

# 'Love for aviation' turns into ministry

TAMPA, Fla. — The world's first passenger airline flight occurred on New Year's Day 1914, making the short jaunt from Tampa to St. Petersburg. Times and aviation have really changed.

**T**oday the Tampa International Airport is big and bustling — with people coming from everywhere and going to anywhere. About 8,000 people are employed by airport-related businesses — with a good bit of turnover.

But where do these persons — employees and travelers — find help in times of crisis? They look for volunteer chaplains in their burgundy shirts.

The airport's interfaith chapel opened in October 1998, and Shields Moore started making his rounds as chaplain. Now a total of 19 volunteer chaplains — from various faith traditions — are engaged with two or three on duty most days.

A former fire department and hospital chaplain, Moore also spent 16 years going to and from the airport as a limo driver. It was an appeal going back to a job with Eastern Airlines when he was in his 20s.

"I always had a little bit of love for aviation," said Moore.

Now 78, Chaplain Moore moves throughout the airport each day in hopes of brightening someone else's day. He and his staff of chaplains provide listening ears and words of comfort — and, when appropriate, a spoken witness.

"If they ask a religious question, we can give a religious answer," said Moore, a member of Azalea Baptist Church in St. Petersburg. "That's the open door."

In addition to one-on-one conversations, the volunteer chaplains distribute more than 1,000 greeting cards annually to airport employees. Shields' wife, Sue, a retired nurse, and other chaplains personalize and deliver the cards by hand.

"We were stopped in the hallway one day by a ground crew person," Sue recalled. "They had a baby and received a gift basket from the chaplains — but didn't get even a card from



(Above) (L-R) Ruthie Stilha, Shields Moore, Linda Sahlin and Sue Moore are among the 19 volunteer airport chaplains in Tampa. (Below) Chaplain Shields Moore visits with pilots just before a flight.

the company where they had worked for 16 years."

Anderson-McQueen Funeral Home donates sympathy cards to the chapel, and additional greeting cards come from other businesses and church groups. The Moores have been known to pick some up at garage sales too.

Because of security issues, the greeting cards "pass through places we can't go," Sue said.

The airport chaplains don't hole up in the small chapel where travelers and employees come for meditation and to write their thoughts and concerns in a shared prayer journal. They move about the airport engaging in conversations.

The front table at Burger King in the airport food court is the site of many staff meetings, counseling sessions and other conversations involving chaplains.

The airport chaplaincy program — with an all-volunteer staff — runs on a tight budget built from donations.

"We just spend what we have (on

supplies)," said Shields, expressing appreciation to Hertz and Avis for providing parking spaces to the chaplains.

John Dahl, general manager for United Airlines operations in Tampa, appreciates the contributions made by chaplains and said their work is well received throughout the airport.

"They are always around when a situation happens in an employee's life," said Dahl.

"There is someone there to talk to when you have a heartache or some challenge in your life."

Chaplains come from a variety of backgrounds, said Moore, including some airport employees who stay after their work shifts to provide ministry services. One, he said, holds a doctorate in counseling.

Those already familiar with the airport and its protocol require less training to be chaplains.

Moore finds support and shares information through involvement in the International Association of Civil Aviation Chaplains. He hopes the airport authority in Tampa will someday fund a full-time director of chaplaincy as some other airports have done.

But for now — despite limited funding, security prohibitions and a broad job description — Moore and his crew will keep doing what they are doing. Why?

"We make a lot of friends and we have the feeling of lightening burdens," said Moore, still drawn to the airport after all these years. **BT**