

Defining Moments!

On September 9, 2001, I was in my 23rd year, serving as Senior Pastor of New Life Community Church in Sayville, Long Island, NY. I was on a long overdue Sabbatical. It was a beautiful Sunday morning with low humidity, bright sunshine, and crystal clear blue sky. Sue and Andrew and I were driving in our car on our way to worship at Brooklyn Tabernacle. As we were driving along on the Brooklyn Queens Expressway the Twin Towers looked majestic against the clear blue sky. I said to Sue and Andrew, "It has been too long since we went up to the Observation Deck of the Twin Towers. We need to go there sometime in the next couple of weeks." We lived 58 miles from the World Trade Center.



Photo by Pastor John, airplane window, June 1986



Sue and John WTC Observation Deck June 1989



Photo by Pastor John, July 1989



Photo by Pastor John, May 1996

On Tuesday morning, September 11, 2001, I was shooting baskets in the driveway with our son Andrew and his friends from the neighborhood. At about 8:40AM I drove the boys to school. I got back home at about 8:50AM. Sue called me from work and told me to turn on the TV right away. I couldn't believe what I was seeing! Smoke was billowing from one of the Twin Towers after being penetrated by a commercial jet airplane! I grabbed a legal pad and began logging the time and what was happening. I immediately began praying for friends and members of the church who worked in that area of Manhattan. I watched with horror as the second plane crashed into the other Twin Tower.

Before I left on Sabbatical, I put our two Associate Pastors in charge while I was away. When I called the church office to see if they needed me to come in, one of our Associate Pastors told me they had everything under control and they didn't need me to come into the office. It was the first time I could remember when disaster struck, I wasn't in charge as the leader, and my presence wasn't needed. It was a strange feeling for me. In some ways, it felt really good. I believe some low level lingering PTSD kicked in. I remained glued to the TV news for the next twelve hours, interspersed with praying for all the people trapped in the Twin Towers, all of the first responders trying to rescue people, and all the people I knew who worked in lower Manhattan.

Steve and Christine Olsen were members of New Life Community Church. I had the privilege of officiating at their wedding and baptizing their two sons. Christine's brother, David Halderman, was an off-duty firefighter who rushed into the North Tower. I spent all day on September 12, with Christine and her sister Marianne, at their Mom's house. We watched TV all day to see if David was dead or alive.



David Halderman was a handsome, quiet, kind and gentle man. He had two brother and two sisters. David was the youngest of the brothers. He wasn't married and had just celebrated his 40th birthday on August 2, 2001.

He joined the fire department in June of 1992, following in the footsteps of his father who retired after 30 years and his brother Michael who was recently promoted to Battalion Chief. At the time of his death he was on the list to be promoted to Lieutenant. He was promoted posthumously. He loved the job and in 1999 he transferred to Squad 18 in Manhattan to be in a busier house and more involved in rescue work. His happiest moment on the job was when he delivered a baby.

He was interested in history and read many books on the subject. He was very active in his twelve-step program and touched many lives in that fellowship and he is sorely missed there.

David was on vacation for most of the month of August 2001. At that time his father was ill in Mt. Sinai Hospital in Manhattan and he spent much of that time visiting him and driving his mom and his sisters into the city to the hospital. His father died on August 8, 2001, one month before David.

According to a firefighter who was in the north tower on 9/11, David and another man from Squad 18 were on their way out of the building when on the 18th floor they responded to a May Day from another company and returned to the upper floors. They never made it out of the building.

He is truly an American Hero and would be slightly embarrassed at any attention given to his heroism as he mostly preferred to be out of the limelight.

On September 13 I started calling agencies in New York City, offering to serve as a volunteer. I didn't have the right connections and got nowhere. So I spent the rest of the week listening to people who were grieving and traumatized and trying to process what happened on 9/11. Many tears were shed. Great sadness, confusion, and uncertainty permeated the community. On Thursday I called my Associate Pastor and asked him if he wanted me to participate in leading worship Sunday morning. He told me he had everything covered. He also said he could hardly wait to preach on Sunday morning.

After I hung up the phone, his words struck a chord deep in my heart. I had no desire to preach on Sunday. I knew that if I had to preach, God would give me something to say. But my heart's desire was to listen to people's stories, hug them, cry with them, and comfort them.

My wife Sue was in charge of our video ministry at church. We decided to give our volunteer crew the Sunday off to worship with their family. Sue was the director and switcher. I ran one of the video cameras and our son ran the other camera. We were among the first to arrive Sunday morning. I was out in the foyer hugging and comforting people before the first service, between services, and after the second service. It was a very emotional time. I focused on being a pastor and shepherd to God's people.

God knew He was preparing me to embrace a new calling on my life and a new focus to my ministry in His Kingdom where listening, asking questions, and being like a shepherd to people would be necessary and highly valued rather than preaching and speaking. He was preparing me to serve as a pastor to pastors, missionaries, and Christian leaders and their families. 9/11 became a defining moment for me!



Our church had two large signs to encourage people who drove by on Lakeland Ave.



There were numerous signs all around Ground Zero.



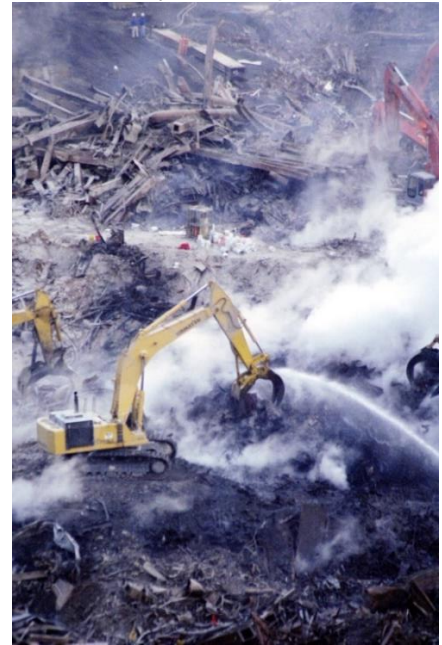


Yvonne Jamieson's office at 1 Chase Manhattan Plaza was very close to Ground Zero. She walked through the thick clouds of ash and the strong smell of burning, heading to the Brooklyn Bridge. They were told not to cross because of a threat of attack, so they crossed the Manhattan Bridge into Brooklyn. A co-worker's father met them on the other side and drove them to Queens so she could take the train home. Her husband Brad was volunteering at church, but she couldn't get through. She did reach their God-daughter in Texas who notified Brad. Twenty years later, Yvonne can still smell the strong burning smell that lingered for months.

Photos taken by Pastor John Smith 10-19-2001

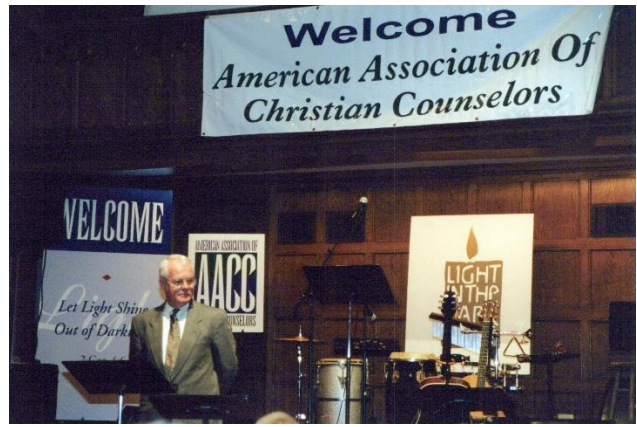


Yvonne also gave us access to the 19th floor of the building at 52 Broadway to take photos.



Yvonne saw the worst of humanity and the best of humanity on that day! She has not been back to visit.





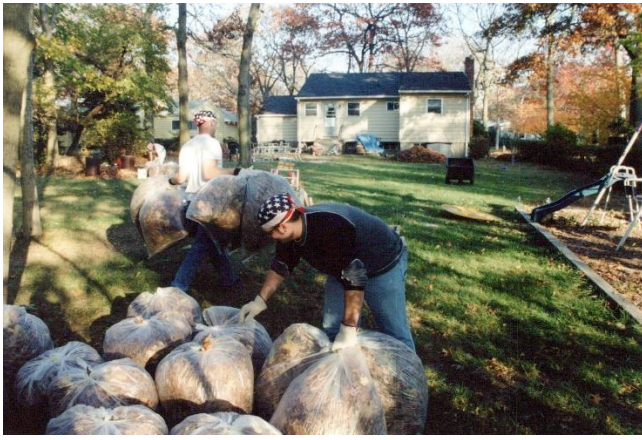
I went into New York City Oct. 24 & 25 for training with American Association of Christian Counselors.

Our daughter Sarah and Aaron, and friend Jason made the trip from Grand Rapids to help. We visited Ground Zero on November 6, but we weren't able to do anything to really help anyone.



On November 7, I learned that NYFD Firefighter Lincoln Quappe, died on 9/11 in the World Trade Center, leaving behind his wife and two young children. I got their address from a friend. When we drove by their house we immediately knew what we could do to help. They had a large yard with lots of leaves.

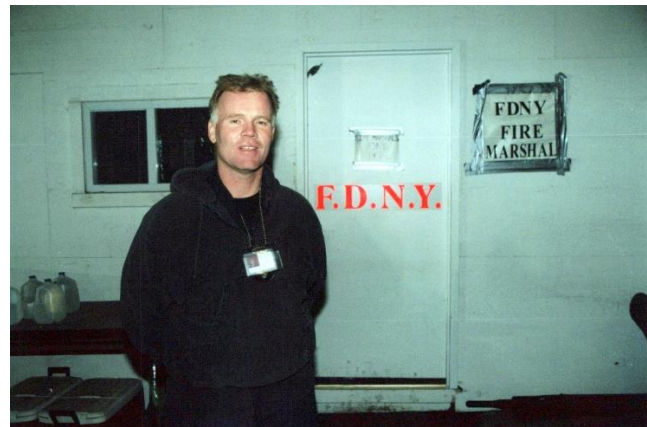




Steve Schreck was our son Andrew's baseball coach and lacrosse coach.
Top Left Coach Steve Schreck, Back Row 2nd from left Eric Schreck, 3rd from left Andrew Smith



Steve Schreck is a NYFD Fire Marshall. He spent countless hours day after day, week after week, desperately seeking to find his fallen comrades. Steve lost 50 close friends on 9/11.



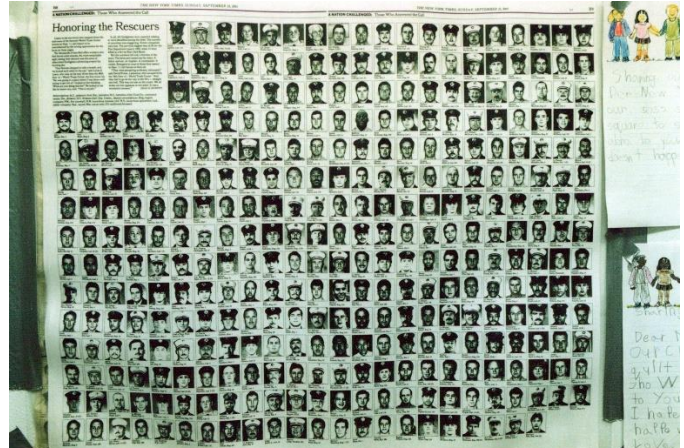
Steve was assigned to the Field Morgue at Ground Zero. He was responsible for identifying remains on site. Then they were transported by ambulance to the city morgue. Steve invited me to spend the day with him at Ground Zero on Saturday, November 17, 2001. It was an incredible honor to be with Steve at Ground Zero from 8 am to 8 pm.



Buried Treasures is a store on Main Street in downtown Sayville. I included this photo because it addresses the question of what we value most in life. Do we value the buildings we admire and the stuff we acquire — or the people we live and work with and the relationships that give life meaning?



For some, the big concern was securing the money and the gold that was stored in the lower levels of the Twin Towers. For men like Steve, the big concern was rescuing anyone who was still alive, and then finding the remains of as many of the people who perished that day as possible.





Steve brought me up to the roof of the tower on the left with the green rounded dome.





Steve shared with me his distress that it had been ten days since they found any human remains. After we were on the roof for about an hour, Steve noticed movement in the pile indicating they had found something. He said, "I'm going to get a call." Less than a minute later his cell phone rang. After he took the call he said, "We have to go." The photo of the workers on the pile was taken with a telephoto lens.



Steve and the other Fire Marshalls identified the remains of seven fallen firefighters that day. Each of the fallen firefighters were respectfully carried on a stretcher with an America flag draped over them from the field morgue over to an ambulance waiting to transport them to the city morgue. Each time there was a semi-circle line of firefighters and police officers standing at attention to pay their final respects to their fallen comrades. Providentially I had worn my navy blue winter coat and I blended in very well. Out of respect, I stood just behind the line of first responders. It was an incredible honor to be present and witness those very sacred moments. I didn't believe it was appropriate for me to take photos. But I will always remember the visual images that are stored in my mind.



Area where the firefighters' remains were found.



Area where the gold bullion was recovered.



Steve & Christopher Olsen, with Charles Catrone, September 10, 2021



Christine and Steve Olsen, September 11, 2021, 20th Anniversary Remembrance

I first met Pastor John Smith over thirty years ago in the late eighties. I was a new Christian looking for a church. My wife to be and I came to the church where he pastored. This past memorial of 9-11 was the 20th year anniversary of the terrorist attack that killed nearly 3,000 people and sent NYC and the nation into turmoil. Needless to say there was much need for counseling for many people. John spent many hours visiting my mother-in-law as well as Christine and myself. John was well prepared for the moment.

John has since switched focus from ministering to the laity to pastoring pastors (also much needed). We were able to reconnect for the 20 year memorial of 9-11 in person. John flew to NYC for the event. I was delighted he asked me to write a few words for his Newsletter.

My experience of 9-11 has many stories and facets. From seeing the initial devastating impact as I spoke with many who lost their fathers or brothers in the plane crashes or in the Towers or Pentagon. What I want to speak about is the many anguished questions of how could God let this happen. As if God was a goalie, that just let one pass Him by. The subject of providence has been highlighted for me by these experiences.

A study of providence will do wonders for one's soul. I believe it's important to know from the onset that providence is something that, although we have a Bible based working knowledge of, we can't fully understand. Just like the Trinity, God's holiness, the sinfulness of sin, or that in one decree God can lay out the whole future of man is hard for us to comprehend. God is that amazing!

What is providence? The almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, he upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and "ALL" things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand. (Heidelberg Catechism LD 10)

He upholds the universe by the word of His power (Heb. 1:3). I think a lot of Christians may be familiar with this so far. The point I really want to get at is this; we also have a self-will (free will). God uses His sovereign will to shape our free will. Spurgeon said of sanctification concerning God's sovereign and our self will: these are two metals that can't be joined on earthly anvils. After receiving the gift of saving faith and receiving Jesus as our foundation, we need to engage with effort to build our life upon this mighty foundation. Part of the reason why God wants us to be sanctified and our will changed by his goodness is that the Lord will not force his bride. We will willingly be married to Christ when our wills are perfectly holy.



Spurgeon says, "Of what service is the mere foundation of a building to a man in the day of a tempest? Can he hide himself therein? He wants a house to cover him, as well as a foundation for that house. Even so we need the superstructure of spiritual life if we would have comfort in the day of doubt. But seek not a holy life without faith, for that would be to erect a house which can afford no permanent shelter, because it has no foundation on a rock. Let faith and life be put together, and like two abutments of an arch, they will make our piety enduring like heat and light streaming from the same sun. They are alike full of blessing.

Does God use hardships for his will and our good? Think of Joseph. When he was in prison with the cup bearer and the baker, he was probably in prison for seven to ten years before being released. Yet, at the end of it all he said God used it for good. Knowing this in advance is a great blessing to help us navigate the rough times of life. ~~ Steve Olsen

It was an incredible honor and privilege for me to be with Steve and Christine Olsen and their family at Ground Zero on September 11, 2021 to remember the 20th Anniversary of her brother David Halderman and all of the other heroes who lost their lives on that day... we will always remember.





Esther & Charles Catrone, Geraldine Halderman, Christine Olsen, Christopher Olsen



Geraldine Halderman, Christine Olsen, Esther Catrone



Geraldine Halderman, Steve Olsen, Christopher Olsen, Christine Olsen, Marianne & Dan Tangel





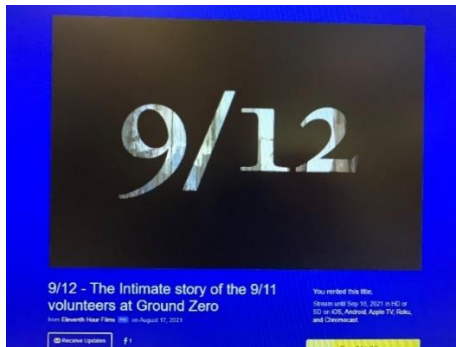
Steve Olsen is one of the best personal evangelists I know. He is passionate about sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with anyone, anywhere, anytime. It was my privilege to recruit Steve to become an Ambassador Volunteer with Our Daily Bread Ministries. I sent him 50 copies of Our Daily Bread Special Edition REMEMBERING 9/11 Booklets. On Saturday, 9/11 I gave him several more. Steve always takes time with each person to have a conversation and show them how to read the booklet. As you open God's Word, open your heart and ask God to reveal Himself to you. Steve treats each person with love and respect. People know he cares about them and they are quite receptive to what he shares.



Steve and Christine and their family left around 1:00 to drive back to their homes on Long Island. I prayed that God would connect me with whoever he wanted to during my final two hours at Ground Zero. I spent the first hour walking through the museum. I spent my final hour at the South Tower reflection pool. After about 10 minutes, I noticed a firefighter in dress blues taking a photo for a woman and her daughter who wanted to pose with four heavily armed counter terrorism police officers. They were about 150 feet away, but I thought he looked like he could be Steve, even though I hadn't seen Steve in 20 years. As the firefighter was walking away, I decided to find out if it was him. I walked as fast as I could and when I caught up to him, I touched his arm and asked, "Is your name Steve?" When he turned and I saw his face, I exclaimed, "It is you!" We were both surprised and thrilled to be reconnected after all these years. Only God could find a way to connect me with Steve in the midst of the huge crowds of thousands of people and uniformed officers at ground zero!



Steve joyfully introduced me to his wife Debbie saying, “God used her to save my life.” Debbie Kahn began volunteering at Ground Zero on the morning of September 12. She continued for the better part of the following ten months. Working at the Hard Hat Café tent on the perimeter of the pile, she met Steve Schreck in November 2001. Steve, an FDNY Fire Marshal, was assigned to the Morgue. Over time their friendship blossomed into love. Steve and Debbie were married in August, 2005.



The award-winning documentary, “9/12: From Chaos to Community” tells the story of a group of dedicated New Yorkers, driven to volunteer at Ground Zero, who form unexpected, even unlikely bonds with first responders and with each other. Through their stories, we present a portrait of the city within a city that was Ground Zero, and examine how a diverse group of people transcended politics and culture in an effort to heal their city and themselves. To learn more, and rent or purchase the film any time, please visit www.912film.com. Steve and Debbie and their friend Alisha share their stories in the film 9/12.



9/11 was a Defining Moment in my life and ministry. I had less desire to speak, and more desire to listen to people. On January 6, 2002 God called me to leave New Life Community Church and go to a new thing He would show me. On February 17, 2002 God gave me a new calling to become a pastor to pastors and their families, especially those who are going through tough times. June 24, 2002 marked my 23rd anniversary and my last day at New Life Community Church. I love serving as a pastor to pastors and their families! God knew what I needed to go through to prepare me to be effective in this ministry.



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