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## **Relying on the kindness of strangers: Welfare-providers to seafarers and the symbolic construction of community**

### **Introduction**

Amidst the ongoing covid pandemic, in many ports all over the world, welfare-providers like port chaplains, seafarer-centre-staff and volunteers continue to assist seafarers, providing them with essentials that they need, from free toiletries to portable wi-fi. This is the kind of welfare-work they have been doing for many years. However, with the global media taking a little more interest in seafarers as key workers the world has become more aware of the valuable deeds of these port-welfare-providers. This article reflects on who these people are and why they do what they do. It considers the kind of community they have evolved into over the years, and reflects on their commitments, similarities, differences and struggles. Beyond this, the article asks if we should read their daily activities, and their interaction with fellow welfare-providers, as an expression of the symbolic construction of community?

Community in this article refers to a “loosely specified sense of social collectivity” (Skogen and Krange 2003: 311). The community that we talk of is also very much territorially and physically bounded (Candea 2007), given that it is specific to ports. There is an emplacement of the community that we refer to following Cohen (1985) and Etzion (1994). However, we also suggest a contemporary view of community that is less place-based and more process-oriented (Fernback 2007: 50). In this case, our research into what is a global network of port-welfare-providers, encompasses two ports in the UK as well as port-welfare-providers in six other countries. Their sense of community is both local and global as they identify with both their port of operation and a wider community of welfare-providers.

The community we are discussing is referred to as symbolic as its members frequently do not know one another. In this sense, it can be seen as an imagined community (Anderson 2006

[1981]) despite also having a social/material existence. Members share a collective identity that is predicated on repetitive practice enactment, and adherence to an ethos of concern for strangers. On top of this, welfare-providers are part of a social imaginary. As explained by Taylor (2004), “social imaginary involves the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Bantry-White et al. 2018: 554). It is not unusual for welfare-providers to say that people who are involved in welfare-work with seafarers have an abiding respect and understanding of seafarers and what they do for the world. The daily work that they do with seafarers underpins the symbolic construction of their community.

The members of this community move in particular spaces/places that include the ship, the port, the seafarer centre and their environs. However, though people who belong to this community are tied to specific places and move about within the spatial limits of particular ports, they share many of the same everyday routines and challenges. The work of welfare-providers in UK ports is the same in the Philippines, New Zealand, and elsewhere, albeit with some place-specific variations. Seafarers assisted by staff, volunteers or port chaplains at a seafarer centre in a UK port may have previously been helped by a staff member or port chaplain somewhere in Brazil. These seafarers may have asked for the same assistance – SIM cards, mobile top-up vouchers and free transport to the nearest mall. In a way, regardless of where seafarers are, when they visit a seafarer centre, or wherever they are when they are visited onboard by welfare-providers, seafarers expect similar forms of welfare assistance,

and the same level of eagerness and enthusiasm which they have previously received in other parts of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Welfare-providers to seafarers are seldom studied as a community in their own right, compared with other social groupings, for example, people patronising certain types of sports (Fairley and Tyler 2012; Satterfield and Godfrey 2011); athletes (Warner and Dixon 2011); people of faith (Hastings, HA 1999; Kovacevic et al 2021); or people with AIDS (Frey et al 2000). In the current literature on seafarer-welfare port chaplains are the most common point of reference; they are the face of welfare-work in ports (see, for example, Cadge and Skaggs 2019; Montemaggio 2018; Palmer and Murray 2016). They are the embodiment of societal intervention in the wellbeing of seafarers when they are in ports. They are the benign human face of an otherwise technical, capitalist, commercial and transactional world (Cadage and Skaggs 2019). However, they do not always work alone and may be assisted and supported by volunteers and centre-staff who comprise people from different backgrounds – male/female,, religious/non-religious, with/without maritime backgrounds - from all walks of life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are hundreds of national/international institutional networks that connect port-welfare workers around the globe. Much of the community is imagined and there are some institutions that create it through individual and institutional relationships like the International Christian Maritime Association (ICMA) which is based in London. ICMA was founded in 1969, and currently represents more than 450 seafarer' centres and 900 chaplains in approximately 125 countries. See also <https://icma.as>. Another is the North American Maritime Ministry Association (NAMMA), a Christian association based in Reading, MA, USA which provides fellowship, encouragement, advocacy, education, spiritual and professional development for those in maritime ministry. NAMMA's affiliated agencies include 55 maritime ministry agencies and approximately 100 Member chaplains. NAMMA serves as the North American region of the International Christian Maritime Association (ICMA). See also <https://namma.org>

<sup>2</sup> Decades ago welfare-providers used to be from the same religious groups – Bethel Church Movement etc. in the USA for example – but are now more disparate and focused on social services.

To explore the nature of this group, its prospects and challenges, and how its members negotiate their belongingness to this community, we look at two seafarer centres in the UK where we interviewed chaplains, staff and volunteers. We also consider the views of seven chaplains from six other countries. We examine the work performed by these welfare-providers, the performative acts that bestow upon them homogeneity as a group, and their internal struggles, which constitute their plurality amidst perceived unity. Rather than focusing solely on the former as a way to make a case for the manifestation of symbolic community, we highlight the latter - the counter-narratives and plurality of intentions permeating the fabric of this community. We go beyond the notion of community as a concept “of always positive evaluation and evocation” (Rapport 2002, cited in Stobart 2011: 210), and examine the divergences and differences in the needs and opinions of welfare-providers in relation to their work in seafarer centres, with seafarers and each other.

This article contributes to our understanding of welfare-work and the symbolic construction of community in the context of maritime studies and sociology of work. It elucidates instances and performances of community building as welfare-providers perform their daily tasks of looking after seafarers. People in articulated and bounded locations create narratives which are both specific and particular, but at the same time similar to and contiguous with others in the sense that places are never free from outside influences. Using empirical data gathered from participant observation and interviews, we hope to shed light on a group of people, their work, and their struggles as a community, which is seldom given attention in social science literature. Furthermore, we want to contribute to discussions of the different ways in which symbolic communities are constituted especially in the context of welfare-work in ports. We highlight how the symbolic communities of welfare-providers though constituted in the spirit of solidarity, compassion for others (Montemaggio 2018) and

kindness to strangers can also be constructed (and deconstructed) via disagreements and contestations from within.

### **Port-based welfare-providers**

With strong historic antecedents, the UK remains the base for some of the most established and highly resourced maritime charities providing welfare services to seafarers. These include, the Mission to Seafarers (MtS) which was started in Bristol in 1836; Stella Maris (Apostleship of the Sea) which was founded in Glasgow in 1920 and the Sailors' Society which opened its first mission hub in London in 1818. Today, MtS has a presence in 200 ports in 50 countries whilst Stella Maris is present in 311 ports in more than 30 countries around the world. The Sailors' Society has chaplains and ship visitors in 91 ports and has projects and services covering 30 countries.

In Europe, North America and Asia, many welfare-providers are affiliated with MtS, Stella Maris and Sailors Society, although there are also some independent church-based welfare organisations that provide assistance to seafarers like the German Seemannsmission, Danish Seamen's Mission and Norway Seaman's Mission. In the US, welfare services to seafarers are also run by small and independent community-based Christian organisations (Cadge and Skaggs 2019).

Port-welfare-providers do not need to have a physical base in ports (like a seafarer centre), and some dispense welfare services from their vehicles.<sup>3</sup> However, where ports have a

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<sup>3</sup> This also highlights the differences in resources and difficulties that welfare-providers face in different ports. A chaplain based in Myanmar, for example, explained how entry to the port to conduct welfare-work was negotiated with port authorities on a daily basis. They had no seafarer centre and dispensed assistance to

seafarer centre, they are usually populated with full and part-time staff, volunteers and port chaplains, although in some cases seafarer centres are unstaffed though open to seafarers all day. Seafarer centres which employ staff are usually open from 10:00 am to 10:00 pm, although this varies depending on the size of the port and the number of ships that use its terminals.

The most common welfare services offered to seafarers are: free transport to/from the ship to the town/city centre or seafarer centre; sale of SIM cards; free use of portable wi-fi (mostly in UK ports); shipboard religious services or visits to houses of worship; money transfers, personal shopping, sending parcels; and assistance with complaints related to employment contracts, work conditions onboard, and personal problems.<sup>4</sup> Seafarers can expect to have free use of wi-fi, buy drinks from the bar (if the centre has one), relax in the lounge, and play in the recreation room in seafarer centres. Some other centres have their own chapels, swimming pools and basketball courts. Most seafarer centres in Europe, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand also offer free clothes such as woolly hats and gloves which are mostly donated by centre supporters. When chaplains and volunteers undertake shipboard visits, they also take free reading materials, sweets and other goods for distribution to seafarers.<sup>5</sup>

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seafarers from a vehicle. These difficulties are seldom faced by welfare-providers in Europe, North America, New Zealand and Australia where port authorities tend to be more open to collaboration with welfare-providers.

<sup>4</sup> Welfare-providers do not provide solutions to problems experienced by seafarers. When they are work-related, welfare-providers usually refer them to the relevant authorities for resolution. However, when it comes to personal problems like family problems, though welfare-providers cannot provide solutions, only advice, the mere act of providing a listening ear to seafarers is deemed to be an act of assistance. Thus, coming onboard, and being with seafarers, interacting with them, listening to their stories, also constitutes a large part of the welfare services provided by port chaplains and volunteers. Chaplains call it a ministry of presence (Zudeima and Walker 2020).

<sup>5</sup> As maritime welfare charities and their welfare-work in ports have become common knowledge amongst seafarers, the shipboard visits of chaplains and volunteers have become a part, and in many cases, an anticipated event, in every port of call. There is a general belief amongst seafarers that chaplains and volunteers are people that they can trust for their needs. With the globalisation of shipping, ships have become mainly multi-ethnic in composition (see also Sampson 2013), some ships having as many as 10 nationalities onboard. As a result of

The staff and volunteers in seafarer centres come from varied backgrounds. Some are directly employed by religious organisations while others are only answerable to centre managers. Volunteers are usually recruited by either centre managers or chaplains, and just like centre staff do not need to profess any religious affiliation.

Although they come from different backgrounds an interesting feature of welfare-providers is the unified and homogenous front that they project as a symbolic community. Welfare-providers are commonly perceived by people who support their work as a group of people who work harmoniously together for the benefit of seafarers. Seafarers see them as a group of people ready to help them when in port. They are almost always seen as working **not** for money, but for the joy of helping others.<sup>6</sup> The ethos of selflessness characterises the work that they do. Many welfare-providers describe the work that they do as a calling, a vocation, something that they have been drawn to as way to concretise their faith and help others. Two chaplains explained.

I always felt I wanted to do something different, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do and I felt like a calling, I wouldn't say a vocation [...]but I felt a calling to do something, [...] for the sake of a better word,

It's like doing, being able to put your faith into action. It feels like that it's doing God's work and being able to, trying to be Christ like for others. For them to be able to see that. That's how I see it.

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this and other developments in the maritime field, there have been shifts from evangelisation in the early years of welfare provisioning in ports, to addressing the practical needs of seafarers. With the varying religious orientations of seafarers, many seafarer centres have made efforts to be inclusive, turning their chapels into ecumenical rooms, where all seafarers are welcome to practise their faith.

<sup>6</sup> Maritime welfare charities like the MtS and Stella Maris and the seafarer centres than they run and manage are usually referred to by seafarers as "seamans' club" or "mission". In most cases, seafarers do not distinguish the organisational differences. For many of them, they are one and the same. Welfare-providers are also usually assumed to be priests (or nuns if women) so much so that, for example, some Filipino seafarers would refer to them, whether they are chaplains or volunteers, as "Fathers/Sisters". Information about the availability of welfare services in ports is usually passed on by word of mouth, and is not part of the information that seafarers receive for every contract. It is only through years of experience of working at sea, or information passed on from one seafarer to another and the internet, that they come to know the location of welfare-centres.



At annual events organised by MtS or the International Christian Maritime Association (ICMA), etc., they meet and get to know each other, share common best practices, experiences, and challenges, and foster close relations. In most cases welfare-providers are also in touch with other welfare-providers in different ports all over the world especially with those belonging to some of the biggest maritime charities. Such is their web of connections, irrespective of differences in organisational affiliations, that they could easily connect seafarers to a host of other welfare-providers in other ports when there is a need to do so. For example, if Filipino seafarers who are mostly Catholics would want to attend a mass in their next port of call, the chaplain in their last visited port could easily relay such request to a chaplain working in the next port.

Port chaplains employed by Christian maritime charities may accept assignments in ports in different parts of the world, expanding their networks in the process. Regardless of their port of jurisdiction, there is a uniformity of welfare services that they render to seafarers, driven in part by the expectations of their globally mobile ‘clientele’.

In recent times, with the ebb and flow of the global economy, and rapid developments in technology, welfare-providers have seen changes in how they respond to the needs of seafarers. For instance, as ships spend less time in ports (especially container ships), seafarers have very little time to go ashore and make use of the services and facilities available in seafarer centres. This has resulted in the closure of a number of centres across the world. When centres continue to operate, port chaplains from various religious organisations may work together (e.g. in one building rather than in separate centres) to save on operational costs. Pressure on the finances of centres has also forced centre managers and welfare

organisations to rely more on volunteers rather than paid staff. In addition, as a way to generate more income for centres, people running them have devised ways to make money from their existing facilities. All these changes have had an impact on how welfare-providers conduct their daily activities. Issues pertaining to how centres are run and how they relate to each other can also result in conflicts and tensions, which in turn impacts on how these communities are symbolically constructed in the present context.

## **Methodology**

The research which underpins this article was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC - ES/N019423/1). Overall, the study considered how seafarers who are affiliated to different religions, or none, work and live together and the role of faith in their everyday life at sea. To accomplish the purpose of the study we conducted fieldwork aboard two cargo vessels and in two seafarer centres in the UK (Porton and Riverside – pseudonyms). In total 89 days were spent on board ships and six months was spent in ports. The data collected via interviews and observations in these locations were supplemented by interviews with chaplains from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, Myanmar and the UK. Interviews were also conducted with stakeholders from maritime charities.

This article relies primarily on fieldnotes made at two UK seafarer centres, interviews with volunteers and staff from Porton and Riverside, and 10 chaplains from seven countries. Fieldnotes were made using a guide which was flexible enough to allow for unforeseen data to be captured by Turgo who was primarily responsible for data collection but remained in close contact with the team. Sampson joined Turgo for several days in each port and Smith joined Turgo in Riverside. The data were coded according to emergent themes and some of

these have fed into this article specifically. The places and people mentioned in the article have all been given pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality.

### **Symbolic communities**

There are different ways of conceptualizing ‘community’. Communities can be physically demarcated, for example, a particular district, with an exact location, boundaries and topographical coordinates, or may be imagined – in the case of one which traverses boundaries and does not submit to geographical constraint. Many studies about community have been focused on bounded sites (Candea 2007) and they play out in different ways. They focus on a wide variety of issues affecting community life, for example the classic study of the relationship between self-centred clan-systems and backwardness in the Italian town of Montegrano (Banfield 1958), the dynamics of caste relations in Karnataka, India (Srinivas 1976), and a study of the hunting, trapping and fishing practices of a fishing community in northern Laos (Lindell and Tayanin 1991). This has been the traditional, most explored trajectory of dealing with the notion of community, as it enables social scientists to capture the specificities and generalities of life in places at a particular moment in time.

But community is more than a demarcated space in a thin slice of time. It also refers to socialities in places, cultures, social activities, and more, that people do and commit themselves to. Thus, when we talk about community, we refer to an entity invested with sentiments attached to kinship, friendship, rivalry, familiarity, jealousy, and so forth which inform the social processes of everyday life (Cohen 1985: 13). Places that exist in real time and are referred to on maps are vested with history. People make history and weave sociality in places as they evoke their membership to family, kinship system, associations, and to

larger congregations that have a bearing on how life is transacted with others on a regular basis. People live and thrive in association with others, in pursuit of certain ideas and ideals, and in the process create communities of experience, irrespective of location and geographical boundedness.

In recent times we have been introduced to notions of communities without borders. These are seamlessly porous and boundary-bursting communities where people, living in different places, and ensconced in varying temporalities, share wants and needs, aspirations and ideals, visions and interests. They form a community of affect - a community of people that becomes a collective not because they share the same space/place, but because they come to share and inhabit a similar passion or purpose, for instance, fans of Jane Austen (Sukhera 2019) and the TV series *Downton Abbey* (Bagnoli 2015, Schirra et al 2014). Members of these communities are real and share similarities and interests though they also differ from each other in terms of age, gender, nationality and locational situatedness. They don't live and share space in the same place but they share the same sense of fascination with things that bind them together and like pilgrims, they may visit places of interest and/or to pay homage to their shared passion (Pennacchia 2015).

This latter and albeit well-rehearsed notion of community is of course brought about and made salient and immediate by globalisation, especially in conjunction with travel and technology. As more people become mobile and as technological advancements in communication surge exponentially, we have become more interconnected with the rest of the world. This in turn has paved the way for the creation and multiplication of communities that traverse boundaries and space. This notion of community is the kind of community that the article describes. Indeed, maritime welfare charities and organisations like the MtS, Stella

Maris, Sailors Society, NAMMA and ICMA, foster community among welfare-providers. Even when people involved in these organisations are not connected with each other physically they still share a kind of symbolic community. Thus, although the community of welfare-providers that we discuss here is place-bound and spatially constrained, it is globally dispersed and multi-sited. It is very much part of a global network of welfare-providers who focus their attention and efforts on active working seafarers.

In so many ways, the easy connections and sense of community that welfare-providers to seafarers foster with each other have been made more salient and immediate by the contemporary form of globalisation. However, the early forms of such sense of community can be traced back to the founding years of many maritime welfare charities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though not as globally expansive and interconnected as now, such construction of symbolic community had its impetus much earlier as more welfare provision services expanded in ports in the UK and overseas.

Contestations from within and differences amongst welfare-providers in relation to how they serve seafarers will be the basis of this article which considers how the community of welfare-providers is symbolically constructed. This universe of differences underpins the very constitution of the community that welfare-providers construct on a daily basis. Though they are unified by their adherence to an ethos of kindness to strangers, the manner in which kindness to strangers precipitates differences in approach, needs further consideration. This article therefore focuses on divergences rather than the unifying force of togetherness amongst welfare-providers. The symbolic construction of community is enunciated in this instance in the realm of contrapuntal forces and interests amongst members. This will be taken up in the succeeding sections of the article where we highlight some of the more

important practices and instances constructing port-welfare-providers as a symbolic community.

### **The community of welfare-providers:**

#### **A ministry of presence<sup>7</sup> and much more**

The construction of port-welfare-providers as a symbolic community is manifested in how chaplains, staff and volunteers interact with each other on a daily basis. Welfare-providers symbolically construct and maintain their community through a ritual of daily activities and practices, and a shared ethos behind them. As Kertzer (1980) explains, ritual is a standardised and repetitive symbolic behaviour that allows individuals to put the chaos of human experience into a coherent framework (Castellanos 2010: 62). The reiteration of activities on a regular basis allows for the formation of a community where members feel situated and where they have a stake to sustain and nurture. For example, driving and ship visiting are part of a port-welfare provider's life in any port in the world. Other minute details of repetitive activities undertaken by welfare-providers are also worth noting. For instance, in shadowing chaplains during shipboard visits, Turgo was intrigued by the ritual of "packing the rucksack" that chaplains went through on a daily basis. Regardless of the affiliation of the chaplain concerned they did the same thing prior to leaving for the ship.

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<sup>7</sup> Quite interestingly, this notion of ministry of presence is common across settings where chaplains work – not just in ports. See for example Sullivan's (2014) "A ministry of presence: Chaplaincy, spiritual care, and the law."

The rucksack was heavy as it was full of magazines, booklets and newspapers for distribution to seafarers. Inside, (the chaplain) led me to the store room where I was told to fill the black bag with woolly hats and then two parcels for delivery to a seafarer on board the ship that we were visiting. Once done, I was then directed to get some more reading materials from the side table by the entrance door and put them in the rucksack. (Fieldnotes)

Filling the rucksack became part of Turgo's daily life with the chaplains that he shadowed. It became automatic to him that once he was in the centre, prior to any shipboard visit, he would check his rucksack and replenish the goods inside. Turgo also noted how the chaplains took the same degree of care in seeing to it that the rucksacks were properly loaded with goods most requested and needed by seafarers. Once, with another chaplain for their first shipboard visit, when the chaplain saw Turgo preparing the rucksack with goods for distribution, they commented that Turgo already knew the drill.

The commitment to caring for strangers is shared across the board by welfare-providers, especially chaplains. Historically the mission of welfare-providers was very much driven by Christian faith, especially in relation to saving souls (Kverndal 1986). However, there has been a shift to the prioritization of welfare-work, focusing on the practical needs of seafarers (Cadge and Skaggs 2019). This shared commitment to helping strangers peppered the responses of welfare-providers in their explanation of their work in ports and seafarer centres. As one chaplain explained, "(they) lend a hand and (they) are that unknown friend to seafarers in ports." In various interviews, chaplains, volunteers and centre staff highlight their desire to help others and motivation to serve. A volunteer explained the reasons why she joined the centre.

[...]I saw the advertisement on the website and that's where I felt that would be a good thing you know. I mean you, well you're not really giving to the community but you're giving in a different way you know because obviously the community is wider because it's ships but it's a way of giving with an underlying church baseline but then have an interest in the sea. I understand the challenges at sea so yes, that's what led me to applying.

Many call their form of helping out a ministry of presence. Chaplains believe that they “need to be ‘present’ to care for others rather than give charity for their own self-worth” (Montemaggio 2018: 509). Underpinned by the theological precept of welcoming strangers to their fold, chaplains have this to say about the importance of their presence amidst the frenetic life of seafarers when in port:

It's just like a ministry of presence in a sense, the biggest part is that you showed up, like if nobody comes to visit a ship then seafarers are even more isolated, even more lonely [...] So I think it's even worth it that I showed up you know and that's the way you have to look at it because it's not every visit that you have where someone's going to cry and tell you about their life story or you're going to see pictures of this new baby, you're not always going to have a great story every single time. So every single ship visit is equally important to the crew just so that even they know that someone is thinking of them.

Another chaplain expounded his definition of ministry of presence:



The way I look at my ministry is, as long as I go home at the end of each day and say, I made a difference – no matter how small or big it was, because a crew member hadn't been paid, whether it was because we'd organised the mass on board, or whether it was because we took a SIM card so the seafarer could talk to his family. Or whether it was simply, by sitting on the ship for two hours and having a good chat with the captain who I've known for years. Because we're doing a job that no-one else is within the maritime industry. We're turning up to a ship and not wanting anything [...]

The mere presence of welfare-providers in ports defines one of the main purposes of administering welfare services to seafarers. As one chaplain put it, whether they were able to provide help or not, their mere visibility in ports reassures seafarers of kindness and service that they can rely on. The ministry of presence, founded on the Christian tradition of ministering kindness to strangers, forms one of the bases of their symbolic construction of their community.

### **The ties that bind**

Chaplains and volunteers enjoy informal relationships. In the seafarer centre their interactions often include the sharing of stories about their recent visits to ships – both funny and sad. In all the centres included in our research we found an easy atmosphere. When chaplains needed a hand with some work, volunteers and staff were quick to respond. In turn, when the centres were busy, and the staff were inundated with requests from visiting seafarers, chaplains and volunteers helped in whatever way they could.

Some manifestations of the camaraderie amongst centre staff were highly ritualised. For example, regular tea-making was an everyday occurrence and took a regularly observed form. Almost every hour, when the centre was not busy, a different member of the team would ask everyone if they wanted tea. Staff and volunteers would usually buy biscuits using their own money and bring them to the centre. These would accompany the shared tea and staff, chaplains and volunteers would chat about their work in the centre and also about local and current events. For Turgo, joining the tea ritual also helped him know more about the people working in the centre.

As the centre was still very quiet, I sat down with staff for tea. We talked about their lives prior to joining the centre. Apparently two of them used to be seafarers in their younger years and then after doing some odd jobs in the port after leaving seafaring, they decided to apply for a job in the centre. (Fieldnotes)

In this convivial atmosphere in centres, people who provide welfare services to seafarers bond and reinforce their belief in the importance of what they do. To a casual observer they might resemble a relatively cohesive community. As explained by Bantry-White et al “sameness sustained community bonds and (is) represented through the identification of shared histories and interests” (2018: 555). In seafarer centres the unique understanding held by staff and their shared experiences of ship visiting and providing welfare services helped to establish shared bonds, or indeed to the untrained eye, there is nothing much happening in seafarer centres aside from the show of camaraderie and support for each and every welfare provider. However, in such settings there is often more than meets the eye as shown by the excellent ethnography of shop floor workers undertaken by Roy (1959). As shown in that

research our work also indicates complexity and how on occasion seafarer centres could be characterised as fraught and divided.

### **Stretched bonds**

Whilst rituals and convergence are important in the symbolic construction of community, differences and tensions have the capacity to ultimately result in the cementing and fortifying of one's group connections. Differences matter as they contribute to the continuing maintenance of communities as a symbolic construction.

### **The financial imperative**

In recent years seafarers centres all over the world have been hit hard by reduced footfall (<https://ukchamberofshipping.com/latest/death-and-rebirth-seafarer-centres-uk/>) and lower income. Due to lockdowns and restrictions brought about by the pandemic, funding agencies that provide grants to charities, including maritime charities, have experienced a squeeze on their resources which impacts the financial assistance they provide (<https://www.ft.com/content/ea40845e-d0cc-4163-929b-4eb6520a0319>). This has exacerbated the pre-existing financial woes of many maritime charities which in recent years have resulted in the closure of many seafarer centres, or a reduction in their hours of operation and the services they provide to seafarers (replacing staffed 'shops' with vending machines, for example).

One way of making ends meet has been to open seafarer centres to non-seafarers. In our research, we became aware of some centres allowing port workers to use their facilities to

provide additional income. We were told that staff, chaplains and volunteers generally supported this arrangement. At Riverside, however, the manager chose to restrict use to seafarers fearing that otherwise locals might dominate the centre and alienate seafarers. Some of the staff in the centre thought this was the wrong approach and believed that the presence of locals could create a much more engaging and welcoming atmosphere. It became apparent that the difference in viewpoints contributed to quite deep divisions within the team, accompanied by surprisingly strong feelings.

Different views of what the centres were for, and how best to keep them running in sub-optimal financial contexts, proved to be a fairly widespread source of tension across the ‘community’. Regularly encountered disagreement occurred over the selling of mobile top-up vouchers to seafarers. For seafarer centres worldwide, these vouchers are a source of steady revenue. However, in some centres, including Porton, the sale of top-up vouchers was not the preserve of the centre. Chaplains (who were not employed by the centre but were attached to religious maritime charities) also sold them independently, during the course of ship visits, to the disadvantage of the local seafarer centre. In some centres a compromise arrangement was that chaplains bought their top-up vouchers from centres rather than from commercial agents. However, some chaplains opposed this practice as they could buy vouchers more cheaply elsewhere and therefore offer them to seafarers at a lower cost. This friction was rooted in differences over the underlying purpose of SIM card provision and the service ethos of chaplains. It was a significant source of unspoken tension between chaplains and the centre manager in Porton.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> To make it appear as if there was no disagreement on this issue, chaplains would buy top up vouchers from the centre from time to time, especially at times when they ran out of the amount or data required by seafarers during their ship visits, but would in general source their bulk supply mostly from commercial agents who offered discounted prices.

In Riverside there were no chaplains providing ship visits. These were the preserve of staff and volunteers. The sale of top-up vouchers was therefore monopolised by the centre. There were, nevertheless, different views about selling top-up vouchers during ship visits. Some staff believed that this had the potential to discourage seafarers from leaving the ship and visiting the centre, which in turn translated into less income for the centre (via reduced, associated, sales of drinks and sundry goods for example). One of the staff, for example, relayed this to Turgo in one of their conversations whilst waiting for seafarers to turn up in the centre:

The first thing that seafarers ask us when we do ship visiting is, do you sell SIM cards? You hardly take your seat and they are already asking you about SIM cards. Then those who just want to talk to their families, they just buy a SIM card and they don't see any reason to go to the centre. When we had telephone booths here, and no wi-fi or SIM card yet, you would be amazed by the number of seafarers visiting the centre. There was always a crowd here. Look at the centre now, very quiet.

(Fieldnotes)

In addition, coupled with commercial imperatives, some staff believed that seafarers must always be encouraged to take shore-leave for their health and well-being.

Our purpose when I joined was to get them off that ship, because they're on it constantly. And it affects your brain, your mind if you're trapped on a ship for so long. They're already doing 10-month contracts, get them off. They don't have to spend money, just get them off. Just come in ashore, go for a walk, just come off. We're doing the opposite now because, and what I mean by that is we're taking

modems onboard, internet. So we're putting the seaman's club onboard. So like I said before internet is priority, it's the main thing that they come for, internet.

The centre manager had a different take on the issue. For him, centres exist to provide welfare services to seafarers and not to prioritise profit. There are some seafarers, he said, who can't leave or don't want to leave the ship for various reasons and centres should find ways to serve them too. By giving them the option to buy mobile top-up vouchers during ship visits, he believed that centres are performing their duty to seafarers.

In similar ways a program providing free shipboard wi-fi also created divisions in some centres. Whilst chaplains and other centre staff welcomed this new service, funded by a UK charity, others saw it as a threat to the relevance and existence of seafarer centres and again argued that seafarers needed to be encouraged to take shore-leave. One said:

We're taking modems on the ship, so why would they come ashore? We're taking internet cards onboard a ship, so why would they come ashore? We're taking not only internet cards onboard, but we're taking long-term internet cards.

Seafarer centres all over the world face unprecedented challenges in relation to their finances. Those which remain open, have to deal with issues of income generation. However, welfare-providers differ on how commercial activities relate to their work with seafarers and how centres benefit from them. Such differences expose the varying ways in which welfare-providers define the meaning of service to seafarers - to which they were all committed.

## Differences in theology

In recent years, ecumenism has become a buzz word in most welfare-work in ports where chaplains from different religious organisations work together to deliver welfare services to seafarers. Working together is often borne out of financial necessity, however the success of this arrangement is readily apparent and a number of seafarer centres in the UK, and overseas, house chaplains from different religious organisations under one roof. Nonetheless, the research exposed the ways in which beneath an overall espousal of Christian fraternity and solidarity, tension occur between chaplains from different organisations especially in relation to theological matters and beliefs about service provision.

The single largest nationality group of seafarers serving in the global fleet is Filipino and the majority of Filipinos are Roman Catholic.<sup>9</sup> In the course of our fieldwork we observed occasions where this appeared to cause friction between Roman Catholic and Anglican chaplains serving the same port.<sup>10</sup> There appeared to be a sense of ‘ownership’ and rights to access among Roman Catholic chaplains with regard to Filipino seafarers. In some cases, they expected to be informed when their Anglican counterparts visited a ship where seafarers might want a mass to be held onboard. When this did not occur it led to tensions between collaborating chaplains working in the same ports.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In 2015, it was reported that 82.9-85% of the population were Roman Catholics. Based on this, it is safe to assume that for every 10 Filipino seafarers onboard, 7-8 are Roman Catholics.

<sup>10</sup> Some of the tension between the chaplains has its origin in theological, and especially ecclesiological, differences. The Anglican tradition, especially in the UK where the Church of England is established, has developed an ecclesiology which seeks to be broad and inclusive, almost indiscriminate in membership. By contrast Roman Catholic ecclesiology stresses the importance of defined membership and allegiance so that communion can be real and meaningful. These differences mean that Anglicans view their ministry as all encompassing whereas Roman Catholics have a stronger sense of specific identity and belonging.

<sup>11</sup> In cases like this, Anglican chaplains would offer their services whilst at the same time explaining that theirs was an Anglican religious service and not a Roman Catholic mass. If Filipino seafarers agreed, they would

A case where a Filipino seafarer fell ill and was hospitalised exemplified the kinds of conflicts which were witnessed. On this occasion an Anglican chaplain got a call from a port official to inform them of the seafarer's plight and to ask them to pay the sick seafarer a visit. They did so and the visit was welcomed by the seafarer who gratefully received the proffered practical assistance and comfort. A day after the visit, the chaplain received a text message from their Roman Catholic counterpart who worked in the same port. It asked them if the Filipino seafarer wanted to see a Roman Catholic priest. During their visit, the seafarer did not express a desire for any religious provision to be made for him. Some days later the Roman Catholic chaplain enquired once again about the health of the seafarer and suggested paying him a visit. The chaplain asked where the seafarer was confined. The Anglican chaplain replied that the Filipino seafarer had no specific request on this regard and that they would inform their counterpart if ever a request of that nature was made. Fieldnotes recorded the resultant tensions:

Ken received an email from Luis. [...] They were wondering if Ken could ask the Filipino seafarer if he needs a Catholic priest to administer sacrament to him or if he just needs a Catholic priest to talk to. Whilst for me (Turgo), the email sounded very cordial and helpful [...] Ken interpreted it as another example of Luis interfering in their work.<sup>12</sup>

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proceed but if seafarers wanted a Roman Catholic priest to officiate, they would arrange this with their Roman Catholic counterpart. Some Catholic chaplains, however, believed that some Anglican chaplains would proceed in organising religious services onboard without proper explanation to Filipino seafarers.

<sup>12</sup> Names are pseudonyms.



In this case one chaplain was irritated by the persistence of the other despite the fact that it was clearly in the seafarer's interests to have visits from as many benevolent people as possible, given that he was alone in hospital in a strange country.

Such tensions are partly because chaplains need to be seen to be providing a valued service, justifying their presence and role. They also arise from theological boundaries which are a source of frustration to some chaplains as explained by one working in another seafarer centre.

I have a German colleague, a Polish colleague, an Indonesian colleague and a few British colleagues as well and then there's me from (place) so we reflect in our ministry our different cultures and our different backgrounds. So we have a Lutheran, a Presbyterian, a Catholic, like Irish raised Baptist working for the Anglican it's like you know, there's already that mix which helps us to approach the job in a more open way and that's where I find it so frustrating sometimes when some seafarers chaplains are so protective of their own brand, like whether they're (names of charities). You know they're so protective of their own society or they're like 'the Catholic way is the only way' or 'the evangelical is the only way' you know when the whole point of your job is that you're ministering to all these people who don't believe the same thing as you.

Some chaplains also expressed discomfort with welfare-providers who wore their religious hearts on their sleeves, so to speak. They believed that although providing religious care to seafarers is a part of their service, those who make it the focus of their visit onboard create trouble for other welfare-providers. One chaplain, for instance, observed:

I don't think they really see a difference and so when you get these kind of ship visitors who are going on board a ship being like 'read the gospel', 'believe in John 3:16' it really harms everybody who does ship visiting because you're not going to have that sort of open reception. [...] if someone came into my home and my workplace and is going 'you're not a good Christian', 'you need to read your bible more' like I don't want that you know. It's not appropriate in the workplace, it's not appropriate in your home and seafarers are not in a position where they can walk away and often at times their culture causes them that they want to respect visitors and be respectful to them and open so they're not going to walk away or they're not going to be so brash as to say listen, I don't want to hear that right now. So it really harms, yes, it really harms the entire welfare industry when you have people approaching it from that sense [...].

However, it was apparent that some chaplains took a very different view of the meaning and purpose of chaplaincy. Thus, one chaplain told us about a colleague who took exception to selling SIM cards.

One of our deacons in the US was very much against selling SIM cards. He was a Roman Catholic deacon. He wouldn't sell them. His idea was that he was there to minister to the seafarers. Yes, you are. 'Well, I'm not going to sell SIM cards'. I said, 'but that's what they need'. 'No, no, no, no – I wasn't ordained to sell SIM cards'.[...] the way he was applying his theological education was... well, I wasn't ordained to sell SIM cards. Well, none of us have joined to sell SIM cards. But the way I looked at it was that a practical ministry is a gateway to a pastoral or spiritual ministry. By

selling the SIM cards, that's an excuse to be on the ship. Then you start talking, and they might tell you there's an issue and I've been sent home and unfairly dismissed, or we've not been paid.

Port chaplains generally perceive the expression of their Christian ministry as being primarily rooted in the provision of welfare services (Cadge and Skaggs 2018). As people of faith, they do their work with seafarers in accordance to their religious credo of helping strangers. However, as they care deeply for seafarers, this at times comes at the expense of their working relationship with their peers as they grapple with their own personal and institutional orientation on theological issues that relates to their work with seafarers.

### **Labour issues**

Most seafarer centres employ both full and part-time staff aside from having volunteers. Some centres limit the work of their staff and volunteers to the confines of the centre. In these cases, they are not tasked to undertake ship visiting but work in the centre's bar and shop, sort out donations, clean the building, manage accounts, and serve seafarers in whatever capacity they can. In other centres, staff and volunteers undertake ship visiting on top of such ancillary duties.

However, whilst volunteers eased the workload for paid staff, in some cases their contribution was seen as a threat by staff who feared being replaced by them. It transpired that this fear was not unfounded. In a context of restricted budgets, centres generally need to cut down on operational costs which include labour costs. One way to do this is to rely on a good supply of unpaid volunteers, working flexible hours. In Riverside, for example, some

full-time staff had been asked to work fewer hours and this was only possible because of the volunteers who were attached to the centre. The situation inevitably resulted in tensions between the staff and the centre manager. One member of staff complained that:

He's cut down the full time [hours] for (name). That tells me we're nothing. And [yet] the mission can't run without us, it can't run without us. There'd be no mission if we weren't there.

Paid staff could also feel resentful when they failed to gain promotion or to gain access to development opportunities. For instance, a long-serving paid member of staff in Riverside decried the snub that they felt they got from the centre manager when the position of assistant centre manager was given to a volunteer candidate.

We used to have a volunteer that came in on a Saturday every six weeks, sometimes they never came in, and they contacted this person and said do you want this job. It was double my salary, and so you could see how upset I could have been. When you think about it you've only got like six staff, we're not 600 staff, we're only six staff. So someone who's been there for 25 years, although only full time on 2000, you would automatically go to that person and say look it's only natural we pass it down to you, the time you've been here you see. But they never even contacted me to offer me the job, or offer me an interview, they just called this person up and said there's a job going, do you want it, it's yours. But because of my love of the job it didn't make me want to slam down and say I'm going, I'm leaving. I didn't, I carried on.

As many seafarer centres face tough financial challenges, they rely more and more on volunteers rather than on paid staff. Quite understandably, paid staff who have devoted many

years of their lives working in the centre, feel threatened. The labour of many paid staff was perceived to be unrecognised and unappreciated by the management and this caused resentment.

## **Conclusion**

This article has described the characteristics of the port-welfare community. It suggests that the expression of unity is underscored by a diverse and sometimes conflicted web of relationships. Welfare communities in ports are more than “an idealized community based on place, sameness and solidarity” (Bantry-White et al, 2018: 557). Not unlike cultural institutions (see, for example, Glynn 2000), welfare communities serving seafarers have “identities composed of contradictory elements” (285) and are in constant reconstruction and redefinition underpinned by the clashing interests and ideas of their members. The many facets of welfare communities as an expression of symbolic construction of community highlight the fact that this seemingly unified community is oftentimes sutured together by constant internal struggles, and at times, irreconcilable differences of members.

Though there are many commonalities that unite welfare communities and welfare-providers, the differences that run through the façade of their expressions of symbolic community can be identified as owing to the theological differences of the organisations that support them, and the ways centres deal with constrained resources. These two fault lines highlight some of the challenges facing welfare-providers. However, we have seen how welfare-providers work harder, and more closely together, to renew ties as an expression of symbolic community.

As communities are oftentimes built on similarities and consensus, differences and tensions are oftentimes relegated to the sideline, or hidden from public view, perceived as a threat to the ontological existence of communities. This article argues that differences matter because they highlight the dynamism of communities and their evolving character. Many tensions arise from the clash between commercial imperatives and the nature of deeply held beliefs about service provision and centre management. There are members of the community who think that when the financial wellbeing of centres is looked after, this is manifested in better welfare services for seafarers. There are also those who believe that revenues from commercial transactions play a secondary role in running centres as they are run not for profit but to serve the interest of seafarers. In our research divisions emerged between managers, chaplains and centre staff/volunteers in relation to what services should be provided to seafarers, and these divisions underpin the plurality of ways of looking after seafarers.

It is also the case that whilst welfare-providers commit themselves to give kindness to strangers, moving “between economic, religious, moral and advocacy roles” (Cadge and Skaggs 2019: 100) - kindness to the members of their own community is harder to evidence. Seafarers are often seen as marginalized and in need of support. However, some welfare-providers, may also be considered to be marginalized. For example, some staff in Riverside lacked qualifications, and as older workers would have struggled to gain alternative employment in the labour market. Given the precarious financial status of many seafarer centres, paid staff were often targeted as a way to reduce operational costs. It is a supreme irony therefore that whilst the community of welfare-providers seek mechanisms to create a safe space for all visiting seafarers – a space where they feel valued and cared for – some members of this community felt exposed to the brutal effects of frontline financial cuts.

The symbolic construction of community amongst welfare-providers in ports has two faces. One is readily apparent and presents a sense of purposeful unity and selflessness amongst members in pursuit of service to seafarers. The other, reveals the all too human aspect of welfare provision in ports. Members of the community compete with each other in determining how services are delivered, in what form, and in what ways. Their disagreements are rarely aired collectively and civility is generally preserved and valued, but behind the mask of a homogenous front, issues simmer. They do not arise in a vacuum. Changes in the habits of seafarers, the length of time that ships spend in ports, and the ebb and flow of the global economy all contribute to the challenges that port-welfare providers face. In turn, welfare-providers deal with, and react to, these changes in different ways, and as a result, they contribute to the varying ways in which they symbolically construct their community.

However, the tensions and differences we have outlined wholly undermine the construction of a single community. Like the different groups in the anti-carnivore alliance in a municipality in south-eastern Norway studied by Skogen and Krangle (2003), their sense of community is not “faked or artificial” (323). Welfare-providers, regardless of their differences, and periodically testy exchanges, continue to cooperate with one another. The deepest significance of the community remains in the everyday, non-mediated, physical interactions (they) have with one other (Fernback 2007: 63). Teas flow on a regular basis, chaplains banter with staff, and volunteers come on duty at their appointed time to help with the running of centres. Members of the community continue to talk about caring for strangers - caring for the seafarers of the world.

To all intents and purposes, regardless of divergences, the communities of welfare-providers in Porton and Riverside, and in other ports of the world, power on, as evinced by their heroic

efforts to address the needs of seafarers unable to leave their ships because of Covid restrictions.<sup>13</sup> The continuing construction (as it is an everyday process) of the symbolic community of welfare-providers lies not so much in the warmth and camaraderie that they find in each other but in their commitment to the service that they provide to seafarers. Despite their differences, they emerge as ‘one’ with their embodied hospitality (Montemaggio 2018), singular in their desire to serve seafarers - a community united in providing kindness to strangers.

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<sup>13</sup>In a recent communication, a chaplain relayed to us how a colleague based in Canada racked up a staggering \$80,000 credit card bill for the purchases requested by seafarers who could not leave their ships because of the pandemic.



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