

“Public Work” at Ground Zero

by Donald Schell

First published on the website [Episcopal Café](#), October, 2007.



For two wonderful days last October, I helped lead a workshop on “Music that Makes Community” at [St. Paul’s Chapel of Trinity Church Wall Street](#), the colonial church that fronts on Broadway and whose churchyard faces the World Trade Center/Ground Zero site. The Sunday after the workshop, I sat in the congregation at St. Paul’s for their 10am liturgy. It was one of the most powerful experiences of our church’s work and worship I have ever had. The murmur of visitors, the impossibility of handling four to five hundred pilgrims an hour with greeters, the pilgrims themselves finding their own way and having their own private reasons for their visit all destroyed any hope that the church could be a place of seclusion, refuge or pious meditation. This was the great work of the church, the public work of liturgy.

When I first visited St. Paul’s in the late 1960s, it was essentially a museum, George Washington’s Church in New York City. The stunning human losses of 9/11 changed that beyond recognition. When Trinity’s staff saw that St. Paul’s Chapel was undamaged by the fiery collapse of the twin towers next door, they boldly chose to dedicate the historic chapel for the duration of demolition and recovery as a holy place of hospitality to the New York firemen, police and construction workers at the Ground Zero site. Trinity staff and hundreds of volunteer chaplains from around the country offered rest, comfort, counsel and help for those whose brutal work was combing through hot rubble for genetically identifiable fragments of the dead that grieving family members might bury.

Trinity’s hospitality to a nation’s heroes made St. Paul’s a pilgrimage site. Something like a million and a half visitors a year – imagine an unbroken stream of 400 strangers an hour – wander through to remember, see and reflect on 9/11 displays. As at the Viet Nam Memorial in Washington D.C., some do come to pray, but few kneel or make any outward show. Others seem to be tourists, muted tourists who want to include this bit of history in their trip and tell people at home ‘I was there.’

For any who remember the pre-9/11 St. Paul’s and have not been there recently, I should add that less than a year ago, Stuart Hoke and the other Trinity staff took another bold step to make the chapel’s welcome more evident –

hoping to gather people into a circle of prayer, they removed the long forward-facing pews from the 1960s to make space for a barrier-free oval of chairs around a central altar. St. Paul’s website has a good [slide show](#) picturing the changes and giving its rationale.

At my workshop, twenty of us – clergy and church music leaders from around the country – gathered in the open space around the table for our workshop to talk, reflect and make music, specifically developing a practice of the most traditional and modern kind of church music: learning music by ear and by heart, singing without books. All day our workshop sessions, our worship and even our midday meal were at the center of a swirling sea of people, all of America, the world. When we were singing we could feel the music touch them (and sometimes we forgot they were there and lost ourselves in music-making and praise). Sometimes we saw curiosity, joy or even healing on people’s faces. It came in swells, both for us and in their response. Sometimes they walked with their backs to us, continuing their quiet murmur of background conversation as they surveyed the 9/11 displays and the story of workers and a city who turned the terrorist attack into a sign of mutual support and courage. Then a piece of sacred song, something hearty or haunting, maybe some improvised bluesy jazz on a text from the Bible, or even our laughter at a shared discovery – something drew their attention and they were with us in



The interior of St. Paul’s Chapel, New York City, after the reordering.

church, both the community of people and the place of worship. So it went all day, hundreds of people an hour and flashes of grace and glory as our little group joined our Public Work to Trinity's.

In the evening I thought of how strangely intimate and public the days were. Trying to describe our experience on the phone to my wife, I said it felt like street preaching on Times Square, or maybe like participating in a life drawing class with a nude model in the main rotunda of the Metropolitan Museum. We were aiming for truthfulness and Gospel, but we were unequivocally doing intimate heart work, speaking and singing our faith in a very public place. The work itself guided us from our fear and self-consciousness.

But even two full days of our workshop could not prepare me for the joyful wonder of the 10am liturgy in this place of pilgrimage. I sat in the third or fourth row of the oval of seats so I could both join in and watch the congregation and the pilgrims on the perimeter. The tourist buses do not stop just because it is Sunday, and as a worshipper and as part of a larger, more diffuse group, I felt the strangeness (and joy) of it very strongly. We were a hundred or so people, a solid, diverse congregation, and we were together in faith, in prayer as publicly as if we had made our circle in Grand Central Station.

Marilyn Haskell, Music Associate at St. Paul's and our musical leader that morning, offered us welcome, guided us through the service leaflet, got us singing with piano and a capella, and joyfully encouraged us. The Rev. Mark Bozzuti-Jones, a Jamaican Anglican priest new to Trinity's staff, presided and preached his first liturgy at St. Paul's. His sermon and the way he engaged us all was breathtaking—bold and comforting, confronting and sweet. And even as he drew our hearts into the center of the circle to hold one another in our reflection on scripture, he generously, and without the least notice, lobbed an occasional word or prayer over our heads to the sea of pilgrims.

The liturgy was an even stronger magnet than the music workshop. Strangers slipped into the circle to join us. Many stopped to listen and pray and seemed to wish they could linger longer. A few seemed perplexed to hear a Gospel of such forgiveness, inclusion and challenge. Many blessed themselves with a touch of water from the front.

I wish everyone thinking about inclusion and welcome in our church could spend a Sunday with St. Paul's, Manhattan. Having experienced it as a blessed and unequivocal Public Work, I don't think our liturgy will ever look the same to me again.

Public Work, as it turns out, may be a better translation of 'liturgy' than the 'public work' I learned in seminary in the 1960s. In the 1960s and 70s our church was beginning to make our liturgy shared, collaborative work in new ways. 'The work of the people' was a useful etymology. It turned our attention to from the priest's performance to what WE were making together.

Now friends who teach liturgics and history have been telling us that *leitourgia* ('liturgy') in the first century Mediterranean world was 'public work,' more like we think of with a Department of Public Works making or fixing a road or a bridge. In fact, in the ancient world public work often referred to the generous works of public-minded rich people, like the medieval queen of Spain who built a bridge at Puente la Reyna for the pilgrims walking to Santiago or like Andrew Carnegie building libraries across America.

Today, we have found enough shared authority in liturgy-making to begin recovering this other, earlier sense of liturgy as work for or on behalf of the people. What we have to offer is holy, vibrant, and flexible enough that it can truly be public work. At St. Paul's the 'public work' made very good sense. For me every question we can frame about welcoming strangers to liturgy will look different to me after three days of singing and praying at St. Paul's Chapel.

For information about future workshops of "Music That Makes Community" contact info@allsaintscompany.org or 415-558-6958.

The Rev. Donald Schell, founder of St. Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco, is Creative Director of All Saints Company, working for community development in congregational life focusing on sharing leadership, welcoming creativity, building community through music, and making liturgical architecture a win/win for building and congregation. He wrote *My Father, My Daughter: Pilgrims on the Road to Santiago*.