

Fasten your seatbelts: A space chaplaincy

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [May 08, 2002](#) issue

The American Association for the Advancement of Science sounds like a feet-on-the-ground organization. But in a recent meeting in Boston some scientists took flight, at least in imagination. They talked about physically possible step-ups in the speed of travel that might make it conceivable to reach a near star. Alpha Centauri, our neighbor, is 4.4 light-years from the sun, which means 6 trillion miles times 4.4. We learn that if a cave man 11,000 years ago had launched something at the pace of Voyager, it now would be only one-fifth of its way to the nearest star.

The scientists, joined by some writers of science fiction, speculated. With foreseeable developments, they envisioned a crew that could reach Alpha Centauri in 50 years. For even longer voyages, genetic diversity in the crew would be a problem. You'd need a large bunch of people and careful planning.

As for food? The scientists pictured ways to keep food products regenerating in an artificial environment. Bet on diets of yeastlike micro-organisms, varied with wheat berry, scrambled tofu, lentil loaf, potato cilantro stir-fry, carrots and roasted soy nuts.

Of course, there's the problem of boredom. Also picture saying good-bye to those going on a voyage that would consume six or eight or ten generations of people who would be born and die in space.

There's no mention in the report on the conference that the scientists discussed the religious aspects of the voyage. But assume that people are genetically programmed to belong to a species marked *homo religiosus*. As they go through the passages of life, they seek ritual, comfort and challenge—offerings of religion or, if you want to be outer-spacy, "spirituality." Who'll run the religious show aboard the spacecraft?

If you simply call on the current clerical cast of Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Orthodox and Muslim, you are overloading the crew and vehicle *and* buying trouble. “What about the Buddhists?” one hears being asked. Or Mormons? Or Wiccans?

Envisioning a mall-sized space platform and enclosure might help earthlings think through our own present situation. Shall the crew’s makeup reflect the earthly scene? Would celibate clergy have their place? In denominations in which bishops or their equivalents ordain, who would ordain?

What strikes me most is the question of who would be “established,” “privileged,” and allowed “under God” and “thou shalt have no other God” status of the kinds some picture in place for our slightly larger spaceship, the good craft *U.S.A.*

Since this launch would be all about power, power would determine personnel. Of course, the “Abrahamic faiths” would outpoll others. “Judeo-Christian” is at the same time both too limiting and too broad a designation. Catholics? They are outnumbered by Protestants. Among Protestants, the largest group is Baptist. (Immersion might put a strain on the water supply through generations of recycling and purifying.) At least, if we had such homogeneity, some would contend, we would agree on an ethic, on morals and on ritual on our interstellar launch.

Let Baptists run the religion aboard and all would agree with all, we might speculate. Let’s see: that means we’d seek consensus among a crew that would include people like Jimmy Carter and Strom Thurmond, Harvey Cox and Jerry Falwell, Jesse Helms and Jesse Jackson. On second thought, forget about it. Until Baptists or any other group all agree on something, anything, it’s foolish to dream of concord. Reaching Alpha Centauri would be a snap in comparison.