



Gathering amid the arrivals and departures of an international airport

'Gathering' might seem a strange theme to reflect on for a place that daily facilitates up to 250,000 people journeying to and from some 220 destinations worldwide, writes Ruth Bottoms. As Head of Heathrow Multi Faith Chaplaincy, this is my patch. But as I ponder, a number of snapshots come to mind.

Chaplains gather themselves before God

Our strapline is that the chaplaincy is 'Here to support everyone's journeys'. A city on the move, the chaplaincy team cannot possibly meet everyone. But many of the team consciously take a moment at the start of each session at the airport to gather themselves before God/the Divine of their faith tradition. They might pause in one of the ten Multi Faith Prayer Rooms and pray that they will be in the right place at the right time to offer a person the right word of support, encouragement and maybe prayer depending on the circumstances. The team has a sense that we don't go out and about on our own.

Gathering in regular acts of worship

You will find people gathering together for regular worship at the airport. The Multi Faith Prayer Rooms are busy in the middle of the day as Muslim passengers and colleagues come together for prayers, particularly on Fridays. Meanwhile at the Chapel you will find Roman Catholics celebrating Mass four times a week. Some companies at the airport support faith-specific staff groups that chaplains may be invited to share in. One of the USA airlines invites me to share in its event held on the annual American Day of Prayer.

Gathering in grief and remembrance

In the midst of the Central Terminal Area is the Chapel of St George and the Garden of Remembering. Here, several times a year the Chaplaincy team will find itself leading a small service/ceremony of remembrance and the dedication of a new plaque in memory of a colleague who has died. Sometimes we will lead a full memorial service in the Chapel where colleagues were unable to get to a funeral. The garden also has plaques commemorating downed flights from years ago. No longer in the headlines, family and friends gather quietly to remember on the anniversary. The garden is where we hold an airport Armistice Day Service when Heathrow's emergency services teams lay wreaths and together we give thanks for and remember past sacrifices.

Gathering to work for the common good

Then there are the meetings I attend where, with people of all faiths and none, we are working together for the common good. An example would be the quarterly meeting of the Working Group on Modern Slavery. Bringing together people from across the airport, this group seeks to ensure that Heathrow's Modern Slavery Statement is not just words, but results in training and action to help everyone at

the airport be alert to this issue and to play a part in preventing people being entrapped.

Are these airport gatherings very different to our Baptist concept of being a gathered church? Personal discipleship, communal worship and fellowship, supporting one another through the tough times, working together to advance the kingdom of God: all present at the airport too.

Gathering with loved ones

My final snapshot is of people being gathered into the arms of loved ones, whether in departures before someone is waved off or in arrivals halls as people connect again. Some of the most moving family reunions are when, as chaplains, we escort a family off a plane who have



received a family entry visa to join someone granted asylum in the UK. Often coming from a refugee camp, not having flown before, speaking little, if any, English we help them navigate their way through border control, baggage collection and then stand back and witness the joy of the embrace, reminded of the uniqueness and preciousness of each human life. Parting from them, I entrust their on-going journey to the all embracing love of God in Christ, who would gather the whole world into the kingdom of God.

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