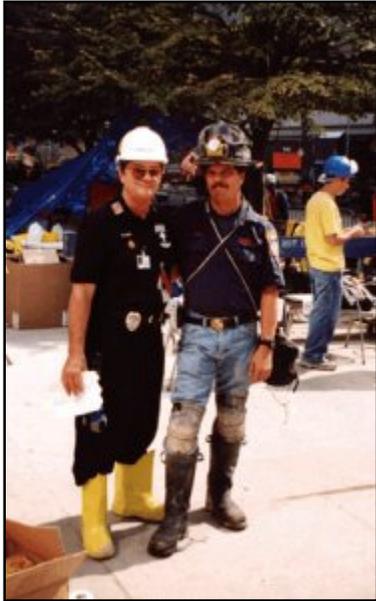
Little did I know when we were in the San Antonio school that plans were being made for me to be asked to lead a team of two other mental health professionals and chaplains to go to New York and assess the need for others to minister to areas where victims of this tragedy might be found. The North American Mission Board of Atlanta, GA had contacted Texas Baptist Men Disaster Relief to ask who had the unique qualifications that would be needed. We were to view the situation at Ground Zero and report back as to how the extensive TBM resources might be used. Gene Grounds, Ex. Director of Victim Relief Ministries, told the leadership of these organizations about my fire and EMS background coupled with the fact that I had critical incident debriefing experience as a counselor. They called to check on my availability and the next day following the attack, I was on my way to Ground Zero.



After 27 hours of hard driving, we arrived at the New Jersey check point and began one of the most incredible ministry experiences I have ever had. We reported to the the mayor's office to work under the supervision of Dr. David Hartman, the Crisis Coordinator for the Ground Zero site. He gave us the initial briefing and we began our ministry. We literally walked from 72nd street to the site of the disaster at the complete other end of Manhattan. We wanted to get a feel for the city and what the people on the streets were experiencing.

I had been to New York City several times before and was fully aware that when New Yorkers pass you on the street they seldom make eye contact. However, this was a completely different experience. Not only did people make eye contact, they would see that we were Chaplains and stop to thank us for being there.

People by the thousands were creating memorials to the victims of the trade center attacks. They were putting up pictures of the missing along with flowers and candles.



The largest memorial gathering centered around Union Square. By the time we arrived at that point on our trek, there were approximately 3,000 people just milling around in a semi daze as they looked into the faces of those who were missing. I vividly remember looking into the eyes of each of the untold numbers of pictures and thinking about who they were and where they had come from. There was a young Hispanic man sitting on a bench in front of several pictures sobbing in the arms of a young lady. I asked him if I could help and he pointed to the picture of his brother. He told me of driving in from Florida and finding his brother's picture. There was not much to say. I bowed silently and prayed. We finally made it to what was being called, "The Pile." I cannot put into words the utter horror and terrible carnage that lay before me the first time I saw the site of the disaster.

The only way I could feel anything but sheer shock was to try to imagine my loved ones remains in the literal mountain of twisted steel and rubble. This tragedy is so immense it defied description unless you were somehow able to personalize it. I talked to hundreds of Police Officers and Fire Fighters. Most were from New York, but many were coming in from all over the country and Canada. The overwhelming commonality among these heroes was a look of hollow numbness. They moved like robots. We were all on auto pilot.

I was excited to be able to meet the Search and Rescue Unit assembled from Texas. They were incredible. As I stood and watched, three of them were called to go to the top of the 'pile' because some air pockets were found. As they carefully climbed to where the pockets were located, someone said that it was still over 1000 degrees in parts of the rubble. The size of the 'Pile' was so huge that the people could not even be seen as they ascend to the pocket. I remember thinking, as I watched and prayed for them, how little likelihood there would be for anyone to be found alive. Too much fire and twisted steel. It would definitely be a miracle. Then I smiled. Miracles do occur! But, after a while my smile faded and I prayed for understanding.



Being a former firefighter, it was great for me to watch the fire and rescue workers from the elite New York Fire Department. On our first night we visited two of the firehouses that were the closest to the disaster. One department had lost 13 members. When we talked to the captain, my heart began to genuinely hurt for the guys who had to live with that memory. I know how close firemen get when they work together 24 hours a day. They eat together, recreate together, sleep in the same building and work side by side. Firemen come to know one another very well. They are sometimes much closer than even family. One young New York fireman came up to me as I was standing on the edge of the 'bucket brigade' in the middle of the pile. He was clearly overcome with emotion. I just put my hands on his shoulders



and told him to let it go. It was OK. He began to sob uncontrollably and unashamedly for a good five minutes. Then, he took a deep breath and said, "Thank you Chaplain. I'm alright now. I need to get back to work." I later saw him at a break station and it was as if he had known me forever. I found the type and quality of spiritual care we were able to give on that scene to be the most rewarding ministry experience I have ever known.

Working on the bucket brigade in the middle of the 'Pile' was emotionally draining to say the least. Each person would pass the buckets from one to another down the side of the rubble so that sifting could take place to separate ashes from possible body remains. Each time a bucket would pass by I couldn't help but wonder why and how such a tragedy could occur on American soil. Had we become so distant from God that He would permit evil to simply fly in unrestrained and give us such a destructive wake up call? I don't claim to know the real answer to that, but I was astonishingly reminded when an iron worker and I found that huge steel beam in the shape of a cross jammed into the rubble of the U.S. Customs building, that God still reigns.

Because most of the firefighters and police officers from New York are Catholic, I answered to Father and blessed shields on a regular basis. Even though I am Baptist by denomination, I am Christian by relationship and that did not offend me nor cause me to hesitate in any manner. I found virtually no one who refused prayer. I was there to have a 'ministry of presence' and to be available to share **hope** and encouragement to some tireless heroes who welcomed a Chaplain being around.



I worked at the county morgue with FBI Chaplain Joe Williams who was one of the lead chaplains at the Oklahoma City bombing, and Chaplain Gene Grounds, Director of Victim Relief Ministries in Dallas, TX. We will soon have the first national training for a new category of crisis chaplains.

Out of Dr. Haynes experience at Ground Zero, **Crisis Chaplaincy Care, Inc.**, a division of The Faith Based Counselor Training Institute, Inc., was born to offer grief and trauma counseling to Emergency Service Personnel and their families at no charge. Because **FBCTI** is a non-profit (501c3) organization, communities and individuals support the ministry through contributions.

Click on our contact button and see how you can become a supporter of this incredible training ministry.