

The Anchor



SEAMEN'S CHURCH INSTITUTE

A window into ministry to seafarers who keep commerce flowing and secure

Fall 2011



Two intense days of ministry

The Rev. Bill Rex, a Lutheran pastor and one of our part-time chaplains, takes you behind the scenes as he ministers to a tanker ship crew that had been recently attacked by pirates and helped a seafarer get badly needed medical care.

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A good detective story

Mesfin Ghebrewoldi, our senior ship visitor and a former seafarer, got a tip from our night staff that someone had ripped off four seafarers. With help from colleagues and others he tracked down the culprit and returned \$1,200 to the seafarers.

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Our work continues long after the sun sets

By Mark Staples

For Al Blackman Jr., of Philadelphia, a host/transporter at night for the Seamen's Church Institute, part of the reward is seeing the difference doing little things can make in the life of a lonely seafarer.

"I remember this one guy I met on ship," he says. "The crew hadn't been paid yet. He asked me if I could get him a tube of toothpaste. That's all he really wanted. Getting it for him made such a difference. Stuff that you take for granted they are so grateful for."

Other memories have involved more substantive concerns skillfully handled by Blackman and eight others who work the night shift, two or three at a time, for Seamen's Church Institute. They continue our ministry after dark at 31 terminals on both the Pennsylvania and New Jersey sides of the Delaware River.

"I've helped a crewmember be in touch with a priest when there are problems at home. A crewmember had a baby with heart complications. It is just so rewarding when someone you are trying to bless is also blessing you." Mr. Blackman, who works in construction during the day, and his wife, Charmaine, are members of Hope Temple Baptist Church in Philadelphia. The couple has a son, Al III.

Steve Anderson, another night-duty host/transporter, remembers assisting another seafarer who was seriously ill.

The man, a Filipino, was afraid about being so sick in an unfamiliar place. "We helped to get him to the hospital

(Continued on next page)



From our night shift: (left to right)

Steve Anderson, Frank Carmon and Al Blackman

Photo by Mark Staples

Making seafarers happy with Bibles, magazines and conversation



These friendly chaps are on the 21-member crew of Sepang Express, a mammoth ship that transports 3,000 automobiles and trucks. They did not know they would be coming to the United States when they left home. So they did not get a U.S. visa so they could not go ashore.

Lonely from months at sea, they asked me to hang out and talk with them. I'd brought magazines collected by people at the church I attend, as well as Bibles and information about Philadelphia, all of which they clearly appreciated.

-- Henry J. Holcomb

“I guess I remember most trying to console a crewmember who had just learned his wife had died back home.”

(continued from front page)

and explained to hospital personnel about the insurance coverage the ship's company provided. I was able to console him and visited him the next day.” Mr. Anderson learned about a nighttime job opening at Seamen's Church Institute while working at his main job on the port security force at the Camden terminals.

In his security job he could “see the joy in seafarers' eyes when SCI staff and volunteers showed up to welcome them to the port,” Mr. Anderson said, adding: “I wanted to be a part of that. That's what I enjoy the most – seeing how their eyes light up when you come out to greet them.” Mr. Anderson and his wife, Esther, belong to Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in Deptford, NJ. He has an adult son, Steve, Jr., who lives in Florida.

Frank Carmon, a supervisor at night, has been at Seamen's Church Institute for about six years. He heard about a job opening from his brother-in-law, a security supervisor at one of the terminals in the Port of Philadelphia. He handles paperwork, attends to problems he hears about on ships and visits seafarers aboard ship. He figures he's been aboard thousands of ships over the years.

“I guess I remember most trying to console a crewmember who had just learned his wife had died back home,” he says. “He was so distraught. He just wanted to go home, but he couldn't leave until his relief arrived,” Mr. Carmon recalls.

He says he appreciates the opportunity at SCI just to care about people he meets. He's also impressed by the

rich variety of cultures he's seen aboard ships. “I've met Russians, Filipinos, Turkish crewmembers,” he says. “I've met men from Myanmar, China, Poland, Greece, Japan, Korea and Africa.” A military veteran, Mr. Carmon says his life has been changed by his work. “I think I've become more compassionate and understanding about people and their cultures.”

He urges residents of the region “to approach us and just take advantage of the chance to come and see what the life of a seafarer is like and hear their stories. They work so hard. They endure terrible weather. They are away from their families for 11 or 12 months at a time.

Many are detained aboard ship when they visit a port because of security limits, so we may be the only American hosts they come in contact with.” Mr. Carmon and his wife, Sandra, are parents of sons, Frank III, Khalil, and daughters Lasonya and Latwanza. He and Sandra are members of Bright Hope Baptist Church in Philadelphia.

The night staffers also talk about the wide variety of goods Americans receive, thanks to the devotion of seafarers – cherries, bananas, pineapples, steel, pipe, fuels, cocoa beans, gypsum, salt, plywood – to name just some of the cargo varieties.

“Just come out and listen to their stories,” Mr. Anderson says. “They will stick to your heart.”

Mark Staples, a writer at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, is a trained volunteer ship visitor for the Seamen's Church Institute.

Learn how to help our ministry to seafarers on our new web site: www.sciphiladelphia.org

Two days in the life of a Seamen's Church chaplain: Comforting a crew attacked by pirates and helping a seafarer get medical care

By the Rev. Bill Rex

A Seamen's Church Institute Chaplain

Recently I boarded a tanker at the Paulsboro terminal, the *Isola Blu*. It began as a routine visit but quickly turned into a series of intense situations. At the top of the gangway an officer approached me, speaking in broken English and very animated. The ship, he said, needed a blessing due to a pirate attack on their last voyage, while they were anchored off the coast of Nigeria.

We talked as we walked to the crew mess. A short time later I sat with a crew member named Fernando, who would become the central character in another challenging situation. He was sitting across the room smoking a cigarette and looking down. I asked about the pirate attack and we talked about the vulnerability of ships at anchor waiting to load oil at offshore sites. Fortunately pirates in this attack, unlike those in Somali, were only interested in money and petty thievery.

Then the conversation changed course. He told me about a large growth protruding from his neck. He said he did not have a visa to go ashore.

He said the captain had arranged for a doctor who had not seen the growth to send some pills. But they did not work. Then the ship's owners in Italy asked for a picture of the growth, which led to another type of pill being prescribed. Again, no results.

The captain had decided to wait till the next port to get treatment. He was worried.

The conversation went on and I learned that the ship's local agent had not been asked to arrange a routine medical exception from our government, which would have allowed him to be escorted to a doctor even though he lacked a visa. He was worried about his physical situation and, like many seafarers, he was afraid of getting in trouble with the captain for complaining.

Mesfin Ghebrowoldi, our senior ship visitor, and I decided to contact the agent, K3 Maritime Agency Inc., to find out what had been done to support this man in his distress. I encountered a very cordial agent who said his knowledge of the situation was limited and thanked me for our diligence.

He was told the captain was ashore so he talked with the next in command, who promised to have the captain respond to us upon his return. The agent made it clear that he had the power to intervene if the captain was resisting,

and I said I would stay on board until things could be worked out.

Hours later I learned that the captain had not gone ashore. He was in his cabin. I then called the agent who called the captain and the owner and worked out a schedule to get a doctor on board right away.

A doctor arrived the next morning and diagnosed the situation as being severe enough to warrant hospitalization and possibly extended treatment. Because he did not have a visa, a government-certified escort would have to be with him around-the-clock if he was treated here. So they decided to send him home to the Philippines for treatment.

I eventually talked with the captain and discovered his concern was genuine. I got the sense he felt constrained by the home office. He continued by thanking me for getting involved and moving the issue through the local agent.

The captain thanked us for helping prevent what might have become a tragedy at sea. The agent thanked us for alerting him and said he felt that the owners were happy with the outcome.

Fernando was noticeably showing signs of relief and for this I thanked God as we prayed together with the support of several other seamen.

This whole thing took two days. As the crew requested, we offered prayers for the ship and its safe passage, as well

as for Fernando's health.

That Italian officer I met when I first came aboard also had a perplexing issue. His U.S. visa, which had been accepted since 2005, was rejected this year in Newark and Philadelphia. Customs and Border Patrol officers said it was not the right type.

The original was issued at the U.S. Consulate in Rome noting that he was a seafarer with proper papers, and it had been properly renewed. He was confused -- why was his visa rejected five years before it expired?

I could not help on that issue right away but promised to keep working on it.

We're staying in touch via email and Facebook.

Pastor Bill Rex, of the St. Luke's Lutheran Church of Ferndale, works as a part-time chaplain at Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia and South Jersey under the auspices of Lutheran Seafarers International House in New York City.



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His good detective work helps ripped-off seafarers

By Henry J. Holcomb

Frank Carmon, a supervisor on our night shift, heard that an employee of a company servicing a big tanker ship had taken \$1,200 from four seafarers with a promise that he'd return with four iPhones.

The guy never came back. All the seafarers had was his first name.

Mr. Carmon passed this along to Mesfin Ghebrewoldi, our longtime senior ship visitor, who is a pretty good detective. He's also a former seafarer who has spent the last 32 years helping seafarers on behalf of the Seamen's Church Institute.

Mr. Ghebrewoldi found out what companies had serviced the ship.

One by one he called them, asking to speak to someone with the first name he had. He found the culprit and asked about the phones.

The man denied being involved.

Mr. Ghebrewoldi became convinced he had the right man. While he pressed the suspect, rather persistently, the Rev. Canon James D. Von Dreele, our executive director, worked with the manager of the company, expressing his strong displeasure about



Mesfin Ghebrewoldi

what had happened. Eventually the man acknowledged what he had done, but said he no longer had the money.

Turning the matter over to the police was not a good option. The seafarers would be far away on the high seas, not available for court proceedings.

Mr. Ghebrewoldi persisted until the man began sending \$200 installments until the full amount had been paid. When the ship returned to Philadelphia the seafarers got their money back.

Henry J. Holcomb, a retired staff writer at The Philadelphia Inquirer for 25 years, is a volunteer ship visitor and volunteer editor of the Anchor.