

# PORTCALL

## Seafarers International House

### MESSAGE FROM OUR PASTOR & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: LIVING IN TENTS

*"By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise."  
(Hebrews 11:8-9)*

Seafarers International House has been staying in a foreign land, living in metaphorical tents for a year now. Last year on March 20, we had to lay off our guesthouse staff and began to work remotely and deployed and became "tent pitchers". We pitched our tents in many locations: leaving the guesthouse for three months as we welcomed the Covid-relief work of Comunilife; moving back when Comunilife departed but not being able to open for guests; continuing to house seafarers and asylees in our "SIH relocated tents" at the AC and Hampton Inn hotels; and continuing to "pitch tents" with vulnerable seafarers by visiting quarantined mariners in the ports of Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Jersey and New Haven, CT. during the height of the pandemic.

Today, we face "tenting" again as Breaking Ground, a stabilization bed site for housing insecure individuals, leases our guesthouse for the immediate future.

Where will our "promised land" be? How long will we wander in the wilderness? How will we continue to be "tent pitchers" in this strange and foreign post-Covid land?

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote "People wish to be settled. Only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." This tension between stability and uprooting is at the core of what we have been experiencing at SIH this past year. Yet, we are balancing the ongoing assurance that God is with us wherever we pitch our tent and the unsettledness of not being sure where our next encampment will be.

Is it the ultimate irony or the ultimate in "God's timing" that as we welcome people experiencing homelessness to our guesthouse SIH is now experiencing homelessness in the process? But this we know for sure: God is faithful and tents with us wherever we may serve.

And serving is what we continue to do. Even in the worst part of the pandemic, we have been able to call on ships: in 2020 we visited 1,407 ships (down from 1,894 in 2019) and did "personal shopping" for thousands of seafarers isolated by the inability to have shore leave. That's only a decline of a little under 500 ships amidst uncertainty, turmoil, temporary lay-offs of port chaplains and general chaos. That's incredible considering all of the barriers

the pandemic threw our way. Last year (2020) we housed 12 asylees for a total of 442 nights (compared to 36 asylees in 2019) even though our borders were effectively closed to any incoming asylum seekers for most of the year. In the midst of pandemic and unsettledness we have still been able to "pitch tents" with 19,746 souls who have needed our harbor of hospitality more than ever.

And, like Abraham who kept the faith as an heir to the promise, we have been kept and encouraged by the outpouring of financial promise that has come our way through incredible increases in personal, congregational, synodical giving and foundation grants. Through it all we have had incredible insight and wisdom brought to us from all of our leaders who have been able to keep our ship afloat. Yes, "living in tents" is not easy or predictable. But it is not unprecedented when we are people of faith. We are confident that God will continue to be a "tent pitcher" in whatever foreign land we encounter.

Peace, 

*Marsh Luther Dreyer*



# THIS IS THE WORLD WE LIVE IN ...

By Seafarers International House Port Chaplain Arnd Braun-Storck

**T**his is the world we live in, and these are the hands we are given..."

In the past several months I have listened to the often played song 'Land of Confusion' by the English rock band Genesis. It seems that DJs find it fitting for a time when crowded cities like New York feel abandoned, places like Times Square and street life in general look deserted. There is no rush hour, stores and businesses have closed. For many, this coronavirus pandemic involves the most dramatic kind of fight - for life, for food, for economic survival. For others, it can feel like a petty little thing as they stay inside - a fight against boredom, too much eating and drinking, isolation, or simply dealing with the education of their children.

My ministry as a port chaplain with Seafarers International House (SIH) is affected by these changes as well. The crews of the many ships arriving in the ports of New York and New Jersey are not allowed to go ashore any more. And truth be told, very few would attempt to set foot outside a vessel anyway because of the fears and anxieties that are the prevalent feelings right now: of getting infected by a deadly virus. For the past year, seafarers have continued to endure a very difficult time on their vessels. Rationally, they understand that their ship offers the safest environment at the present time. But emotionally seafarers suffer from many ailments in body, mind and spirit. Just simple tasks like a doctor's visit in a port, can become a very stressful experience as they have to jump through so many hoops to make that happen.

Yet, I still make my rounds at the terminals and visit ships. These visits don't take place over a cup of tea or



Seafarers rely on visits from port chaplains like Arnd (middle) more than ever.

coffee in the mess room any longer, but have become 'gangway visits', with the recommended social distancing of six feet. I am not fond of this term because **I try to do the opposite: 'social closeness and nearness' while maintaining 'physical distance' and keeping all the necessary precautions.**

It is an important message for seafarers to know that in all the stresses they are going through, the seamen's mission has not forgotten them.

As I visit, I find two needs expressed most often. One is the wish to have someone to talk to. Pastoral and spiritual care is more appreciated, and most conversations circle around the feelings of anxiety and fear. During this crisis, many seafarers express their basic human need to be connected and to talk about how this need is threatened by ever increasing isolation, including their need for certainty, meaning and purpose, self-esteem, and sense of belonging with others. Many seafarers are worried for the well-being of their families back home.

Others worry about the status of the vessel in case someone becomes sick. Will their ship become 'untouchable', an outcast for the authorities and abandoned out at sea, left to their own devices? It is these stories I have been listening to and which seafarers need to communicate during this time of stressful existence. As chaplains, we provide a listening presence in a time of uncertainty, and yet also try to be a source of reliable information about what is going on in New York, the port community and ultimately back home, in order to alleviate and help with the many anxieties seafarers facing.

The second need expressed is the need for basic services such as SIM cards, souvenirs, toiletries and often enough something for the sweet tooth to get them through the day. Seafarers are very concerned about their own health and well-being, and requests for hand sanitizer, face masks, vitamins are common. So, for SIH and its chaplains the demands have increased manifold. Besides these regular on

# ASYLUM SEEKER PROGRAM 2021

By Henryk J. Behnke

board visits by the gangway for pastoral care, I have developed a high efficiency and literacy in maneuvering the ever increasing demands of crews to provide and contribute to the personal needs. Shopping in supermarkets and online has become an integral part of daily chores, and yet it never seems to be enough. Transportation to and from various shopping malls and the sightseeing trips to NYC remain on hold for now.

The times are unsettling. We worry about the future of our ministry, our environment, our health, but ultimately realize that we have no control over most of these things. So, as chaplains, we do what we are called to do: we support seafarers in spiritual distress and help them to identify and draw upon their sources of spiritual strength, hoping that we can provide some relief from stress that they are experiencing on a daily basis.

**Our goal is to accompany them as scripture says:**

*Two are better than one,*

*because they have a good return for their labor:*

*If either of them falls down,*

*one can help the other up.*

*But pity anyone who falls*

*and has no one to help them up.*

*Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.*

*But how can one keep warm alone?*

*Though one may be overpowered,*

*two can defend themselves.*

*A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12



As we have highlighted at our *Right of Asylum Online Advocacy Event* last October, under the past administration almost all immigration to the United States came to a standstill. With the vaccine, we expect to be able to once again visit detained asylum seekers with our volunteers in Detention Centers and plan to build on the success of the *Asylum Seeker Program* in 2019, when we assisted 36 asylees with free lodging, food and Metro cards, and social work assistance.

Fleeing persecution and violence, our guests came from the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Honduras, Mexico, Nepal, Nigeria, Philippines, Russia, Uganda and Venezuela. They identified themselves as 26 male and ten as female and include LGBTQIA+ members.

Pastor Marsh and a social work intern help asylees navigate the red tape to get work permits, driver licenses, as

well as bank accounts. Within about three months, they find their own place to stay and permanent employment and become contributing members of their communities. Often they return to Seafarers International House to mentor other asylees, who share their fate.

In normal years, much of our *Asylum Seeker Program*, which costs over \$210,000 a year, is subsidized by guesthouse revenue. This income will not be available in 2021. The **Mother Cabrini Health Foundation** recognized this and awarded Seafarers International House a \$100,000 grant to assist 30 asylees. Further funding comes from an **ELCA Hunger Grant** and in the past from **Advent Mission Fund**, **Metropolitan New York Synod ELCA** and from the **St. Peter's Fund**, Huntington, NY. Generous individual donors also contribute towards the program. You can join them by donating online at [www.sihnyc.org](http://www.sihnyc.org) or by mailing a check. 



Asylees and mentors in our lobby on a cold winter day in 2017.

# SAYING THANKS AND STAYING CONNECTED

By Susan Huppert, North American Maritime Ministries Association (reprinted and updated with permission)

Most Christmas gifts that international seafarers are receiving are given through congregations across the globe. Fortunately, at a time when charitable resources have dipped due to COVID-19, the Seafarers International House in New York is still greeting seafarers with Christmas cheer in the ports they serve.

Thanks to a grant received through the International Christian Maritime Association from the ITF Seafarers' Trust, Christmas satchels gathered and assembled by volunteers are being delivered to seafarers in the ports of New Haven, CT; Baltimore, MD; Newark, NJ; and Philadelphia, PA where dedicated chaplains from the Seafarers International House work to meet seafarers needs.

The Reverend Marsh Drege, Executive Director of the Seafarers International House appreciates the practical collaboration of international and local concern seafarers can witness.

"We work together because the seafarer is our ultimate concern. We add flyers to each gift indicating this so the seafarers will know there is strong partnership between the ITF and port ministries" he said.

The Christmas satchels include hooded sweatshirts, t-shirts, socks, a hand-knit scarf, large candy bars and a jar of peanuts. These gifts complement the types of gifts given by other port missions across the country.

The funds provided from the ITF Seafarers' Trust added an additional 40 satchels and helped complete the 2,080 Christmas gifts given this year.

"Last year we gave out about 2,600 satchels," said Drege. "Although our numbers were down this year, we were taken by delightful surprise that a lot of congregations wanted to continue the project. The additional grant funds helped us expand what we were able to do. So we are really grateful."

The funds also indirectly expand ongoing support for those who work at sea as various churches and civic groups get involved in filling the bags. Many of the churches that participate are land-locked, unaware of seafarers and their plight as workers. Connections that develop with the Seafarers International House through this Christmas project educates and broadens support and care of seafarers, many of whom have been on-board beyond their contracts for more than a year.

"A by-product of Christmas at Sea is the educational piece," said Drege. Before volunteers from Minnesota or North Dakota became involved, they were unintentionally ignorant of those who live and work at sea. They were unaware of the challenging life seafarers endure as they provide goods around the globe which benefit people like themselves. Giving gifts is a great introduction.

"The partnership has an advocacy piece too," said the director. "I remind people that seafarers are away from their families, confined to ships and that their gifts let seafarers know they are not alone. I like to personally thank those who help for the work they've done. It feels very much like Christmas. There are still so many people who don't know what seafarers do," said Drege.



Crew members of Cargo Ship MV Rubina with Christmas-at-Sea satchels in New Haven, CT. Photo by Port Chaplain Ruth Setaro, December 2020.

The Christmas volunteers extend from coast to coast and include remote places like the mid-country in Minot, ND where a group of devoted knitters religiously click their needles to send about 75 hand-knit scarves to the Seafarers International House each year. Their devotion to those they don't know is impressive.

"There is something really holy about it," said Drege, who grew up as a child in the same Midwest congregation.

Meanwhile, due to the pandemic, a group of nine confirmation students in Stillwater, MN share religious studies together via Zoom meetings. Their corporate motivation allowed them to individually bring life to their faith by assembling nine satchels; each a lone gift for a seafarer they don't know and may never meet.

The Christmas giving projects are a reflection of something much greater that happens globally. Through online opportunities to "Chat to a chaplain" seafarers may temporarily break the cycle of limited human interaction and find personal support.

Being remembered at Christmas is a highlight of a broader truth among seafarers. People care about you. 🚢

**Acknowledgements:**

In addition to supporting the Christmas-at-Sea Holiday Initiative, the **ITF Seafarers' Trust** provided Seafarers International House with funding to help subsidize temporary lodging for seafarers in Manhattan, a program that is also supported by **The TK Foundation**. The Trust further funded vans that Seafarers International House' port chaplains in regular times use to transport seafarers from their vessels to the mall or medical facilities.



Thank you and godbless 🙏🙏❤️❤️👉

*A seafarer thanks supporters for his Christmas-at-Sea satchel on Seafarers International House's Facebook page.*

Christmas-at-Sea is sponsored by **International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots (MM&P)**, **Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (MEBA)** and **Seafarers International Union (SIU)** and is supported by countless individuals and congregations as well as the **North American Maritime Ministry**

**Association (NAMMA)**. In 2021, **New Jersey Synod ELCA**, **Delaware-Maryland Synod ELCA**, and **Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod ELCA** joined **German Society of the City of New York**, **New York Community Trust**, and **The Woman's Seaman's Friend Society of Connecticut** in supporting parts of Seafarer International House's port chaplain salaries. 🚢

**A THANK YOU EMAIL FROM A SHIP TO OUR SUPPORTERS**

-----Original Message-----

From: Northern Jade

Sent: Saturday, December 26, 2020 9:55 AM

To: Seafarers International House

Subject: Northern Jade - Merry Christmas

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please be informed that we have received with thanks your nice prepared bags from Santa Claus on 24th evening.

On behalf of our crew I would like to say - THANK YOU! Dankeschön!

Bolschoje spazibo! Tschezu tem bade!

Unfortunately I'm not able to express the same in Chinese or Ethiopian language :-)

One bonus we have had on board: Vessel was passing the date line from west to east and was gaining 1 day. It was the 24th! So we were able to enjoy - beside of regular duties - the Christmas time a little bit longer than others.

With kind regards, Jörg Krüger, C/E

# VISITING DETAINEES IN DETENTION CENTERS

By Seafarers International House Board Member Leslie Neve

I have been visiting detainees in New Jersey detention centers since Bill Clinton was president, initially through First Friends of New Jersey and New York and now with Seafarers International House (SIH).

First, I visited several men who were being held at the Hudson County jail and who had been in the United States for several years. Most had come into the country legally, but then never applied for a "green" card, stopped keeping their documentation up to date, or had their green card taken away. So, they became undocumented and awaited hearings in immigration court to see if they could stay. I visited most of them over a period of several months in the visiting room, where the detainee was on one side of a plexiglass barrier and I sat on the other. We talked over a telephone. I always felt like I was in a James Cagney movie.



Leslie (third from left) with other volunteer detention visitors at one of the last visits before the pandemic made them impossible.

I remember the first time I visited. I went with First Friends, and after the visit I said I felt so bad because I had done something or gone somewhere that weekend, while the person I had just visited had been stuck in jail. I was hesitant to talk about what I had done. I remember Sister, she was a nun, said, "no they want to hear about what you are doing." So at my next visit we talked about my explorations of the Hudson Valley around West Point – that was where the detainee had lived before he got picked up driving a vehicle with no registration. He loved hearing about my adventures. We laughed a lot together – until he got deported ...

Then I visited a young man from West Africa, who had a long and complicated story – and a wife and a 5-year old daughter. I became a marriage counselor for him, as his wife was acting out because of his long absence. He would teach me about customs in Ghana. And I would share what I had found out on the internet regarding his case. He was to be deported, but Ghana would not let him come back. The county jail opened the doors one night during Clinton's government shut down and let him walk out. I never found out what happened to him.

There were others, the last was a man from Haiti, who I had to stop visiting when I had foot surgery and with cast and crutches could not make it to the jail. *He* called First Friends to ask *how I* was doing, *he* was concerned about *me*, when he was about to be deported.

Then I started visiting with Seafarers International House at the Elizabeth Detention Center (EDC). The folks being held there are mostly new arrivals to the States, who are applying for asylum. They had fled their home countries for political or religious reasons, because they were running away from gangs, because they were gay, or because of war. They were afraid for their lives if they got sent back. I find these gentlemen much harder to visit because the only thing they know about the States are the highways between JFK airport where they arrived and EDC. There is no commonality. They don't know about leaves turning color in the fall, or snow, or the ones from Africa, what humidity in summer feels like. And they are never allowed outside for fresh air, enduring climate controls that are often too cold. It is hard. But when I come back that second time to see someone, the brightness of that smile, when they see us, makes it all worthwhile.

Note: Trips to EDC will resume as soon as they are permitted in 2021. Please check the web site for updates. 

# MISSION & PEOPLE SERVED

Seafarers International House (SIH) is the Lutheran response to the urgent needs of vulnerable seafarers and immigrants. SIH offers hospitality, social assistance, and advocacy to a multi-national and multi-faith community in maritime ports on the Eastern Seaboard and in an 84-room Guesthouse in New York City. This mission serves a total of almost 20,000 people including over 14,000 seafarers visited and over 2,000 lodging nights provided for seafarers, asylees, and domestic violence and human trafficking survivors. 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.

We are making the most of your contributions: 86% of our revenue is spent on programs, only 14% on administration and fundraising.

## PLAN RETIREMENT TO HELP OTHERS

You can easily help seafarers and immigrants in urgent need by naming Seafarers International House as a beneficiary of your 401(k), IRA or other qualified retirement plan. This giving option is quick and easy. All you have to do is sign a paper or online form from your plan administrator and designate Seafarers International House as a full, partial or contingent beneficiary. Your gift will make a difference in the lives of mariners and asylum seekers and may have beneficial tax implications for your heirs.

Please contact Henryk Behnke, Director of Development & Communications, to discuss how you can use your retirement plan for the good of others. You can reach him at (212) 677-4800 ext. 7203 or [henryk@sihnyc.org](mailto:henryk@sihnyc.org). If or when you have included us in your estate plans, please let us know. We'd love to welcome you into the Homeport Society. 🚢



Why don't you join Polly and Harry Forse in the Homeport Society?

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In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, *Seafarers International House* is temporarily closed to the public. We do receive your mail. Please check [www.sihnyc.org](http://www.sihnyc.org) for updates or email your inquiry to [res@sihnyc.org](mailto:res@sihnyc.org) or call us at (212) 677-4800.

If you are a seafarer with a valid MMC in need of accommodation in Manhattan or other assistance, please email [res@sihnyc.org](mailto: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.



Spring 2021  
Newsletter

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Seafarers International House



## IN THIS ISSUE

MESSAGE FROM OUR PASTOR AND  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:  
LIVING IN TENTS

THIS IS THE WORLD WE LIVE IN ...

ASYLUM SEEKER PROGRAM 2021

SAYING THANKS AND STAYING  
CONNECTED

VISITING DETAINEES IN  
DETENTION CENTERS

PLAN RETIREMENT TO HELP  
OTHERS

*About 400,000 seafarers remain trapped on cargo ships because of travel restrictions, some for over 18 months. Without shore leave, our Port Chaplains provide a lifeline to them bringing essentials including medication. Photo by Port Chaplain Arnd Braun-Storck.*

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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