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Search and rescue efforts are seen around a wreckage site in the Potomac River from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, Jan. 30, 2025, in Arlington, Va. (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein)

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The Rev. Nace Lanier was at home Wednesday evening (Jan. 29) watching a movie with his family when he received an emergency text from Washington's Ronald Reagan National Airport, where he is senior chaplain.

After years of preparing for a rare and forbidding moment, the Southern Baptist minister headed to Reagan National to join the team responding to the midair collision of a regional passenger jet and a U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopter, killing 67 people on the two aircraft, with no survivors.

"We have trained and prepared for an incident through the years," said Lanier on Jan. 30 in an email to RNS. "Working with the staff and communicating with the Emergency coordinators allowed us to quickly set up a location that was safe, quiet, and as comfortable as possible for the friends and family."

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The impromptu arrangements, said the chaplain, are aimed at giving family members dealing with unexpected personal tragedy a place to "gather physically and emotionally" and have some privacy as they confronted the suddenness of personal tragedy.

"You listen far more than say anything," Lanier said, who, as an airport chaplain, offers pastoral care in an array of mostly unforeseen circumstances. "Being present is the key ministry gift we give to those we minister."

He declined to discuss particulars about his conversations, but said he was working with a team of people of other religions who he could contact when he received a request for support from people who did not share his faith.

"I was a part of a team to holistically care for the hurting and confused," he said. "I was able to pray with those who requested prayer. It was an honor to serve with their permission by holding their hands and praying to our God who was present but at that time silent."

Training for the what-ifs of air travel is a constant part of an airport chaplain's professional life.

Sometimes they use a "tabletop exercise," where trainees talk through scenarios, said Fr. Michael Zaniolo, the senior chaplain at Chicago O'Hare International Airport and the president of the National Conference of Catholic Airport Chaplains. Other times, airports hold full drills, in which fire officials set an airplane-shaped simulator on fire and volunteers portray passengers who receive aid from first responders, including chaplains.

"Every time they have this, they ask us to bring our chaplaincy team in order that we can train some of our chaplains," said Zaniolo. It allows them to pinpoint how they might help if a disaster occurs. "What do you do at the rescue site? What do you do with the fire personnel or the morgue people? How does a chaplain fit into that?"



Fr. Michael Zaniolo, center, speaks with people near the chapel at Chicago O'Hare International Airport. (Courtesy photo)

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The Rev. Rodrick Burton, president of the St. Louis Airport Interfaith Chaplaincy, said other traumatic situations can help chaplains also prepare for aviation disasters. Called to help the family of a student killed in a 2022 school shooting, he counseled them on having a spokesperson to help handle media requests as well as unwelcome social media posts. More recently, he's assisted flood victims in his area when police chaplains sought additional aid.

"You can actually go and be present in other places that can also prepare you," he said.

In the same way, Burton said he can count on other local first-responder chaplains. "God forbid if this were to happen to St. Louis; there's not enough of the airport chaplains," said Burton, who hosted the International Association of Civil Aviation Chaplains when it met in his city in 2023. "So we would call on the other hospital chaplains and police chaplains in the area to man that center 24 hours."

All three chaplains spoke of the need to work in teams, helping fellow responders and fellow chaplains in the times of greatest need, usually in a center that has been set up to assist those who have become disaster victims, their families and friends.

Burton said other airport workers may also need a listening ear, whether of the airport chaplain or clergy of another faith to whom the chaplain can refer them. "There's the baggage crew that was waiting for the plane to land," he said. "Other employees at the airport will be affected." Some may reach out for help, he said, long after the ambulances and fire trucks have left and an airport has returned to a sense of normalcy.



The Rev. Rodrick Burton (Courtesy photo)

Lanier, who also directs the chapel at Dulles International Airport, said he is working with the part-time chaplain at Dulles to support family and friends of the crash victims.

"But we are just now turning our attention to the direct care of first responders and the many airport workers that have been tirelessly supporting this crisis," he said. "We have been working alongside them but will now be more available to them as they begin to process all that has occurred."

Airport chaplains are also prepared for passengers who die from natural causes while traveling, and other more ordinary situations.

"I have been called in to help the airport with prior emergency situations such as when people have passed away at the airport," said Lanier, who pastored two nondenominational congregations before becoming Reagan National's chaplain. "But it does not compare to a mass casualty event of this nature and size."

Zaniolo, who didn't hear of the midair collision until he woke up Jan. 30, said he was checking in Jan. 31 with staffers at his airport who may be affected by the crash over the Potomac River. "Like any family, when there's a tragic accident or sudden death, it's a traumatic thing, and people need to talk and process it, some more than others," said Zaniolo, who is in his 25th year at O'Hare.

"They might know some of the people that were on board, or they might know some of the people in the crew."

The chaplains know to train, too, to take care of themselves so they can better take care of others. "You have to learn about managing your own emotions in these crises," Burton said. "Because if you're not well, or you're overwhelmed, you can't help people that are overwhelmed."



The Rev. Nace Lanier (Courtesy photo)

Zaniolo said chaplains at Chicago's airports have both a "chaplaincy team" reflective vest and a "go-kit" that has holy oil, prayer books and rosary beads to share with Catholics should a crisis arise. But the small knapsack also includes space for a snack and some water for the chaplain.

"That's the No. 1 thing that they tell everybody who responds to something: Make sure you're hydrated, make sure that you're not running on empty, because then you become a victim," he said.

Lanier said he has already been putting advice of that sort into practice.

"I listened to the Emergency Coordinator at 6 a.m. to go home," he said on Jan. 30. "I was able to take a nap and shower, then arrive back at 11. I was more refreshed and able to attend to the needs of others. Plus encourage others to do the same. I have been in constant prayer throughout so I believe God has strengthened me during this time."