

# Flights of faith: Airport chaplains tend to travelers' emotional baggage

By Ambria Hammel  
The Catholic Sun

Twelve Catholics paused amidst their hectic Christmas Day travels to make time for a prayer service.

That number may not sound like a lot, but it was more than Deacon Joe Cady expected to see at the Phoenix Sky Harbor chapel.

"I've never had a total no-show," said Deacon Cady, a retired airline worker, of Christmas Day or any Sunday since 2000 that he's shared the duty of offering the Eucharist to travelers and airport workers.

Four Catholic deacons are among several ministers who meet the faith needs of nearly 500 visitors each month through the Sky Harbor Interfaith Chaplaincy.

They staff a chapel where a mix of passengers and airport employees visit for prayer, reflection and peace of mind. The ministers also roam the terminals looking for people to help.

"It's difficult to differentiate between what might be a social service and what might be a pas-

toral service," said Rev. Al Young, a Presbyterian minister and head of the chaplaincy.

## Passenger help

For 20 years, travelers and airport workers have turned to the chaplaincy for counsel and care. Some are in the midst of bereavement while others need extra money to get them to their destination. A few simply need help carrying their baggage.

"It can be as varied as the number of stars in the sky," Deacon Cady said of his volunteer job at the airport.

The bulk of the chaplains' work occurs within the terminals where they minister to those in need.

"I look for anxiety in their faces," Deacon Ed Bolton said. "I try to strike up a conversation with them and eventually they will start talking about their problems."

He'll find travelers experiencing anything from a fear of flying to coming to terms with a recent death in the family. He then offers words of encouragement.

"Nine times out of 10 they

feel better after we part," Deacon Bolton said.

"A lot of what we do is listen to people," Deacon Cady said.

Listening was key for him six months ago. Airport police sought Deacon Cady's help with a man they found ambling around.

The chaplain described him as very open and learned the man wanted to commit suicide.

"So I talked to him and found out he was Jewish. I tried to build up his self-esteem by telling him what a wonderful religion he had," Deacon Cady said.

He encouraged the man to rely on his faith. The chaplain also learned during the conversation and through close observation that he had psychological problems and was simply confused from all of his medication.

Deacon Cady found phone numbers of relatives in his belongings and was able to reach medical professionals who straightened out the dosage.

Whether walking terminals or inside the chapel, they root themselves in the common principles and teachings of the nearly one dozen religious traditions the ministry serves.

## Prayer in the air

Although the earliest airport chapels in the 1950s were Catholic,



Ambria Hammel/CATHOLIC SUN

**Deacon Joe Cady, a retired airlines worker and chaplain, talks with a Southwest Airlines employee at Sky Harbor International Airport last month.**

other denominations soon recognized the need to offer a place for reflection and prayer.

Now, the International Association of Civil Aviation Chaplains lists roughly 40 American airports and more than 100 around the world that support the independent operation of interfaith chapels.

The ecumenical feel of the chapel at Sky Harbor is evident. Visitors enter on the third level of Terminal 4 just before the security checkpoint and immediately notice a small prayer rug for those of the Islamic faith hanging below Bibles from various religions.

"We've had a significant number of Muslims who come and use the chapel," Rev. Young said.

Deacon Cady explained how staff revised the chapel's seating arrangement to ensure adequate space facing east. The eastern corner also features a small, tranquil waterfall to soothe visitors of all faiths.

The deacons regularly see Catholics for Communion service each Sunday and on holy days of obligation.

"Ash Wednesday is our biggest attendance," said Deacon Bolton, a Sky Harbor chaplain for 15 years. "We've had as many as 30-35 people. Everybody and his brother come in for ashes."

"Catholics have been well trained to seek out liturgy," Rev. Young admitted.

Other visitors come to the chapel seeking counsel. Deacon Bolton recalled a traveler of a different faith who came into the chapel upset with a family member. She wanted him to pray with her. Another time he prayed with two Protestants.

"They felt much better when they left," the deacon said. But it isn't just the laity that find solace in the airport chapels.

"For me it has always been a great blessing to be able to come into a chapel at an airport, rest and pray, and refocus on God," Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted said.

"It helps me to be aware of His presence with us and reminds me to pray for others who travel and those who serve them." \*

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