



Seamen's Church Institute
of Philadelphia & South Jersey

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Frequently Asked Questions

I didn't know we had a port. How big is it?

Very big. The Port of Philadelphia and South Jersey generates thousands of jobs and pumps dollars into our region. We visit ships at more than 30 terminals on both sides of the Delaware River, from Marcus Hook near the Pennsylvania-Delaware state line to Fairless in Bucks County and Paulsboro in New Jersey. Philadelphia and South Jersey constitute the longest river port in the world that is accessible to oceangoing ships.

How has security impacted seafarer shore access?

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 seafarers from some countries are not allowed in the US at all. Therefore, many of them are unable to set foot onshore, and much of our work is done on the ship. Seafarers who are unable to go ashore can use SIM cards and WIFI Hot Spots that we provide for them while in port.

Where do seafarers want to go?

Shopping, mostly. Often they can buy items like electronics here that are more expensive at home, or not available at all. They shop for gifts to take to family members and for necessities for themselves. Many ask to see local landmarks and historic sites.

Do you work with other organizations?

Yes! We have strong working relationships with all the government and law enforcement agencies and businesses responsible for the security, service and hospitality related to ships in port.

What religion are you?

While we have an historic affiliation with the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania, our board, staff, and volunteers come from many traditions. We serve seafarers of all faiths, and those of no religious tradition.

How do seafarers find you?

We monitor Maritime Exchange reports on ships arriving and departing, and we reach out to them. Also, we're known among the world's seafarers. So they often call us.

What makes a ship visitor?

Our ship visitors are at the heart of SCI's mission, spending time with seafarers, transporting them for shopping or other errands, helping someone in trouble, or just plain listening. Ship visitors must be able to drive one of our multi-passenger vans. And because only credentialed people are allowed inside terminals, they must pass background checks, obtain credentials from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, take drug tests, and pass an exam on port safety rules.

Do seafarers ask for prayer?

Yes! Often about problems at home, some of which are in the headlines; others personal. If they are sailing into bad weather or a pirate-infested area they ask us to follow them with prayers, and we do. We're also getting more requests for Bibles and study material -- a home-study movement in the Philippines is now taking place on ships.

Why do seafarers go to sea?

Many talk of the lack of good jobs at home, and how they couldn't afford food, shelter, electricity and school for their children if they didn't go to sea.

How many nationalities are on a ship's crew?

Usually at least three, often five or six. Nearly half the seafarers we see are from the Philippines. Multiple languages onboard ship can add to the loneliness at sea when there is no one who speaks your language. And multiple cultures can bring conflicts which we often help resolve .

Do women go to sea?

Not often. But we're seeing more women than before, mostly from Greece and the Philippines. And we hear more are in their maritime academies.

Do seafarers bring their families?

From time to time we see spouses and children of ships' officers, usually from India.

Where does this ministry rank among other seafarer service organizations?

Because our 30-plus terminals are spread over a very long stretch of river, we're among the largest. Seafarers tell us we're among the best. We are proud to have been chosen among six finalists around the world for Seafarer Centre of the Year from ISWAN, the International Seafarers Welfare and Assistance Network, in 2018. These nominations are especially meaningful because they come from seafarers themselves.

Do you get to know seafarers?

Yes. Many of the ships are on regular runs -- fruit ships between here and Central and South America, tankers between here and Africa, and container ships between here and Puerto Rico. So good conversation can develop and continue for months.

How often do seafarers get ashore?

It depends on the ship. Some tanker crews make round-trips to Africa, where they load at offshore platforms without going ashore at all. The car-carrying ships come all the way from Korea, then stop briefly at U.S. ports with little time for shore leave. And even if there is time, many seafarers can't leave the ship because they lack credentials required by strict US security measures adopted since 9/11.

Are there people who take advantage of seafarers in port?

Yes. For example, some dockside entrepreneurs offer transportation to seafarers, but they charge excessive fees. Among working mariners, SCI is known for being a safe place. Our ship visitors and our vans display SCI's distinctive anchor logo, and seafarers know it's safe to get into our vans and it's safe to talk to us.

What are the most memorable ship visiting experiences?

Reuniting seafarers with relatives or friends they haven't seen in years ranks high. Also helping people like the innocent seafarer who was incorrectly incarcerated due to bureaucratic blunders.

How do technology and cellphones fit into your ministry?

Men and women of the cloth often see ringtones as interruptions, but for us they are central to our ministry. The average seafarer is under 40, and they have grown up with this technology. Most of the time they are dealing with loneliness, and we provide SIM cards and WIFI Hot Spots to help them stay in contact with families and home.

Is life getting better for seafarers?

Yes, largely because of the vigilance and persistent advocacy of organizations like Seamen's Church. We still occasionally encounter a captain denying health care or pocketing money that was intended for seafarer pay or food, and when that happens we work with US authorities and international seafarer advocacy groups to resolve the situation.

How do you work with port operators and shipping companies?

In most cases, very smoothly. Our trained and security-cleared ship visitors pick up crew members directly from the ship, help determine where they need to go, and assure a safe and timely return. And we are good listeners! Our mission of responding to seafarers' needs -- physical, spiritual, or emotional -- helps promote morale on board.

Why is this work important?

Ninety percent of the goods and produce we enjoy comes to our markets by ship. Merchant mariners do work that is important to all of us; and their jobs are lonely and often dangerous. We believe they deserve our support and compassion. By contributing to their welfare and morale we also reinforce our port community. Plus we help make homeland security rules work without abusing seafarers and creating allies for those who would harm our nation.