

# PORTCALL

## Seafarers International House

### MESSAGE FROM OUR PASTOR & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: Strategic Planning

*"The Human Mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established."*

Proverbs 19:21

**M**ilestones are a good time to reflect - and to look ahead. Our 150th anniversary of lighting the way for both seafarers and immigrants is no exception. As we embark on strategic planning, we are grateful for God's guidance throughout 15 decades. This divine plan led us to the 2 million people we have served and continue to serve and connected us with those that make this work with mariners and migrants possible through their support: People like YOU!

Currently, our board and committees are setting strategic service goals for the next five years. Where should our next permanent home be? How many rooms do we need to accommodate seafarers and how many to provide a first home to asylees? Can we provide temporary housing for families in addition to solo asylum seekers? What kind of staffing will be needed?

To answer those questions, we are convening with our allies in the maritime industry (ship owners, unions, shipping agents), fellow seafarers' welfare organizations, and our immigration partners, who gathered in May for our Immigrant Roundtable (see page 5).

We are learning first-hand how increasing ship sizes and climate change



*Left: In April 2023, (from left to right) Pr. Susan Tjornehoj, Pr. Arnd Braun-Storck and Pr. Marsh Drege of SIH meet with Pr. Matthias Ristau of the Deutsche Seemannsmission in Hamburg to strategize partnerships and tour seafarers' guesthouses.*

*Right: Pr. Marsh sharing insights at the NAMMA conference, August 2023. Photo by Rev. Jonathan Westerlund.*



can result in accidents and affect seafarers' welfare (see page 2-3).

In spring, we toured seafarers' centers in Hamburg and Bremerhaven, Germany; Amsterdam, The Netherlands; and Antwerp, Belgium, gaining valuable insights into the use of volunteers, technology, and local collaborations. All four sites are associated with the Deutsche Seemannsmission (German Seamen's Mission), one of our partners from whom we learned so much about operating effective seafarer guesthouses for the future.

Since this past winter, we are attending to the needs of "brown water" mariners, i.e., seafarers working on bulk carriers and containerships on our rivers and lakes, through a new partnership with the Albany Maritime Ministry.

This summer, port chaplains in Albany, Pastors Kate and Lowell, along with

Pastor Jonathan, who joined Pastor Arnd in NY/NJ this spring, Pastor Bob in Baltimore and intern J., who is serving in New Haven this summer, all attended the North American Maritime Ministries Association (NAMMA) conference aptly titled "Ready for the Future of Seafarers' Welfare". We exchanged ideas with other seafarers' welfare organizations and I had the privilege to share my experience.

As we plan for the years ahead, we rejoice knowing that you are a part of the future of SIH and I would be remiss not to thank all of YOU - our friends, supporters, board and committee members, and allies, for your input, support, and prayers.

Peace, 

*Marsh Luther Drege*

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH ALL THE SHIPS?

Henryk Behnke with excerpts (in italic) of the article by David A. Graham published in The Atlantic February 2022

Last year, author David A. Graham posed the question: *Do recent boat disasters actually point to a global shipping industry in distress?*

This year's accidents bring further relevance to that question. Here are a few recent examples: The **Costa Grande d'Avorio**, a vessel that carried 1,200 cars (none were electric) and 157 containers, caught fire in Port Newark on July 5, 2023, resulting in the death of two Newark firefighters, Augusto Acabou and Wayne Brooks Jr. The crew was lucky that the fire did not occur at sea and they were rescued. Later that week, our port chaplains, Arnd and Jonathan, visited the traumatized crew offering prayers and donuts - the original comfort food (see photo next page).

Just three weeks later, on July 26, a fire broke out on the **Fremantle Highway** loaded with 3,783 vehicles. Some crew members were forced to jump 98 feet (30 meters) into the water to avoid flames. One Indian seafarer perished. Luckily, for the 22 seafarers, this accident happened close to the Dutch coast where boats and helicopters rescued them, taking 16 injured crew members to local hospitals. Over the following days complicated rescue efforts prevented the vessel from sinking and disposing of thousands of gallons of oil in addition to the cars. That would have resulted in an environmental catastrophe just miles north of the Wadden Islands, which are part of the largest tidal flat systems in the world and are a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This area is recovering from an accident on the container ship **MSC Zoe** four years ago when 342 containers fell overboard with 3,000 tons of cargo littering nearby coastlines.

*Costa Grande d'Avorio press conference with Capt. Zeita Merchant of US Coast Guard (center) and Beth Rooney, Port Authority of NY/NJ, a 2022 SIH Special Recognition for Service to Seafarers awardee, looking on (left).*

An environmental disaster could not be avoided last year, when on February 16, 2022, the 656-foot (200 meters) car carrier **Felicity Ace** caught fire in the Atlantic Ocean, off the Azores, carrying about 4,000 automobiles. Seafarers International House posted the next day on social media that, thank God, the crew of 22 was rescued unharmed. On March 1, the ship sank 1.9 miles (3,050 meters) to the bottom of the ocean leaving environmental groups concerned about the pollution it will cause in the unique ecosystem of the Azores.

Many readers may recall when the **Ever Given** ran aground in the Suez Canal, blocking the channel in March 2021, disrupting supply chains world-wide on this important route, and causing the public to take note of the issue.

According to insurer Allianz Global there were 209 ship fires reported in 2022, the highest number in a decade and 17% more than in 2021. Thirteen of those occurred on car carriers.

Considering the frequency of acci-

*Emergency services tackle the blaze on the Fremantle Highway.*

*Photo: Netherlands Coastguard.*

dents, David asked in his article last year: "... is the global shipping industry in some sort of collapse?"

David's short answer is "No." *"It's just that people have noticed," John Konrad, the CEO of the shipping site gCaptain, told David. Over the past few years, about 50 major ships have been lost annually. Most of the time, the public has no reason to pay attention to these sinkings and collisions. But supply-chain crunches caused by the pandemic have made the shipping system more visible than it has been for decades, spotlighting cases like the Felicity Ace ... Meanwhile, more volatile weather caused by climate change and ever-larger container ships mean the risk of losses may be rising.*

Comparing figures provided by insurer Allianz, David found out that as recently as 2000, more than 200 big ships were lost annually. Yet in past years that number dropped to about 100 vessels per year, with "only" 48 lost in 2020 and 49 in 2021. According to Statistica, 38 ships were lost in 2022, most of them containerships. *Allianz attributes this to "the positive effect of an increased focus on safety measures over time, such as regulation, improved ship design and technology, and risk management advances."*

*Even so, argues David, that's a startling rate of one major ship lost almost every week. Most of them don't make the news. Though classified as "major," most of these ships are far smaller than the Ever Given or the Felicity Ace. Their crews are largely comprised of seafarers from countries like the Philippines or India, who are generally unknown to Americans, the ships sink far away (the biggest portion of losses is around the South China Sea), and their cargo isn't something that Americans consumers miss. But when ships laden with things Americans care about, such as cars, they tune in.*

*Rarely do we see images of the mariners affected by these disasters. They often remain "unseen" and are hardly mentioned. A seafarer of the Fremantle Highway is rushed to care.*

*Two problems do seem to be growing: shipboard fires and containers going overboard. First, the size of vessels continues to grow, though the crews in charge of wrangling them stay the same size. The Ever Given was one of the largest ships in the world when it launched, at 20,000 20-foot equivalent units (TEUs), a benchmark for container ships. One factor in its grounding was that the huge wall of boxes on board effectively acted as a sail, allowing the wind to drive the ship into the canal's bank. But ships as large as 24,000 TEUs will soon join the fleet. Vessel size has a direct correlation to the potential size of loss.*

*Second, - David argues - ships are also at greater risk of losing containers, or even sinking, when they hit unexpected storms. Climate change means that rather than being confined to specific seasons, storms can hit at any time. "The weather is getting more unpredictable, and these ships are getting bigger, so they're stacking higher," Konrad said. "When the ships get hit in a wave, you*

*get a bigger lever that's pulling the containers over." (In a bitter environmental irony, the Felicity Ace fire has kept burning because of lithium-ion batteries on electric cars. A year later, authorities would blame the battery of one of the 498 electric cars for the fire on the Fremantle Highway.) In other words, concludes David, the recent rash of high-profile shipping snafus may be only a factor of greater attention — but a warming planet means a mounting number of disasters might be just over the horizon.*

Seafarers International House's staff will continue to monitor how increased vessel sizes and climate change impacts mariners so that we can advocate on their behalf, especially, if their jobs become even more dangerous.

First and foremost, our port chaplains will be at their side when seafarers need someone to confide in and pray with as they did for the crew of the Costa Grande d'Avorio. 🚢

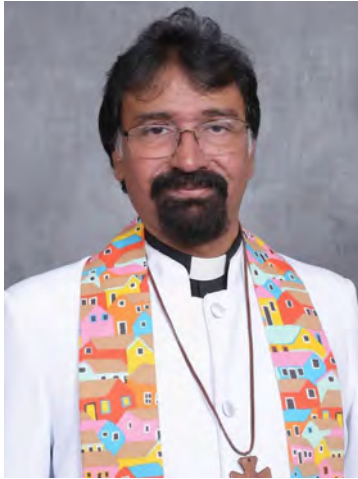


Arnd Braun-Storck (left) visits with crew members of the Costa Grande d'Avorio bringing donuts. July 2023.

# U.S.A. MEANS YOU START AGAIN

By Rev. Sohail Akhtar, SIH Board Member and Pastor: First English Luth. Church, Lockport, NY, & St. Peter Ev. Luth. Church, Medina, NY

It gives me immense pleasure to briefly share some of my experiences in life's journey back in my native country and my new home, the U.S.A.



I served the National Council of Churches in Pakistan for almost two decades in different capacities, including Youth Secretary, Program Coordinator and later Deputy General Secretary. Due to some unavoidable reasons and my work-related issues, I left Pakistan in 2011 and arrived in the US. I was granted

asylum in 2013.

It is an honor that Emiko Furuya-Cortes, a Director on the Board of Seafarers International House (SIH) was my attorney. Later, she introduced me to SIH's ministry for immigrants and seafarers. At Emiko's invitation, I decided to serve on the board of SIH myself. As a SIH board member, I like to extend help and guidance from my end to the organization for assisting immigrants and asylees who encounter similar issues I once faced. I lived a life as an asylee and know the struggles, hardship, never-ending waiting periods of the immigration process, therefore, I believe I can contribute my share of experience to the ministry of Seafarers International House.

Today, I am a proud citizen of the USA, living in Buffalo, NY. God has blessed me with three daughters and a wonderful spouse. After leaving Pakistan in 2011, my family joined me in the US in June 2014. I firmly believe in God's grace in my family's reunion after the span of two and half long years of separation. Being an asylum seeker, life was hard. Shortly after my arrival in the United States of America, a friend told me, "U.S.A. means You Start Again." Whatever you were in Pakistan, that is finished there and now in America, you need to start from scratch. This was very true, and I experienced it myself.

I feel blessed that despite hardships and struggles, my faith never wavered. After getting asylum, I moved to Buffalo, worked in a local restaurant, and occasionally on

Sundays before my shift at the restaurant visited Trinity Old Lutheran Church in Amherst. Their Pastor Fred Kopp became my good friend. Fred is a good and God-fearing person who helped me and my family settle in. He further facilitated my studies at the seminary. During my internship at First English Lutheran Church in Lockport, NY, he was both my supervisor and my mentor. In this new journey, Bishop Lee Miller (II), who was Dean at that time, also helped and motivated me to join the seminary. I firmly believe that these friends played a pivotal role and were part of God's plan for me. Not to mention that this big leap of faith could not have been accomplished without the full tuition scholarship from the ELCA Fund for Leaders. God held my hand throughout this whole journey. After graduating from seminary, I was ordained in September 2020 and had my first call as a Pastor from First English Lutheran Church and St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church, Medina, NY.

It's only by God's grace that throughout the past three years I have been serving these two churches. God's plans are marvelous and beyond our expectations. My life's journey is one of them.

And don't forget, "U.S.A." offers an opportunity for a fresh beginning and makes dreams come true. ⚓



Top left: Rev. Sohail Akhtar.  
Above: Sohail (right) with SIH board president, Captain Rick Schoenlank (left), and Pilot Apprentice Jesse Wynn of the Sandy Hook Pilots' Association, which generously made the pilot boat "New York No. 1" available for a fundraiser for Seafarers International House and the Marine Society of the City of New York on June 14, 2023.  
Photo by Marsh Drege.

# IMMIGRATION ROUNDTABLE RESUMED

By Michael Bradford and Henryk Behnke



*The Immigration Roundtable offers SIH Immigrant Mission Committee members and our immigrant partner organization a forum to assess current needs of migrants in New York City.*


*Photo by Marsh Drege.*

On May 31, our Social Worker, Michael Bradford, helped to relaunch our annual Immigration Roundtable. The Roundtable is an advocacy lunch, that brings together staff and members of our Immigrant Mission Committee and partners from 11 referral organizations in the Metro area. They discussed how to best help migrants in light of the expiration of Title 42, an emergency COVID 19 immigration policy that began in March 2020 and expired in May 2023. This policy has been replaced by Title 8, which includes old immigration legislation and outlines processes for handling migrants at the border. Predicting the impact of Title 8 on the immigration landscape remains difficult.

The other main issue discussed was the lack of housing for single asylum seekers who do not get ushered into the New York City system like migrant families. Those who can't find housing through friends, family or social contacts often need to enter NYC's homeless shelter system. Yet, only a fraction of migrants are currently referred to *Seafarers International House*. While in the past asylees stayed up to three months with SIH until they became contributing members of society, current guests urgently need accommodation for only a few nights until they travel on to family and friends elsewhere.

Last year, SIH provided 23 immigrants with a total of 537 lodging nights. The guests hailed from Benin, Cameroon, Columbia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Myanmar, Nigeria, Saint Lucia, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe (see highlighted countries on the map below).



We appreciate our friends and immigration partners who were able to join us on May 31: American Friends Service Committee; Bellevue Program for Survivors of Torture, Bronx Defenders, Brooklyn Community Bail Fund / Envision Freedom, Church World Service, Human Rights First, Lutheran Social Services, Mamichelo Foundation, RIF Asylum Support NYC, Riverside Sojourners, and WANA We Are Not Afraid. 

# A CAPTAIN REFLECTS ON HER STAY AT SIH

By Captain Alexandra Hagerty



As a ship captain with Lutheran roots, I have always had a passion for the sea. Throughout my career, I have had the pleasure of staying at seafarers' centers around the world, but none has had a greater impact on me than Seafarers International House (SIH) in New York City.

Established in 1873, Seafarers International House provides seafarers and immigrants with essential services such as accommodations, meals, and counseling. Seafarers are served in the Ports of Albany, Baltimore, New Haven and Newark with ship visits and transportation. Over the years, SIH has served over 2 million people from different countries and cultures, creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for seafarers and for immigrants.

In 2023, SIH celebrated its 150th anniversary with the Setting the Course Reception, and I had the pleasure of attending the event. The celebration was a testament to the organization's rich history and the impact it has had on the maritime community. The event brought together seafarers, maritime industry leaders, and supporters from all over the world.

As a SUNY Maritime College cadet studying for my US Coast Guard third mate's exams, I stayed at SIH's guesthouse. It was a home away from home, providing me with a safe and comfortable environment to prepare for my exams. The staff was friendly and supportive, and I felt like part of a family. They provided me with a place to relax, network with other seafarers, and enjoy the diverse culture of New York City.

Later I became a volunteer captain for Mercy Ships, a Christian non-profit that helps those in need of life-changing surgeries. I began to understand the importance of giving back to those in need. Watching patients have free life-changing surgeries aboard the ship I docked in Dakar, Senegal was so rewarding, especially watching their lives transform for the better. I had merchant mariners donate teddy bears to our first patients, which you can see in the photo below.



As a young American seafarer, I believe that SIH provides an excellent opportunity for the next generation of seafarers. By staying at their temporary home at the Markle Residence while pursuing higher education studies, young seafarers experience a supportive and inclusive environment that can help them achieve their goals.



Years ago, the stay at SIH's guesthouse had a significant impact on my career and my life as a seafarer. Today, I am pleased to report that I am furthering my career by pursuing an Executive MBA at MIT in Boston, and I am delighted to learn that there is a similar seafarers' center in town.

I urge young seafarers to take advantage of the opportunity to stay at SIH's temporary home or their future home while between job assignments, medical or coast guard clearances or studying in NYC. Seafarers International House offers not only a place to stay but a community that provides essential support to seafarers of all ages. ⚓

## 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 four ports currently (Albany, Baltimore, New Haven, New York & New Jersey), and in NYC. In 2022, SIH served 19,943 people. This includes boarding 1,368 vessels, visiting 15,135 seafarers and delivering 2,915 Christmas-at-Sea satchels assembled by volunteers. SIH also provided 2,301 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.*

## SAVE THE DATE: APRIL 18, 5 - 7:30 PM 2024 SETTING THE COURSE RECEPTION NEW YORK ATHLETIC CLUB



Thank you to all participants who made the 2023 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):

John Atkins of Global Container Terminals USA; Adam Vokac of Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (M.E.B.A.); and Mark W. Barker of Interlake Maritime Services.

April 20, 2023. Photo by Henryk Behnke.

As Seafarers International House emerges from the pandemic we move forward in our mission by leasing out our flagship building 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 general public for either rooms or meeting space. We still receive your mail.

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.

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Seafarers International House

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:  
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BY REV. SOHAIL AKHTAR

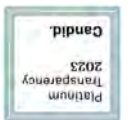
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SAVE THE DATE: APRIL 18, 5 - 7:30 PM  
2024 SETTING THE COURSE RECEPTION

*The car carrier Costa Grande d'Avorio caught fire in the Port of Newark on July 5. While the crew was able to escape the flames, tragically, two firefighters, Augusto Acabou and Wayne Brooks Jr., perished in the blaze.*

*(See article WHAT'S WRONG WITH ALL THE SHIPS? on page 2).*



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