



Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia & South Jersey

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The Seafarers we Serve

A seafarer, sometimes called a merchant mariner, is a crew member on a civilian cargo or passenger ship.

About 40 percent of the seafarers we serve come from the Philippines. There are also significant numbers from India, Russia, Greece, Ukraine, the U. S., China, Latvia, Poland and Croatia.

Most seafarers work on ships flying flags of convenience from a country other than where they live. Vessels are often owned by one company and operated under a charter agreement by another. Crew are employed by manning agents or ship staffing companies which have contracts with ship owners or charter operators. When between contracts, seafarers often have to spend weeks at a hiring hall to get their next job -- they can't sign up via telephone or the internet.

Prior to September 11, 2001, most seafarers were free to go ashore in port when time allowed. Today they need a current US visa, which many don't have, and seamen from some countries are not allowed in the US at all. Therefore many are unable to set foot on shore, and more and more of our work is done onboard ship.

Most ships have at least three nationalities on their crew, and a few have up to six or seven. This adds to the loneliness of life at sea by reducing the chance of being off duty at the same time as someone who can converse in a language you understand. This was driven home to one of our ship visitors not long ago when he visited a large tanker. He met with the ship's chief officer (the second in command) and went through the list of services we offer. For a variety of reasons, none of those could be accepted that day. "Is there anything," the ship visitor asked, "that I can do for you?" The chief officer smiled and said, "Yes! You can sit down and have a cup of coffee with me. I haven't had a good conversation in months." They spent time talking about family, work, life back home, and life on the ship.

Here are some of the basic categories of ships whose seafarers we serve:

Tanker ships transport crude oil, finished petroleum products, or other chemicals. Generally they go back and forth between refineries here and distant countries, often taking on cargo at off-shore platforms or in places where it is too dangerous to go ashore. They can be out of cell phone range for months at a time. While in our area they may spend time anchored in Delaware Bay, transferring a large amount of their

cargo to a smaller tanker or barge so they won't hit bottom coming up river. These ships require highly skilled and alert seafarers, and when in port there is much work to do related to maintenance, taking on fuel and supplies, and inspections. If we do get to take these seafarers ashore, it is usually for a very short time.

Fruit ships, carrying cargo such as bananas, melons, and pineapples, make regular runs between our port and Central and South America, Spain, and South Africa. Some load while at anchor from barges that bring the cargo down rivers, so the crew often cannot go ashore except when here. Because we see these crews on a regular basis, we often get to know them and talk about what they want to do on the next visit.

Cocoa bean ships feed the region's three major chocolate candy factories with cargo from equatorial regions. Our port is the world's largest receiver of cocoa beans.

Container ships carry cargo that is transported in truck-size containers which can be loaded and unloaded quickly, making shore leave quite rushed. One of these ships each week is on a regular run between here and Puerto Rico and is staffed by U.S. citizens. Others are on regular runs between here and distant points such as Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Australia, and New Zealand.

Car ships are giant floating parking garages, carrying 5,000 or more vehicles. Their decks can be adjusted in height to accommodate big trucks and road equipment. Such vessels are here at least once a week, usually unloading cars made in Korea. They stop at many ports in the United States, both discharging cars and picking up cars, trucks and road equipment bound for other countries. We often see several thousand Mercedes Benz and BMW cars picked up in a Southern U.S. port for delivery to China. These ships spend long periods near land so their crews can keep in closer touch with home via cell phone or internet.

Project cargo ships pick up and deliver railroad locomotives and cars, large equipment, or components of refineries and other complex production systems that are too big to travel overland. Project cargo also includes herds of livestock, usually being exported. These ships have no fixed route. When a crew signs on they have no idea what countries they will visit. (We can provide warm clothes when seafarers from tropical countries find themselves here in winter.)

Bulk cargo ships arrive here after a month or more at sea carrying coal, salt, grain, paper, fertilizer, ore, scrap, garbage, and steel products such as rods, slabs, plate, and specialty coils which require special handling. As on project cargo ships, these crews have no idea where they will go when their contract begins, and they often spend long periods at anchorage waiting for their next load.