

## Ben Wenning

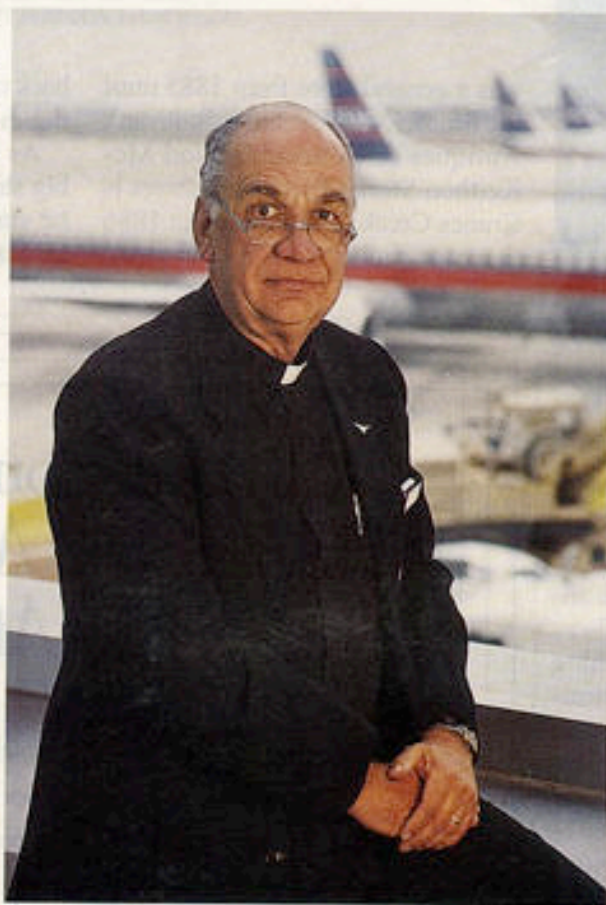
**A**s churches go, the Interfaith Chapel at the Charlotte/Douglas International Airport is tiny. But volunteer chaplains affiliated with the 10- x 14-foot sanctuary serve an incredibly large flock: 16 million passengers and 10,000 airport employees.

Tucked near the visitors information desk at the airport's ticket level, the chapel features a door with a stained-glass kneeling figure. Inside, dim lighting, a handful of chairs, and sacred scripture of various faiths offer respite from the bustling hub.

Some 30 such airport chapels exist in the United States and about 100 operate worldwide. In Charlotte, rent is paid by USAirways, while Mecklenburg Ministries, an association of area churches, sponsors good deeds by the chaplain volunteers, whose only payment is free parking.

"It's a ministry of the moment," says Chaplain Ben Wenning. Prior to directing the airport's spiritual center, Ben guided the airport's planes. "I spent 36 years as an air-traffic controller," says the ordained minister, who served as the Charlotte airport's deputy chief of the control tower before he retired. When the chapel opened eight years ago, he became associate chaplain, then switched roles two years ago with 70-something Chaplain Charles Smith.

Charles and Ben carry pagers and are on call continuously, while 12 volunteers cover the chapel from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day. What warrants a call? Airline personnel may summon them for reasons as crucial as an accident possibility—a craft returning with blown tires, for in-



PHOTOGRAPH BY SAVAGE GIBSON

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stance—to those as personal as a distraught passenger in need of a pediatrician for a sick child.

Or an employee might need their services. The chapel "is a place where they aren't afraid to come and say, 'My daughter didn't come home last night' or 'My car doesn't run anymore,'" Ben says. "What you need to do is have the gift of listen-

ing, because you need to hear what they want to do. Most people have answers to their problems."

Recently, he helped a passenger in the military who was afraid of flying. She refused to continue her flight to San Diego after experiencing some turbulence. Ben called her military base and received permission for her to switch from plane to bus transportation. "I took her down to the bus station, stayed with her about an hour and a half, and got her on a bus," he says.

Each day, Ben and his assistants wander the concourses, searching for "people who are hurting." They check the phone banks because "that's where they either give or receive bad news. You'll find people sitting on the floor, crying. I'm getting a little too old, but

I've been known to get on the floor with them," says the 63-year-old.

Sometimes requests border on the ludicrous. "People ask you to pray for them because they're going to Las Vegas," he laughs. Does he do it? "Absolutely! It's a grand opportunity to pray and infer that this material need that they have is important to them, but [to remind them] we all have to live within the means of our income.

"Occasionally, I get caught in a sham, somebody does me out of a ticket or something," he adds. "But we are not a credit bureau or a bank. Still, I'm going to err on the side of generosity, thoughtfulness, and being human. After all, that's what we're here for."

Nancy Dorman-Hickson