

Church-specific chapels a dying breed at airports: More chapels adopting interfaith feel

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Most of the 30 or so chapels at U.S. airports are tucked in a corner or on a second floor that isn't well traveled. And most are small and plain. But the ReginaCaeliChapel atCleveland's Hopkins International Airport is different, and what makes it unique might also make it endangered.

The chapel, run by theCatholic Diocese ofCleveland, is in a prominent place, past the security checkpoint and just steps from the food court. It's large, with room for 120 people in the gleaming oak pews with maroon cushions.

And it looks like the inside of a RomanCatholic church, with statues of Mary, Jesus and several saints; the stations of the cross; the papal flag; a vigil light; and the Blessed Sacrament.

Airport officials recently met with a representative of the diocese to discuss the chapel's future. The problem, they said, is the chapel's single-denomination orientation.

Todd Payne, chief of marketing and air service development at Hopkins, said the chapel's location and size were not an issue, even though a planned construction project will reconfigure nearly 90,000 square feet for shops and restaurants over the next two years.

"The airport's customer service department has received comments from passengers of other faiths that the current chapel doesn't meet their faith needs, and as a result the city is considering options with regard to a more interfaith, multifaith chapel at Hopkins," he said. "It won't happen tomorrow, but it will happen."

The “reorientation” could include moving the chapel to someplace on the other side of the security checkpoint “so everyone could have access to it,” Payne said.

The chapel was created in 1983 when the diocese signed a 20-year lease and spent more than \$300,000 to renovate and furnish the space, said Deacon Charles Doerpers, who oversees Catholic programs at the chapel.

At least 15,000 people use the chapel each year, according to Doerpers, who favors updating the chapel into a more interfaith space.

It’s a shift that’s slowly taking place at airport chapels across the country. Airport chaplains say chapels with a specific faith identity are increasingly rare, especially across the South and in newer airport terminals.

Chester Cook, executive director of the Atlanta-based Interfaith Airport Chaplaincy, said airports are faced with an ever more diverse clientele. “The airports have to provide a neutral space,” Cook said. “Up North, it didn’t start that way.”

Boston’s Logan International Airport opened the nation’s first airport chapel in 1946 in a partnership with the Archdiocese of Boston. The Logan chapel retains its distinctive Catholic identity, and chaplain Richard Uftring said most visitors and staff like it that way.

Uftring said he sees more chapels adopting an interfaith feel, but the priest seemed to regret the trend. “For some, it’s just a hang-out place . . . and to me, that’s not what a chapel is about.”

Back in Cleveland, Doerpers says he’s concerned that business, not bias, is behind the proposed move. He first learned of the possible relocation several weeks ago when an airport official said, “We want to relocate you. We want retail there.”

Michael Zaniolo, the full-time chaplain at O’Hare and Midway airports in Chicago, can sympathize with the Cleveland chapel’s situation. “You live at the mercy and the generosity of the airport authority,” he said.

“The city of Chicago owns the airport. The city makes all the decisions about how to use the space,” said Zaniolo, who also is president of the National Conference of Catholic Airport Chaplains. “Obviously, they’d rather sell or rent out the space than lease it for a small amount or nothing to a nonprofit. [But] the people at the airport—the workers—request it. They support it.”

Christine Link, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio, said her office still receives several complaints about the Cleveland chapel each year. A lawsuit failed to change things a decade ago, with the airport's argument that the chapel is open to people of all faiths winning the case, she said. *-Religion News Service*