

Pastoring a church

On a recent flight from Gulfport to Atlanta, like everyone else, I wondered who might be my neighbor in Seat 7C. Would they just sit down and be quiet, not bothering me as I cycled myself down on my way to vacation? Or would they become an incessant talker, giving me a headache and dreading every minute of the fifty-three minute flight?

I settled into my window seat and waited. She finally arrived, pushed a large purse under her seat and sat down. She looked my way and said a simple "Hello." I responded with the same. Gradually, she began to break open the conversation with questions like: "Where are you headed?" "For how long?" "Where do you live?" "What do you do?" Generically, I answered her final question with "I pastor a church." My response seemed to end that particular line of questioning.

Arriving at Atlanta airport, I wondered how I might pass my three hour delay until my next flight. I decided to ramble around a while before settling into a seat in a deserted boarding area. As I came upon it, I noticed a display that said "Waste does not exist, only wasted resources." It was an advertisement for recycling and showed a dress that was made from recycled material. Before I sat down, I noticed a large wall about thirty yards in length. It bore the inscription, "Let each man pass his days in that endeavor." The wall supported a collection of thousands of business cards. The quote was arranged from a collection of the colorful business cards.

I just wanted to find a quiet place, away from the rushing crowd and banter of chatter from passing cell phone conversations to places and people unknown. I just wanted to chill out, enjoy some down time before the next leg of my journey. Maybe, I could become a people watcher in this great symphony of movement.

Then I noticed her. She was probably in her sixties. She moved into a corner where the wall of business cards ended, behind rows of unoccupied chairs. She covered her head with what seemed like a blue airline blanket and turned toward the corner. Her head bowed profoundly as she bent her body toward the corner. Then she disappeared behind the seats and prostrated herself on the floor in the corner. Finally, she stood up again and took off her head shawl. She bent down and picked up another blanket, this one a red one. She folded both neatly and gradually made her way to the empty check-in counter. She placed the blankets under the counter and passed by me a few yards away. She was wearing a black knitted cap. She stopped at one of those cleaning crew carts and began to push it toward some trash containers around the gate area in Concourse E. She emptied the garbage and headed off to another gate and then, she finally disappeared out of view.

Out of curiosity, I checked my watch, it was just after two o'clock in the afternoon. Obviously, the timing of her prayer time seemed planned methodically. I wondered if this was her usual daily routine when she was at work cleaning around Concourse E. A few people passed while I observed the woman but they seemed to be immune to what was happening or they didn't even seem to notice.

While I sat there, I became amused at the correlation of three things that seemed connected, even though, on the surface, they seemed to be unrelated. First of all, pasturing a church on the Mississippi Gulf Coast seemed to end a conversation with a woman in seat 7C as she headed through Atlanta airport on her way to a town on the border of North Carolina and Virginia. Secondly, a quote about wasted resources, not waste, caught my eye and reminded me that we must seize creative opportunities to regenerate rather than negate. And finally, an older woman with a black knitted cap, pushing a cleaning cart, caught my attention when she distracted me from her usual cleaning chores to take time to pastor in her own makeshift church, immune to the distracted and stressed travelers on their way to a sales meeting or, like some us, on vacation.

The tri-experiences reminded me that we make our own church or prayer experience, not so much from a designated place or space, but from whatever resources are presented to us to become church or pray-er in our own creative and often surprising environment.