

World Maritime Day

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Attracting and Retaining Quality Seafarers In the Year of the Seafarer – 2010

Presenter:

The Rev. Canon James D. Von Dreele

CEO/Executive Director

Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia & South Jersey

“Calling for Seafarers to become Professional Mariners, Not Members of a Monastic Community”

In my work as the Executive Director and Port Chaplain at the Seamen's Church Institute in Philadelphia, PA and in the North American Maritime Ministry Association, I have attended many maritime business conferences. What has struck me over the years is that seafarers are often only an afterthought, if ever mentioned, during these heady deliberations. They are merely seen as assets to be deployed on a just-in-time basis.

However, I was very much impressed by Secretary General Metropoulos' message for this celebration of World Maritime Day: The Year of the Seafarer - 2010

The very nature of shipping makes it something of a "background" industry. For most people, most of the time, ships are simply "out of sight and out of mind". And the same, as a consequence, can be said of the seafarers that operate the world's fleet, despite the fact that the global economy depends utterly on their presence. Seafarers are, in effect, the lubricant without which the engine of trade would simply grind to a halt.

Seafaring is a difficult and demanding job, with its own set of unique pressures and risks. At the end of a long and stressful day, there is no return home to the family; no evening with friends at the tavern or the pub; no change of scenery; no chance to properly relax, unwind or de-stress. Just the relentless drone of the diesels and the never-ending movement of the vessel that is not only the seafarers' place of work but also their home, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for weeks and often for months on end; and, ever-present in the back of their mind, the possibility of natural and other, invidious hazards such as pirate attacks, unwarranted detention and abandonment in foreign ports.

We often refer to seafarers as a “recruitment and retention” issue. However, slowly this industry is beginning to realize the central importance of seafarers. The crunch is coming and the industry is awakening to the fact it must deal with the human element in its business. Maritime chaplains have a lot to share about seafarer needs and how to improve their living and working conditions.

What are Seafarers' Main Needs? Why Should We Care?

In 2007 the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) published a study, *Port Based Welfare Services for Seafarers*, conducted by the Seafarers International Research Centre (SIRC) of Cardiff University, Wales. SIRC looked at a previous survey done in 1996 and compared those results with their broad based survey of seafarer welfare services provided by maritime port ministries and welfare organizations world wide. From a chaplain's point of view, it was a sobering report outlining the profound needs of seafarers and the gaps in services by port based maritime ministries.

Perhaps the most eye opening graphic from the SIRC report is the following chart of the top six services port ministries provide seafarers and the importance they attach to these services:

Port Based Welfare Services

Services	1996 Study	2006 Study	Net Change
Transport to Shopping	70%	85%	15%
International Phone	79%	81%	2%
Transport to Centers	n/a	72%	n/a
Cheap Phone Cards	n/a	71%	n/a
Internet & Email	n/a	68%	n/a
Counseling	45%	57%	12%

Clearly from this survey, seafarers need access to shore leave and communication services. Technology has become a major factor with the advent of phone cards, Internet and email – all unheard of or unavailable in 1996. There will undoubtedly be even more advances in communication technology in the coming decade.

The final portion of the report analyzes what ship owners do to provide welfare services for their crews. It is not an encouraging report. Here are some of the findings:

- 50+% of the companies surveyed have no welfare budget for their ships.
- Many debit seafarers' salaries for welfare/entertainment services – all without permission.
- Very few ships have email services for their crews.
- Many owners and captains have very paternalistic attitudes towards seafarers. They "know what is best" for their crews.

And we wonder why we have recruitment and retention issues in this industry. Given the base line of seafaring working and living conditions on the majority of ships, why would anyone want to go to sea? Treating seafarers humanely is not only the right thing to do but is good for the bottom line. Here are some ways this can be accomplished:

Enhanced Communications Services – reduces seafarer's sense of isolation aboard ship.

Recently one of my chaplains visited a tanker and inquired if there was anything they needed.

The crew said no, not even phone cards. This piqued the chaplain's curiosity to ask why. Each crew member had 20 minutes of free satellite phone service per day, Internet and email in their cabins. Several months later I spoke with the CEO of this tanker company and commended him for these crew services. His response to me was, "We made a business decision to provide these services because we want to keep these seafarers as loyal employees. This service is much less expensive than retraining replacement crews."

Promoting Environmental Excellence – reduces criminal legal liability for the ship and crew, thus saving millions of \$. In a four year period of time in the mid part of this decade we had 12 crews detained by the Department of Justice for criminal environmental investigations. These detentions lasted between 8-12 months. The seafarers were housed in residential hotels, paid their wages and per Diems but were not allowed to work or go home. This was a frightening experience because the process was totally lacking in transparency and they were afraid that they were going to jail. The stress was enormous on them and their families. Some of their wives were threatened by the manning agents saying that their husbands would be blacklisted if they cooperated with the government investigations. The industry's take on all this was that "whistleblowers" were at the heart of this problem. I found this argument to be a curious projection of our own values (greed) onto the seafarer. On the contrary, they took great risks in reporting these infractions. I know this from personal experience as I received these confidential reports which I then relayed to the Coast Guard for investigation.

It is time for the industry to address the technological issues of Oily Water Separators and why they do not work. Instead on putting seafarers in legal jeopardy, correct the problem and provide sufficient training to operate these systems. Seafarers do not want to pollute the seas, but owners put them in the position to have to do this when they neglect this important issue.

Maritime Ministries – "an extension of an owner's HR department throughout the world."

What many ship owners and others in the maritime industry do not understand is the important contributions maritime ministries make to the bottom line of ship operations. An owner could not afford to have staff to address these following issues

- Crisis counseling in times of death or accidents – Because of the pastoral skills of chaplains and ship visitors, we are able care for seafarers in these crisis moments. The impact on crew morale and ship operations is substantial when someone dies (either seafarer or family member) or is injured. Just ask any captain who has been through these experiences just how helpless they feel in trying to deal with these situations.
- Advocates for seafarers regarding shore leave and security – Frankly, if it were not for chaplains advocating with the Coast Guard and Congress, we would still be operating at the inhumane levels of shore leave denial post 9/11. This is a largely not understood by the industry but acknowledged by the Coast Guard and others. During the early part of the decade, ship owners were afraid to even confront their terminal operator partners on this issue for fear of losing business. It was chaplains who made the challenge, port by port, terminal by terminal.

- Prime transportation service for shore leave – Universally throughout the world, maritime ministries provide the vast amount of shore leave transportation FREE OF CHARGE to seafarers. The shame of this is that people in our church congregations and the local maritime business community are subsidizing this service and few ship owners contribute to this essential service on the local port level. I have even had a shipping CEO, whose company makes 100 ship calls a year in my port, proudly refuse to honor a \$110 invoice to pay for part of this service. The daily cost of running his ships exceed \$50,000 a day per ship!
- Mediation within the workplace – Inevitably, there are workplace tensions aboard ship and they impact ship operations significantly. Who is going to listen to an aggrieved seafarer concerned about working conditions and how he is being treated by his superiors? Ratings are at a great disadvantage and have no advocate for them onboard. Seasoned chaplains and ship visitors are often able to bring reconciliation to these situations.
- Active players in the maritime security arena – Many chaplains have been actively involved in maritime security policies and operations since 2003. In my case, I have been a member of the local Area Maritime Security Committee and its Managing Board since 2003. In this role, I am able to advocate for the needs of seafarers in the context of expanded security regulations and broker agreement of security policies at local terminals.
- Most cost effective providers of welfare services to crews – Ship owners could not possibly afford these services for their seafarers that maritime ministries provide on their behalf. Sadly, most owners do not recognize or support this work on a consistent basis throughout the ports that they call upon.

If the worldwide Maritime Industry is serious about this being the Year of the Seafarer and truly caring for them, it makes good business sense to support local chaplains and their welfare services because we do much to lift up the seafarer and as a result impact the bottom line of shipping.