

Airport Chaplains Let Fliers Connect With The Heavens

News

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ATLANTA (AP) -- The Rev. Frank Colladay Jr. stood at the end of the gate waiting. On the arriving plane was a passenger whose husband had just died of a heart attack on another flight. Her name was Linda Gilbert. The two had never met before.



Colladay's parish happens to be the world's busiest airport. His flock consists of people passing through who might need comfort, spiritual advice, or someone to pray with.

On this day, a traumatized Gilbert needed even more. Colladay guided her through Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, drove her in his silver Ford Fusion to the medical examiner to see her husband's body and arranged for a flight home for both of them.

"He didn't say a whole lot. But just his presence being there, it just felt comforting and reassuring," Gilbert says. "I didn't know that airports have chaplains."

Most people don't.

Airports are mini-cities with their own movie theaters, fire departments and shopping malls. Many also have chapels, typically tiny non-denominational spaces, in out-of-the-way locations. They offer an escape from constant gate change and security announcements and are staffed by 350 part- and full-time chaplains worldwide - Roman Catholic, Protestant and, to a lesser extent, Jewish, Muslim or Sikh.

The positions are highly sought-after and considered glamorous, with chaplains saying they love the excitement and unpredictability of airports.

The job is unlike other church assignments. There isn't a permanent congregation. No baptisms, weddings or funerals. Instead, airport chaplains preach to a crowd that is transient by nature.

Trust must be earned quickly. There's little time for small talk. Everybody is rushing to catch a flight.

"You only get one chance to impress them; one chance to help them," says Bishop D.D. Hayes, a non-denominational pastor at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. "Many times, we touch lives we never see again."

There are daily or weekly services but most ministering occurs elsewhere.

Chaplains see troops off to war and are on hand when bodies of the fallen return. They comfort fliers visiting sick relatives and those traveling for medical treatment themselves. During weather delays, chaplains take the heat off gate agents by standing nearby - passengers tend to be on their best behavior when in the presence of a priest.

They aren't at airports to proselytize and - surprisingly - very few passengers confess to a fear of flying. Often, they just roam terminals offering a friendly face and occasional directions. Some walk up to seven miles a day.

"When I came into the job, my predecessor said you have to buy good shoes," says the Rev. Jean-Pierre Dassonville, a Protestant who just retired after 12 years at Charles De Gaulle Airport in Paris.

Chaplains need outgoing personalities. They have to recognize the signs that something is wrong and know how to approach strangers.

The Rev. Wina Hordijk, a Protestant minister at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, recently saw a teenage girl sitting by herself, crying. The girl was supposed to travel throughout Europe with her boyfriend, but he dumped her at the start of the trip.

"I always have a lot of handkerchiefs in my bag," Hordijk says.

Then there are the more serious situations.

The Rev. Jonathan Baldwin, who is assigned by The Church of England to London's Gatwick Airport, was once asked by a couple to join them as their son and his new wife returned from their honeymoon. The groom's sister had committed suicide the day after the wedding. Baldwin obtained a quiet room for them to meet, break the news and cry privately.

Chaplains don't just support fliers; there are also thousands of airport workers. Employees at ticket counters, security checkpoints and control towers are under extreme stress. They often need to chat with somebody independent from their job.

For those who work Sundays, the airport chapel becomes their de facto church.

"You come into a chapel, you know you're in God's house," says Vibert Edwards, who prays daily before starting his shift as a baggage handler at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport.

To relate, chaplains learn airport lingo, for instance calling workers who unload luggage from planes "ramp rats."

The first airport chapel was founded at Boston's Logan International Airport in 1954. Today there are chapels as far away as Geneva, Istanbul and Bangkok. Catholic dioceses assign- and pay - for priests at larger airports. In some cases, airports or airlines will provide financial support. Many chaplains are volunteers.

Services are quick and informal. If 20 people arrive, it's a big crowd. As flights near boarding, worshippers duck out.

"People are a little bit uptight already. It's a great environment for ministry," says the Rev. Hutz Hertzberg, the senior Protestant chaplain at Chicago's two airports. "In the 21st century, we need to bring the ministry to where the people are instead of waiting for them to come to our churches."

Getting them to services isn't always easy.

The focus of this year's annual conference of the International Association of Civil Aviation Chaplains in Atlanta - yes, the chaplains have their own trade group - was marketing. Announcements are made prior to services, but most travelers are too preoccupied with their travel plans to notice.

"We sometimes have to reach out to people who have no idea we exist," says the Rev. Chris Piasta, a Catholic priest at JFK's Our Lady of the Skies Chapel, home to a statue of Mary standing on a propeller.

JFK is one of the few airports with separate chapels for each religion. Most airports share

non-denominational spaces. Crosses are placed on altars prior to services and removed after. Bookshelves are stocked with texts of all religions, often in multiple languages.

Even those who know chapels exist sometimes can't find them. They are tucked away in odd corners of the airport: next to baggage claim in St. Louis, sandwiched between two tram stations in Orlando and above a Cinnabon and barbecue joint in Charlotte, N. C.

"Can you imagine the smells we're getting?," says Ben Wenning, a Roman Catholic deacon there.

Chaplains are also there for major crises.

When volcanic ash shut down European airspace in 2010, New York's chaplains provided stranded passengers with bagels and cream cheese, fresh shirts and socks, laptops to check emails and helped refill medications.

After a crash, they help console victims' families.

"When the first responders leave, we're the ones who show up," says the Rev. Gordon M. Smith, a Protestant chaplain at Canada's Calgary International Airport.

Within the clergy, airport postings are in high demand. The job typically doesn't open up until an existing chaplain dies. And even after death, some chaplains remain close to the airport.

When the Rev. Peter Holloway, an Anglican priest at Australia's Melbourne airport, died in June at the age of 91, he was buried in a cemetery directly below the landing approach to runway 16.