



Seamen's Church Institute
of Philadelphia & South Jersey

475 North 5th Street,
Philadelphia PA 19123
(215) 940-9900
www.sciphiladelphia.org



*Our senior ship
visitor*
Mesfin Ghebrewoldi

By Henry J. Holcomb
Volunteer ship visitor

Mesfin Ghebrewoldi, senior ship visitor at Seamen's Church Institute, can tell jokes and empathize in seven languages. He can find solutions to whatever problems a foreign seafarer presents, whether it is finding a Bible in a little-known language or helping resolve a thorny contract issue. He can keep track -- in his head while visiting ships -- of where his colleagues are and get them to ships at more than 30 terminals on both sides of the river, when they are needed.

But what truly amazes people who work with him day in and day out is the longevity of his passion for helping seafarers.

One of his veteran colleagues, Anthony Coppola, said he has held jobs where he kept his passion strong for ten years before it faded, "but Mesfin is as passionate about helping seafarers today as he was the day I met him."

Others who have known Mr. Ghebrewoldi even longer say the same thing. He has been on the job daily at Seamen's Church Institute since early 1979. I've known him for roughly half that time. I spent a day with him 15 or so years ago while writing a story for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* about the venerable seafarer ministry, and have seen his dedication grow stronger over the years.

How does he do it? He keeps looking forward, he says. “When we solve a problem it is deleted from my mind.” Each situation presents new challenges, he says, and that keeps him fresh. He is also driven by what he learned as a seafarer 40 years ago. When I retired from the paper and decided to volunteer at the Seamen's Church, Mr. Ghebrewoldi became my mentor during my six-month apprenticeship. I visited ships with him and others and learned how to do the at times complex work.

Mr. Ghebrewoldi grew up in Eritrea, a northeast African nation once colonized by Italy. After World War II the British took over and merged it with Ethiopia, setting the stage for a brutal 30-year civil war.

As a young man Mr. Ghebrewoldi read Robinson Crusoe, the 18th Century Daniel Defoe novel about the adventures of a young Englishmen who went to sea and ultimately became shipwrecked.

“I fell in love with that story,” Mr. Ghebrewoldi said. It drew him to the sea, where he worked on cargo ships for 11 years. In 1974 he was stranded in Philadelphia, and separated from his wife and children, by civil war. Going home would have meant certain death under the military regime that had taken over his country. Eventually his wife remarried and moved on. He eventually married and started a new family in Philadelphia, where he has become a pillar in the Eritrean immigrant community.

The seafaring life has changed since his years working on cargo ships. A sense of adventure once drew men like Mr. Ghebrewoldi to the sea. Before containers and modern cargo-handling equipment, a seafarer could count on spending a week or two in one foreign seaport after another. Seafaring was a chance to see and learn about the world.

Now stays in port are brief. Seafarers are drawn by a chance to make more money than they could at home, to lift their families out of often hard-scrabble situations. Ships are now automated so the crews are smaller. The loneliness of life at sea is more pronounced.

A U.S. citizen since 1995, Mr. Ghebrewoldi says “this is a beautiful country . . . most of its people would never intentionally harm someone.”

But, as he so skillfully explains to seafarers harmed by U.S. policies and bureaucracies, our systems do have flaws. When those defects hurt seafarers, he uses a blend of humor and compassion to calm the victims. “The American people have nothing against you. We just have a system that has cracks,” he told one seafarer who had been incorrectly jailed for a year, “and you fell into one of them.” That seafarer was so angry. He had been mistakenly jailed for six months. Immediately after the mistake was acknowledged and he was released another federal agency arrested him for staying past expiration of his visa -- never mind that he had been incarcerated and could not leave.

Mr. Ghebrewoldi and others, including yours truly, worked with that seafarer for several days. We called his wife to explain to her what had happened and we made sure his credentials for future work had been repaired. As he left for his home on a Central Pacific island, he was laughing and complaining about the bad food in jail. I promised him a good meal the next time he was in our port.

By the time we finished, thanks to Mr. Ghebrewoldi's persistence and skill, as with countless other seafarers, the damage to our nation's image had been repaired.

Since 9/11, U.S. policies have come down hard on seafarers. They cannot come ashore without an escort, who has submitted to a government criminal and terrorism background investigation -- an escort like Mr. Ghebrewoldi and others at Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia and South Jersey.

Mr. Ghebrewoldi does not see much need to tell seafarers about God. Seafarers, he says, are closer to God than most people. “They face life and death situations. When was the last time you and I were in a situation like that?,” he asks.

So the job of seafarer ministries is not to talk about God, but to work to be assure that seafarers

are treated in ways that please God, Mr. Ghebrowoldi said.

Thanks to the vigilance of seafarer ministries around the world, the life of seafarers is improving on most ships. But on some ships the owners still do as they wish. Usually Mr. Ghebrowoldi is able to forget problems he helps solve and move on. But one sticks in his mind. A captain withheld the crew's pay for six months, causing severe hardships for the crew's families back home in the Philippines.

One seafarer told how his wife had sold everything they owned to buy food. She finally had been forced to sell their son's bicycle. "That shook me up. I didn't sleep that night," Mr. Ghebrowoldi said. "It broke his son's heart. That bike was his pride."

Thanks to the work of Mr. Ghebrowoldi and his colleagues, backed by the river pilots and others in the port community, that crew was paid without further delay.

That's what keeps Mr. Ghebrowoldi going, day after day, up and down steep ship gangways when it is blistering hot and bone-chilling cold. "It's helping the seamen, it's helping the seamen. Period," he added. "I don't want foreign seamen to go through these difficulties."

He stays clear of politics and passes up opportunities to complain. He stays focused on the seafarers. "It's better," he said, "to be on the helping end."

A similar version of this article appeared in the Anchor, the newsletter of Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia and South Jersey, written by Henry J. Holcomb, volunteer ship visitor and board member.