

DID YOU PACK THIS BAG YOURSELF?



Departures



Life as an airport chaplain, by Chris Goswami

If someone had told me a year ago I would be meeting a flight bringing children from a war zone, or assisting a young lady escaping a forced marriage, or counselling a South American fleeing a terrorist organisation, I would have marvelled that such a job existed. And yet it does.

More commonly, I've been helping people denied travel by their airline, assisting with our homeless community and, quite often, working out what to do with the steady trickle of waifs and strays who appear in the Chaplaincy offices here at Manchester Airport.

I've never had a job like this, where you constantly expect the unexpected. Quite often, you don't do what you came in to do – and that's OK!

Our inflight service

Of course, there is some regularity, at least in theory - a 'day job'. Our Lead Chaplain, George Lane (CofE) calls it 'wandering aimlessly' – referring to that old-fashioned service of simply making time for others. So we wend our way through the airport's staff offices, duty free, VIP lounges, check-in desks, engineering departments and break rooms. Our concern is the welfare of the 25,000 staff who work here. Each one has their own ups and downs, bereavements and birthdays, griefs and joys. They do tough jobs, there can be long hours starting as early as 3am, and passengers who may be less than tolerant – and they often appreciate someone with time to simply stop and chat.

One thing I do every week is visit the Short Term Holding Centre.

This is where the Home Office detains individuals accused of breaching their visa conditions. This too is a place filled with stories - some eye-popping, some heart-breaking:

Legislation gone bonkers

I met a young Indian student, Samir, in the Holding Centre. He was under threat of deportation for working more hours than allowed. His job was a carer in a residential care home. "Wow!" I said, "that's a tough job". "No no" he replied, beaming, "I enjoy it!". Samir has a deep respect for the elderly and is experienced looking after his own parents in India. In fact, he told me how the previous night he had accompanied an elderly lady into hospital, and remained with her until 3am, long after his end of shift at 6pm.

It makes you wonder. The UK desperately needs carers. Here's a guy who's a fantastic carer, he even enjoys it... and we want to deport him.

Our cabin crew today are...

Manchester Airport Chaplaincy was founded by a Baptist minister, Arthur Grimshaw, in 1980. Today the majority of our chaplains remain Christian, and our day begins with morning prayer in one of the airport's five prayer rooms. We use Anglican or Catholic daily worship liturgies.

But of course, an airport is incredibly diverse – one of the most cosmopolitan workplaces anywhere. For example, many of our security staff and taxi drivers are Muslim, and we have multiple other faiths and ethnicities. This is reflected in our chaplaincy team which includes five Muslim, three Jewish, and one Sikh Chaplain. We're constantly learning about each other's cultures and beliefs, and, in these potentially dangerous times, that can only be a good thing.

Baptists have a long tradition of defending the right of individuals to hold any faith, including no faith (that's what the Reformation was about after all) and that resonates strongly with me. So it's a privilege to work in such an eclectic team. It also lends itself well to humour: Recently, three of our chaplains - Christian, Muslim and Jewish - in religious dress, were walking together when they were stopped by a passer-by. "Is this the start of a joke?", he quipped! (If ONLY they had walked into a bar!)

Frightened and abused Hamsa, a young man brought to us on arrival, had suffered persecution and beatings in Iran for being gay. For some hours he found it hard to speak to us at all. After much telephoning we managed to get him started on an asylum claim, and found him accommodation and support from a local LGBT-friendly church.

Generally, we don't know what happens to the people we assist but, unusually, a few weeks later we heard from Hamsa. "... I'm gonna participate at an LGBT event on Monday and it's gonna be great. Life is better than before, I have a place and food, and feel better about my future. Thanks for everything, you helped me a lot!". He is even volunteering at a local Baptist church – how heartening is that!

Ensure your seatbelt is fastened!

I would be lying if I didn't admit to a large dose of adrenaline attached to this role.

Dropping into the Police Control Room or Air Traffic Control Tower to see how folks are doing is always a pleasure and often captivating. The airport fire station is another favourite. I'm always struck by the friendly banter and intensely warm atmosphere these teams have created.



It's palpable and positive. The fire station even has a team member who used to be a chef – trust me, they eat seriously well!

A highlight for me was leading one of our several Remembrance events. Mine was at the Fire Station. Many of our airport staff are ex-Services, so it's an important day and we need to ensure it is done well.

Added to all that, whenever we get an email from the Foreign Office or Red Cross, or a call from Border Force, you can be sure there is a story of human interest unfolding somewhere in this town we call an airport.

Sometimes we fail

Lucy, an elderly lady from Seattle, had her savings stolen by a con-man online, over several months. Eventually, the con-man suggested she meet him at Manchester Airport where her money 'would be returned in full'. In desperation, Lucy arrived at T1, found a seat, and waited... and waited. In fact, she remained there for seven days and nights, hanging on to a thread of hope that all might not be lost.

Eventually, she phoned the US Embassy, who contacted the chaplaincy. We got her into a hotel, and then a flight home.

It's hard to spot one face among many. Still, we felt saddened that none of us - security, customer services, cleaners or chaplains - spotted her sooner.

Touchdown?

I've thoroughly enjoyed my first year in this role, despite it being only part-time.

But isn't it funny how things turn out? When I first saw the ad for 'Airport Chaplain' I literally laughed out loud. You see this airport has an intense familiarity for me. I worked in the tech industry for more than 30 years and passed through this airport many (many) times - sometimes visiting our offices abroad, other times a customer tour, or to speak at some conference. And in this place, where I spent so many days over so many years, I have ended up in ministry. If you then throw in a love of fire engines, planes, and police cars... yes, I feel I packed this bag myself.



Chris Goswami is Associate Minister at Lymm Baptist Church, and a chaplain at Manchester Airport. He blogs regularly at 7minutes.net

Incidents related are all true but names and details have been altered to ensure anonymity.

