A young pastor's quick-meet ministry to airplane passengers

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Every Thursday morning, Jose A. Barrientos Jr. leaves his home shortly after 5 a.m. and drives to Washington Dulles International Airport to minister to his flock for several hours.
Barrientos is a Seventh-day Adventist minister and one of 18 assistant chaplains at the busy hub. Not only is he the youngest, he's also the only Hispanic chaplain there, which makes him the go-to guy in offering assistance to Spanish-, Portuguese-, and Italian-speaking passengers, as well as the maintenance staff, the large majority of whom are Hispanic.

He and other chaplains offer support by roaming the terminals looking for people to assist with directions, calming down passengers at baggage claim who haven't received their luggage, or reading faces to find those who might need solace. Barrientos also takes a turn once a month leading the Wednesday evening Protestant service held at the inter-faith chapel in the international terminal.

His full-time job is the children's ministry youth pastor at Community Praise Center Adventist Church in nearby Alexandria, but he volunteers several hours each week outside the church at Dulles.

Denominational leaders hope that more Adventist ministers serving as community chaplains at airports is an idea that will take flight.

"We favor more pastors extending their ministries into the community," said Gary Councell, director of Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries, the denomination's ecclesiastical endorsing agency. "We only have influence when we mingle with people and spend time with them for their interests instead of our needs."

Adventist pastors who become endorsed by ACM serve in places such as corporations, fire and police departments, sporting events and cruise lines.

At airports, many people will talk to a chaplain just to share their good mood for a few minutes, while others are desperate for spiritual support, such as a woman who was sobbing during a chapel service after discovering her significant other was unfaithful. Still, some are seeking other things.

"Need help finding your gate?" Barrientos asked a man wandering toward a dead-end corridor loaded down with a large backpack, computer bag and neck pillow.

Barrientos is clergy, but also serves as a guide, restaurant critic, and a first-rate public relations representative. He brags up the architecture of newer terminals and boasts of upcoming renovations. Dulles airport is currently involved in the largest public transportation construction project in the nation.