

Chapel and Refuge Struggles to Define Role

By DANIEL J. WAKIN

For eight months after the 9/11 terror attack, St. Paul's Chapel served as a refuge of sanity for rescuers and workers at the World Trade Center site, housing a relief operation that has become legend.

Now, the minister who ran the operation, the Rev. Lyndon Harris, and the chapel itself are at a turning point. Father Harris resigned from St. Paul's last month. And the church's stewards are shaping St. Paul's emergence as a national shrine, something they say is beyond their control given the enormity of what happened to the twin towers across Church Street.

Inevitably, the changes have laid bare frictions — which all sides say were inevitable, and perhaps healthy — within Trinity Parish, which operates St. Paul's, and New York's Episcopal world. They are also characteristic of the ripples of upheaval through downtown institutions caused by the attack.

Father Harris's departure was an-

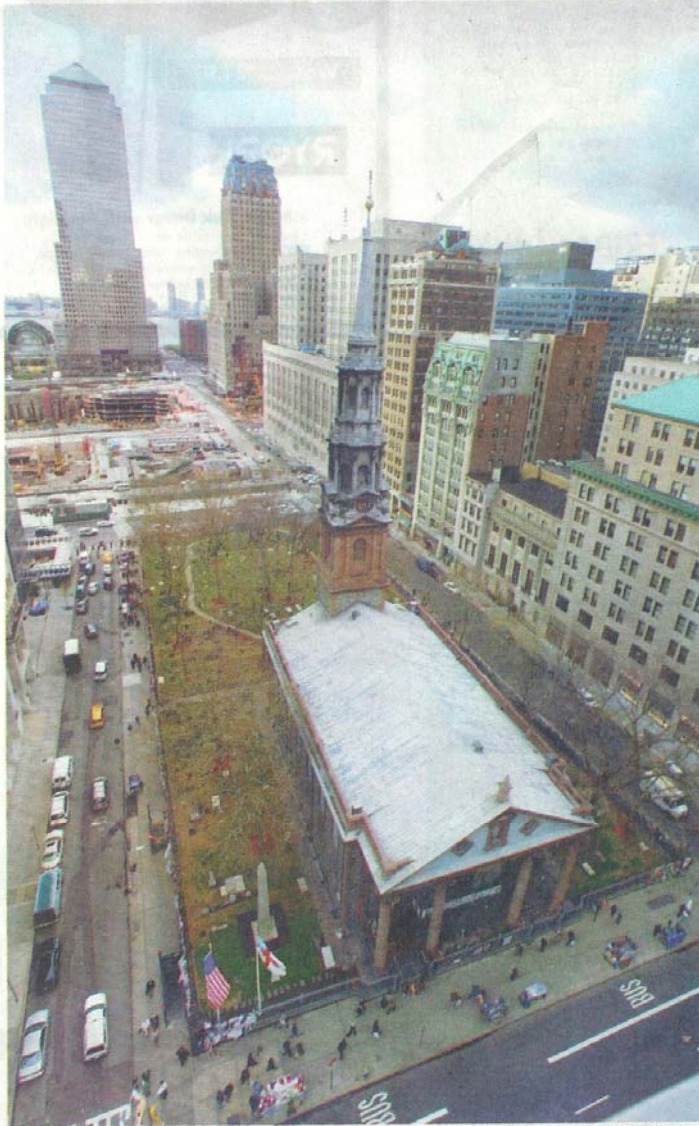
A popular minister is leaving an emerging national shrine.

nounced at Trinity on Oct. 13, drawing gasps of surprise and then an ovation from the congregation. It also provoked whispers that church officials did not fully support the relief operation, and, by extension, Father Harris.

Father Harris, 41, said he resigned to continue work on his doctorate in theology at General Theological Seminary, with financial support from Trinity. He said he wanted to write, lecture and help establish a foundation in Lower Manhattan, called 9/12 Community, to continue the relief operation's legacy of healing.

In any case, church officials say, even if Father Harris wanted to stay, St. Paul's new role left no room for his original reason for coming to the church in March 2001 — to reanimate its tiny group of worshippers and establish a ministry for young people.

Father Harris, who emerged as a public figure in the aftermath of the terror attack, declined to discuss the criticism of his



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

St. Paul's Chapel was called "heaven's outpost" for its ground zero relief operation.

Continued on Page B7

Chapel and 9/11 Refuge Struggles With Its Role

Continued From Page B1

bosses at Trinity, but said they were supportive.

"I'm grateful to Trinity for the opportunities that were given me," he said in an interview. "The St. Paul's experience just about killed me, but it was one of the rarest privileges I've ever had, to catch a glimpse of the kingdom, to see the church as what it can be. It will haunt me for the rest of my life, to try to bring that experience to bear on other facets of the church."

Contemplation of the relief effort must begin with the nature of St. Paul's, at Broadway and Fulton Street. The chapel, while the oldest continuously used public building in the city — an architectural gem where President George Washington worshiped — remains an outpost of Trinity Church parish, one of the wealthiest and most powerful religious institutions in New York.

The Rev. Dr. Daniel P. Matthews, Trinity's rector, has ultimate authority over St. Paul's; the Rev. Samuel Johnson Howard, Trinity's vicar, is directly in charge of the chapel.

After the towers fell, St. Paul's miraculously survived. Volunteers set up shop and offered firefighters, police officers and construction workers a place to sleep and eat 24 hours a day.

Clergy members were on hand to tend to the soul. Massage therapists, chiropractors and podiatrists handled the body. All manner of supplies, from boots to socks to aspirin to toothpaste, were available.

It became intensely appreciated by the rescue workers — "heaven's outpost," in the words of one firefighter.

Praise for Father Harris's role in running the operation ran wide and deep. "It was heroic, it was wonderful, it was from the heart and it touched everybody, and Lyndon Harris was the focus of that," said the Very Rev. James P. Morton, former dean of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine and now director of the Interfaith Center of New York.

Given the undeniable virtue of the operation and Trinity's might, few people would speak on the record critically about how it handled the relief effort. But some who were involved and others working for the Episcopal Church said Trinity's leadership tried to shut down the operation several times or limit its activities.

In a joint interview, Father Matthews and Father Howard freely acknowledged that some volunteers were resentful. As stewards of the chapel, the priests said, it fell to them to worry about fire hazards, like candles burning under drooping paper banners, and matters like air quality and the burden on the chapel's electrical system.



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

The Rev. Lyndon Harris, who ran the 9/11 relief operation at St. Paul's, resigned last month to pursue his theological studies.

"If a volunteer saw anything that curtailed the gifts being given and freedom being given, then you were not respecting and being appreciative of the spiritual magic," Father Matthews said.

The priests said that in the initial chaotic weeks after the towers' collapse, they frequently discussed how long an operation that began as an emergency response should continue. And, they were faced with worries by city health officials and downtown merchants who were crying out for business.

Father Matthews said he wrestled with the basic clerical impulse to keep a sacred place holy, and the need to help people. But both men said they supported Father Harris and enjoyed a good relationship with him.

These days, an exhibit detailing the relief effort dominates the interior of St. Paul's, and outside, the fence surrounding the chapel remains a repository of memorial tributes, with T-shirts, flowers and notes. Trinity has three videos for sale on the relief experience and Trinity's role. Thousands of visitors, mostly out-of-towners, come every day. Church leaders say a survey reinforces the idea that the chapel has taken on a

profound role as a shrine.

While Trinity's leaders are trying to find the balance between church and memorial, some worry that they are moving too far from the mission of a house of worship.

"We're saying, 'God, what do you want us to do with this?'" Father Matthews said.