

PORTCALL

Seafarers International House

MESSAGE FROM OUR PASTOR & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: *Comfort and Strength*

*God gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the
weak.
Isaiah 40:29*

As we are about 9 months into the year with a changed political landscape, we take a moment to reflect on the highs and lows of Seafarers International House's mission..

Let us start with a couple of highs:

First, with our port chaplain Pastor Tammy Sharp, we have now expanded into the **Port of Houston** where we help serve the over 100,000 seafarers that arrive there annually (see article on page 3).

Second, our **Christmas-at-Sea in July** initiative had a great start as we received many donations and had some 20 volunteers from the Propeller Club (see photo) assemble over 300 Christmas-at-Sea satchels.

If you would like to participate in spreading the joy of Christmas, please follow this link (<https://www.sihnyc.org/christmas-at-sea>) or the QR code to more instructions.



The low is certainly reflected in our work with **legal immigrants**. An immigration "system" that was broken for decades is now inexorably changed. Instead of focusing on common sense



"It's beginning to look like Christmas?" Believe it! Pastor Marsh with volunteers of the Propeller Club, who assembled well over 300 Christmas-at-Seas satchels on a hot July day.

solutions like speeding up the review process of asylum cases or creating pathways for people already in the country who contribute by paying taxes and taking jobs few others accept, immigrants and people perceived as such – legal, undocumented, and even citizens, are arrested and detained arbitrarily with little or no due process.

Our clients are afraid to come out of the shadows. Fear is spreading – a fear that for some of us God can help overcome as our new board member Pastor Sara Lilja points out in her blog **"Comfort"** on page 6.

We continue to stand with asylum seekers and those granted asylum by providing a safe place for them to stay while they navigate the next steps towards becoming contributing members of our communities.

A major antidote to this issue is that we

are in the process of closing on a **new property** that will allow us to house more asylum seekers like Hansem (read his story on page 2) without requiring an ID as well as seafarers.

There will be more about this project in a few months, but for now let's say that, after searching for a more "right-sized" mission center and guest house for over 10 years now, God has indeed given us hope that we will expand our Call to **"give strength to the weary and increase the power of the weak"**.

Your prayers and support give us the **strength** to make that work possible, bringing **comfort** for a more just world for all. Peace,



Marsh Luther Drage

IN AND OUT OF THE SHADOWS – HANSEM'S STORY

By Rev. Marsh Luther Drege, Executive Director of Seafarers International House (SIH)

The calls keep coming in - taunting us with dreams unfulfilled.

One social worker after another from our immigrant partner agencies contacts us to see if their asylum-seeking client can stay with us. The conversation seems so full of promise: yes, your client could stay with us temporarily; yes, we have a social worker who can assist your client; yes, we have meal vouchers for your client.

Then, the conversation gets steered toward potential disappointment: Does your client have a government issued photo ID? If "yes", we make the reservation and then 9 times out of 10 the client does not show because they are fearful of arrest by ICE while they are staying in our guestrooms (their IDs having to be on file). If the answer is "no" because ICE has confiscated their IDs while they were in a detention center, we cannot house them because of rules that govern the rooms we lease. It is a Catch-22, an unfilled promise forcing immigrants in and out of the shadows. [Luckily, this will change in our own new property mentioned in my message on page 1, where we will not require an ID.]

The first six months of the second Donald J. Trump administration have arguably seen the most significant changes to U.S. immigration policy in the nation's history. Under this administration, immigration enforcement has run roughshod over rights that most Americans understand to be universal: due process, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, presumption of innocence, etc." Flaunting these basic rights (guaranteed to everyone in America regardless of immigration status), Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (ICE) agents have engaged in unnecessary secrecy and even subterfuge to seize immigrants off the street forcing many to avoid public places, houses of worship, and yes, even showing their ID.

The federal government is mostly using the excuse that apprehending and deporting immigrants is necessary because they are criminals. But, according to a CBS investigation (June 24), internal ICE figures "show nearly half — or 47% — of those currently detained [a whopping record of 59,000 people!] by ICE lack a criminal record and fewer than 30% have been convicted of crimes, a sign of the widening scope of President Trump's escalating crackdown on illegal immigration. On the campaign trail, Mr. Trump vowed to expel dangerous criminal migrants, though top officials in his administration have said no one in the U.S. illegally will be immune from deportation."

Last year, SIH got a referral from the Mami Chelo Foundation, one of our immigration partners, to house an asylum seeker, **Hansem**, who comes from Ecuador (the name and country has been changed to protect his identity). He stayed with us for a month and was a model guest in every way, even helping us make social media posts.

He then moved to Lexington, KY, to work towards his dream of being a line cook at a restaurant. For 8 months he was learning about the dining industry that he loved. Soon his co-workers were being interrogated by ICE officials and threatened with arrest and deportation without due process. Quickly he returned to New York City to stay with us again until he could find permanent

housing because he feels that, since New York is a sanctuary city, he might have more protections. Imagine his surprise when he found out that even NYC is not immune from the long reach of ICE: "Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents arrested at least 2,365 immigrants in the NYC region between late January and the end of June, a nearly 200 percent increase from the five months before Mr. Trump took office", according to an August 4, 2025, article in The New York Times.

Hansem is not a criminal. He has never broken the law, even though some would say that he broke the law by coming to the United States. But seeking asylum from violence and persecution, is not breaking the law; in fact, it is a right granted by the United States since the Refugee Act of 1980.

Hansem has checked in regularly with the federal immigration offices in Manhattan but now he is avoiding that and going even further "underground" because certain deportation is the only logical outcome for him. This dilemma leaves many people like Hansem vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and homelessness.

At SIH, we have housed only 13 asylum seekers this year (January – August), way below the 33 that we served last year - mostly because the fear associated with being an immigrant in this political climate has rendered many of them invisible and unwilling to put their IDs on the table.

We understand that and pray that we can continue to help as many as those who are willing to come out of the shadows and into the light.



HOUSTON, WE HAVE NO PROBLEM

Joining forces with the Houston International Seafarers Center by Henryk Behnke

Since June, Seafarers International House has employed Pastor Tammy Sharp of Christus Victor Lutheran Church in League City, TX, to be a part-time Port Chaplain at the Houston International Seafarers Center.

The Houston International Seafarers Center is led by SIH's friend and fellow North American Maritime Ministries Association (NAMMA) member Dana Blume, who wrote: "This is such great news, and I am so very excited to have Pastor Tammy join us and begin her journey of blessing Seafarers!"

Rev. Tracey Breashears Schultz, the newly bishop-elect of the Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast Synod, ELCA, has worked with SIH board president Pastor Susan Tjornehoj and Pastor Marsh Drege and wrote: "I'm so grateful for Tammy's openness and for Marsh's diligence and for the Spirit's presence in and through all of it!"

Similar to SIH, the Center recognizes that all human persons are a gift of God. The mission of the chaplains and Committee for Ministry to the Port of Houston is to conduct a ministry of presence, outreach, witness, worship, service, and advocacy to, with, and for seafarers and their families from around the world.

The Houston International Seafarers Center was chartered in the late 1960s and is the brainchild of a Belgian captain who immigrated to the US after having sailed extensively around the world. He had to agree that the nickname "worst port in the world" was rightly attributed to Houston's port. He envisioned a great seafarers center and sold this dream to several others involved in shipping. The idea took a few years to germinate until three clergy of different denominations joined forces with a secular group that included well-



Historic postcard of the Houston International Seafarers Center from a Facebook post June 2025.

known Houston names such as Howard Tellepsen and Jane Blaffer Owen. This was the beginning of a unique coalition that was to bring to existence a "one of a kind" service to seafarers to be known as "Committee on Ministry to International Seamen, Port of Houston."

Today, Port Chaplains in Houston are supported financially by their respective denominations. Volunteer ship visitors have received extensive training from the Port Chaplains, the NAMMA International Chaplains school and several other local professional organizations on making effective ship visits.

During daily visits along the approximately 50 miles of dock areas (25 miles on each side of the Ship Channel) with over 200 shipping terminals, chaplains and volunteers offer an invitation to visit the Center and receive spiritual or

practical guidance and assistance to visitors from around the world. Several chaplains speak other languages, and all are well trained in the cultural and religious diversity of the seafarers. Religious leaders of other faiths are also welcome to serve at the Seafarers Center, as there are many seafarers who are Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or other faiths.

Pastor Tammy is a welcome addition to the team in Houston that served over 101,000 seafarers and visited over 5,000 ships in 2024. She will extend Seafarers International House's mission to seafarers in this major port in the lone star state, currently number six of SIH's ports besides Albany, Baltimore, Duluth – Superior, New Haven, and New York & New Jersey.



PORT STORIES ABOUT OUR WORK WITH SEAFARERS IN NEW HAVEN, CT

By Ship Visitor Tim Marzik

I recently assisted the crew of URSA MAJOR, a scrap metal ship, who came to New Haven from their last port in Providence. When I asked what they needed and how I could help, they laughed and replied they definitely don't need groceries since they just stocked up in Providence. But they really needed an industrial ship part which was the only big project on their mind. I met with the chief officer and another crew member and provided Wi-Fi for the crew so we could look up the exact part online. Ruth Setaro, who officially retired from the port chaplaincy in 2023 but is still in touch with me, and I talked about how she sometimes spent hours driving around and never finding specific parts that aren't in stock in stores that could have easily been ordered. So, with the Wi-Fi provided by SIH we found the right part and were able to place an order for delivery before departure. I then coordinated with port security to make sure the delivery would be listed and not turned away. The part arrived on time much to the relief of the crew who happily sailed on to their next port.

I had a similar experience with a ship last fall where I drove them to an industrial contractor store for an electronic motor they needed, and it ended up being the wrong voltage. They appreciated my time, but we spent a couple extra hours googling contractor stores and driving them around only to find out the motor was not available anywhere around New Haven. It was something very easy to order online but impossible to find in a local store. With that crew we also placed the order using the Wi-Fi I provided and I was able to help them get their custom-made part ordered to arrive at their next port and we coordinated with the shipping agent to make sure someone could pick it up in time. We still had a great shopping trip in the Woman's Seamen's Friend Society of Connecticut funded van for things like shoes, but getting the part was the thing that mattered most to the crew, and I was glad to have been able to help.

I had an oil ship "Redamancy" scheduled to arrive for a very short turnaround and got a text from a seafarer aboard asking about new steel toe boots he needed but in size 14. He tried everywhere at their last port in Boston but no stores stock the size 14 and he hadn't been able to find them. I was able to call every store we could think of nearby and ended up going to Bass Pro Shops near me and getting the last double wide size pair of these waterproof steel toe boots for seafarer Vivek. Their time of berthing was also changed by the agent so if we had ordered them, they may have missed them by days. I was able to board the ship just before their departure and delivered the boots to a very happy seafarer whose smile was wider than his new boots. All the crew members were so excited saying no place on all their stops had footwear big enough for Vivek!

One serious interaction I had was with a crew member who simply wanted to hang out and talk with me. I always bring the supply bag to introduce myself and he told me they were missing some cards and didn't have a full deck so I brought him a few free packs of cards so they finally could play card games again.

We passed the ship's gym on the way to the mess hall and bonded over how fitness is such a necessary tool for mental health - just how simple something like cards is a



Just in time: Tim hunts down and delivers size 14 steel toed work boots from a local shop to seafarer Vivek, who could not find shoes his size elsewhere.

great tool for bonding. We were the only ones in the mess hall and after placing the cards and some free shirts and knitted hats from our supporters down for the crew (who were all working), he started getting more serious and sat down with me.

I had asked him how the day was going for him, and he looked at me and said honestly that it's been difficult recently. He had just gotten news that one of his former crew mates committed suicide. I let him talk and just listened. They had felt very overworked on their last contract, and he said everyone was really burnt out. He regretted not talking more to his friend near the end of that contract. He then apologized for getting so serious but the reason he wanted to share that was because he felt like the new ship and contract was treating everyone much better and he brought it up because things like having a nice new gym aboard and the kindness of being able to play cards again really meant a lot to him. We shared a big hug and then he laughed again apologizing for getting so serious and dark. I smiled and told him that's the whole point of these visits and I was thankful he shared such an honest moment of being human with me.

Another, more lighthearted story is from the first ship I visited in March 2024. That time I met a Polish captain who was very outgoing and friendly and much younger than most captains I typically encounter. We also bonded over fitness and working out and he insisted he didn't want a long van trip for his crew but wanted directions for the best walk so they could get some much-needed steps in. I helped him map out a good stroll around the best parts of New Haven and dropped them off in the van near Wooster Square. I drew out a long circle for them so they could enjoy downtown New Haven, make it through two big parks, and then route the return trip so they could get some New Haven pizza. Two of the crew members from the Philippines told me they really liked this captain because he encourages these exploration walks that clearly boosted morale for the ship. They really enjoyed their hard-earned pizza party after walking around the whole city!

Note: Our Port Ministry in New Haven is supported by donations from individuals, congregations, and the *Woman's Seamen's Friend Society of Connecticut*. Thank you to all.



The photo was taken by then Port Chaplain Ruth Setaro in 2021 and is a testimony to how important pizza can be to seafarers.



Selfie of Tim transporting only one seafarer – the only one granted a visa for shore leave on that vessel back in April 2025. These private rides are important opportunities for seafarers to talk frankly about their lives and work.

"COMFORT"

By Rev. Sara Lilja, Executive Director, Coalition of Religious Leaders; Pastor, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Berlin, NJ; and SIH Board Member

"Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God."
Isaiah 40:1

This is a word of hope and consolation offered to all God's people, particularly during hardship and exile. It signifies that God knows human suffering and offers comfort and forgiveness. God's comfort, however, is not for ourselves alone, but also for our neighbors. This text signals that God intends to use us to share comfort with all of God's children.

Bringing comfort is the hallmark of Seafarers International House (SIH). SIH is a harbor of hospitality that provides relief for seafarers and immigrants. The ministry of comfort with focuses on asylum seekers, seafarers, as well as other displaced people; this is God's holy work. I am involved with SIH because it is an organization built on a foundation of God's comfort and hospitality, providing me with the opportunity to live into God's word.

Too often, organizations are overly structured or chaotic in their service delivery. SIH, over its 150-year history, has managed to balance careful management of gifts with generous hospitality to those who are vulnerable. I am proud to be part of this organization because of its mission and its practice of ministry.

Beyond this operational clarity, welcoming immigrants and asylum seekers is crucial to me. Persons who have been held in detention awaiting a judicial review of their asylum case are often released late at night or without any notice.



Pastor Sara Lilja

SIH provides transportation, hospitality, and housing for God's children who are new to this country and are often alone. God's comfort is brought to asylum seekers through the ministry of SIH.

I invite you to join me in supporting this organization through your prayers, volunteering your time, providing financial support, and helping to share the incredible mission of this historic, faithful, and engaging community. To get to know more about the ministry with immigrants, go to the website at <https://www.sihnyc.org/stories-of-immigrants> or scan the QR code on the right.



CONSIDER PLANNING YOUR LEGACY

Legacy planning gives you the opportunity to **infuse your estate plan with personal purpose and values.**

Your legacy gift could ensure that the next generation of seafarers and immigrants can count on SIH's support.

Please consider adding SIH to your will. Alternatively, you might set up charitable gift annuity, a simple contract between you and the ELCA Foundation (or another foundation or trust). In exchange for making a gift to benefit Seafarers International House, you will receive regular (quarterly, semi-annual, or annual) fixed payments for your lifetime and, if you desire, for the lifetime of your spouse or another person. SIH receives the remainder of your gift.

You receive a **tax deduction** at the time the charitable gift annuity is established. A portion of each payment is tax-free in most cases. Our federal tax ID is 13-5562413.

You may also think about joining our **Lighthouse Keepers monthly giving program** to help those in need. Just click the "donate" button on our website (www.sihnyc.org) and choose your amount and frequency.

If you have remembered SIH, please **let us know so that we may acknowledge you** accordingly and add you to our **Homeport Society**. To do so or for any assistance, please contact Henryk, Director of Development. You can reach him at (212) 677-4800 ext. 7203 or henryk@sihnyc.org. 



MISSION & PEOPLE SERVED

Seafarers International House (SIH) is the Lutheran response to the urgent needs of vulnerable seafarers and immigrants. SIH offers pastoral/spiritual care, hospitality, social work assistance, and advocacy to a multi-national and multi-faith community in the ports of Albany, Baltimore, Duluth - Superior, Houston, New Haven, New York & New Jersey, and in NYC.

In 2024, SIH served 19,066 people. This includes boarding 1,232 vessels, visiting 13,556 seafarers and delivering 3,507 Christmas-at-Sea satchels assembled by volunteers. SIH also provided 3,733 lodging nights in Manhattan for seafarers and asylum seekers. SIH provides its services to all people regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, or family/parental status. Program services accounted for 75% of expenses with only 15% spent on management and 10% on fundraising and communications.

SAVE THE DATE: APRIL 23, 5 - 8:00 PM 2026 SETTING THE COURSE RECEPTION NEW YORK ATHLETIC CLUB



Thank you to all participants who made the 2025 Setting the Course Reception a huge success for the Port Mission that serves over 15,000 seafarers per year. Instrumental were our honorees who are now all members of our Leadership Council (from left to right):

Capt. Willie Barrere of American Maritime Officers; **Susan Winfree** of Shipping Association of New York & New Jersey; and **Robert F. Sappio** of SeaCube Container Leasing Limited.

Photo by Henryk Behnke, April 24, 2025.

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Seafarers International House now fulfills its mission by leasing out the guesthouse to a not-for-profit partner that aligns with our work. This helps us to focus on our original purpose: to care for the urgent needs of vulnerable seafarers and asylum seekers. Therefore, we are no longer taking reservations for accommodations from the public for either rooms or meeting space. We still receive your mail at our guesthouse address.

If you are a seafarer with a valid MMC in need of accommodation in Manhattan or other assistance, please email res@sihnyc.org or call us at (212) 677-4800. If you need to access mail or your locker, please make an appointment at least 24 hours in advance.

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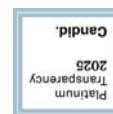
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SIH Port Chaplain Pastor Tammy Sharp (left), now a member of the team at the Houston International Seafarers Center, on one of her first ship visits with the Chief Officer of the Bow Flora (middle) and Chaplain David Clark (right). Port of Houston, selfie, June 2025.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



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