The Changing Shape of Support in the Work of Port Chaplains

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Abstract: This article draws on historical and ethnographic data from port chaplains working with the Mission to Seamen/Seafarers in the United Kingdom in the 1950s and the 2010s to chart a shift in the shape of that work. Relationships with seafarers are at the core of the work in both decades. We describe this work through individual support for seafarers, work around death, support for community building, and religious gatherings and events. While we find evidence for each of these components of the work in each decade, there is a clear shift in the shape of pastoral or caring work which became more individualized and practically oriented over time. This shift likely results from automation and shorter turn-around times for vessels as well as changes in the spiritual and religious identities of the seafarers and the port chaplains.

Key words: ports, chaplains, seafaring, lone worker

Port chaplains have long come alongside seafarers, quietly supporting them in the midst of difficult health, economic, and other personal situations. In 1955, a chaplain with Mission to Seafarers in Tilbury recorded a visit to a local hospital, writing, "a Swedish seaman presented us with a problem – no English. I was able to get the Swedish Pastor down from London to see him and find out what was troubling him and then the Pastor prepared a statement in English for the House Surgeon. Afterwards the Swedish wife of a fellow Rotarian visited him with me regularly until we could get him repatriated."[1]

More than 60 years later, a researcher accompanied a port chaplain with Mission to Seafarers (UK) to visit hospitalized seafarers. A Filipino seafarer was brought to hospital via a helicopter from a supply vessel stationed in the North Sea after experiencing breathing difficulties. From fieldnotes:

> In the hospital, the Filipino seafarer was surprised to see us. He was not expecting us. Peter introduced himself. I greeted him in Filipino. 'Kamusta ka?' I asked him. I extended my hand. The seafarer rose from his bed. 'How did you know that I am here?' he asked. 'We got a call from the coast guard and we thought of dropping by to say hello and know whether you need anything from us,' Peter said. The seafarer looked at us with benign sorrow. He had company for now, in a foreign country, in the whitewashed and

[1] 1955 Report for Tilbury 5.

> antiseptic glow of the morning sun flooding his room. He must be relieved….
>
> For the next hour or so, we talked about his family, his work at sea, and how he became a seafarer [….]. We sat there listening to him, assuaging his fears, telling him that everything would be fine, that we will pray for him and his family […]. When there was a lull, Peter took out something from his rucksack. 'Here's a sim card and a top up voucher,' Peter said. He handed them to the seafarer […] The seafarer tinkered with his phone. I looked at Peter. He nodded. Is it working? He asked. The phone came to life and soon the seafarer was talking to his wife. 'See the people who are visiting me,' he said, 'the chaplain and his friend. I don't feel alone anymore.' Then the seafarer cried […] Before we left, the seafarer thanked Peter. 'I will not forget you,' he said. 'You were here when I was not expecting you. You did not know me but you found time to see me.'

Port chaplains support traveling seafarers around the world. They are one of the few groups that do, providing significant free labor that benefits seafarers and is relied on by ports, shipping companies, and governments, who do not typically provide financial support for the chaplains' work. The work ranges from hospital visits and death notices to organizing entertainment and advocating for better working conditions.[2] The intent behind the work has changed even as the content has shifted. Seafaring itself has changed as well, an important part of the context when examining accounts of port chaplains from the 1950s and 2010s. We focus on chaplains working with Mission to Seamen in the United Kingdom. One of the oldest and largest organizations providing these services, Mission to Seamen was formed in 1856 through a merger of several existing Anglican Missions. Bill Down described the work as "pastoral, evangelistic, and intensely practical."[3] In the context of seafarers, chaplaincy has included everything from ministering to seafarers on sailing ships and steam cutters, to providing religious

[2] Wendy Cadge and Michael Skaggs, 'Serving Seafarers in the Boston Harbor: Local Adaptation to Global Economic Change, 1820-2015,' *International Journal of Maritime History,* 30 (2018).
———, 'Humanizing Agents of Modern Capitalism? The Daily Work of Port Chaplains', *Sociology of Religion,* 80 (2019), 83–106.
Roald Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions: Their Origin and Early Growth* (Pasadena, 1986).
———, *The Way of the Sea: The Changing Shape of Mission in the Seafaring World* (Pasadena, 2008).
[3] Bill Down, *On Course Together: The Churches' Ministry in the Maritime World Today* (Norwich, 1989), 33.

tracts as well as books and magazines, to operating centres that provided food, reading and game rooms, chapels, and, in some places, overnight accommodations.

We listen in this article to the experiences of those who served as front-line chaplains with Mission to Seamen (now Mission to Seafarers) in the 1950s and 2010s in the UK. Information from chaplains in the 1950s comes from written reports they prepared for local and central offices. Information from the 2010s was gathered from fieldwork on board two ships which took place between 2017 and 2018. Additional data came from fieldnotes taken during several months of fieldwork in two UK ports and interviews with port chaplains working with the Mission of Seafarers from 2017 to 2020.

Relationships with seafarers are at the core of the work across decades. We describe the work of chaplaincy through individual support for seafarers, work around death, support for community building, and religious gatherings and events. While we find evidence for each of these components of the work in each decade included in the present study, there is a clear shift in the shape of pastoral work over time. Chaplains today also offer more individualized pastoral and practical support than they did seventy years ago and less explicitly community-building or religious connections. This shift likely results from automation and shorter turn-around times for vessels as well as changes in the spiritual and religious identities of the seafarers and the port chaplains. Ports, shipping companies and governments rely significantly on the free welfare services port chaplains provide, a reliance that is consistent over the time period examined. This reliance needs to be revisited in light of the Maritime Labour Convention 2006 and the lack of financial support available for it from ports, shipping companies, and governments.[4] By looking

[4] Helen Sampson, Nelson Turgo, Wendy Cadge, Sophie Gilliat-Ray, and Graeme Smith, 'Overstretched and Under-Resourced': The Corporate Neglect of Port Welfare Services for Seafarers", *Maritime Policy & Management*, (2022).

at the continuing and changing welfare needs of seafarers and shifts in how the Mission to Seafarers addresses such needs, the article hopes to draw attention to the complexities of welfare services in ports and the importance and relevance of government and maritime industry support provided to maritime charities.

Context

Chaplaincy, also called spiritual care in some settings, has a long history in the United Kingdom and the United States. First present in the military, chaplains today serve in hospitals, prisons, colleges and universities, and a range of other settings including ports. National contexts shape whether and where chaplains are required as well as the diversity of religious traditions represented in their ranks. Alongside the increasing religious diversity of British society, the inclusion of 'religion' as a protected characteristic under Equality Act 2010 legislation has been a catalyst for greater consideration of the religious and spiritual needs of those who work within, or are served by public institutions. As a consequence, a noticeable change in the landscape of chaplaincy in the UK over recent decades is the growth and incorporation of chaplains of different faiths, to the extent that some prisons and hospitals now employ 'co-ordinating chaplains' who may be of any other faith tradition or none at all. Public institutions are now recognising the need to have a team of chaplains who can meet both specific religious needs (such as offering bedside Eucharist, or reciting the 'call to prayer' in the ear of a newborn) as well as providing more 'generic' spiritual care to people of all faiths, and none.[5]

[5] *A Handbook of Chaplaincy Studies: Understanding Spiritual Care in Public Places*, eds. Christopher Swift, Mark Cobb, and Andrew Todd (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT, 2015).
Winnifred F. Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago, 2014).
Ronit Y. Stahl, *Enlisting Faith: How the Military Chaplaincy Shaped Religion and State in Modern America* (Cambridge, MA; London, 2017).
Wendy Cadge, *Spiritual Care: The Everyday Work of Chaplains* (New York, 2023).

Port chaplains, who are mostly Christian, often place the origins of their work in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who called his first four disciples from their work fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Institutionally, the work emerged from the Bethel Church Movement started in Methodist and Evangelical revivals in eighteenth-century England, including in the Royal Navy.[6] Many seafarers' missions were established in the 1820s as leaders aimed to make floating Bethels available around the globe to support Christians and bring more seafarers to belief in Christ.[7] In the nineteenth century, sea captains, described in the primary sources as Bethel Captains, led devotions at sea, facilitated shipboard meetings and gatherings in ports, and reached out to seafarers from other countries. Some captains drew on organizing work they had done in earlier years through Bible societies.[8] This grassroots maritime evangelism movement gradually institutionalized, as captains formed a range of associations for Christian support and fellowship under the Bethel flag and pledged to provide Christian witness to other seafarers.

Over time, Christian evangelism by seafarers towards other seafarers was replaced by more social service provision and advocacy, including support for regulatory systems designed to support seafarers' welfare.[9] Many organizations were involved, including the groups that became Mission to Seafarers and the British and Foreign Sailors' Society in the UK; a significant number of other organizations appeared along the way, some of which have survived into the

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[6] Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions.*
Down, *On Course Together,* 33.
Peter F. Anson, *The Church Maritime 'The Word Upon the Waters': Incidents in the History of Christian Missions to Seafarers* (1974).
Paul G. Mooney, 'Serving Seafarers Under Sail and Steam: A Missiological Reflection on the Development of Maritime Missions from 1779 to 1945', *Occasional Papers of the International Association for the Study of Maritime Mission,* 2 (2000).
[7] Paul K. Chapman, *Trouble on Board: The Plight of International Seafarers* (Ithaca, 1992).
———, 'What the Church Says to Seafarers', *Maritime Mission Studies* 1 (1994), 23–26.
[8] Kverndal, *The Way of the Sea*.
[9] Kverndal, *The Way of the Sea*.

present. While they mostly did not connect with chaplains working in other settings, the geographical arrangement of many ports meant that port chaplains often worked alongside industrial chaplains who worked in engineering, steelmaking and other heavy industries in the UK by the middle of the twentieth century.[10] They remained largely Christian even as the demographic of those working at sea shifted to include many more from the global south, with a wider variety of religious backgrounds.[11]

With changes in the industry, the Mission to Seamen continued to adapt and change – what Bill Down calls "resetting" in *On Course Together* – through the next decades. Automation, faster turn-around times, smaller crews, and other changes led the Mission to focus on ship visiting, practical needs, comprehensive care, collaborative work, and advocacy for seafarers when needed.[12] The central office of the Mission to Seamen in London did more collaborative coordination among local sites in response to needs. The Mission to Seamen set up a group in its London office to gather information directly from seafarers and offer advice on specific problems related to employment, poor treatment, and other industry challenges.[13]

The work of port chaplains has always been fluid, changing in response to developments in maritime work and the rise of subsequent needs. Such developments included transitions first from sail to steam-powered ships and then to diesel-powered vessels in global shipping. The introduction of shipping containers in the 1960s also provoked major changes, as they decreased dramatically the number of seafarers needed on individual vessels and the amount of time ships needed to spend in port. The advent of new technology on board, like the Global Maritime

[10] Elaine McFarland and Ronnie Johnston, 'Faith in the Factory: The Church of Scotland's Industrial Mission, 1942-58', *Historical Research,* 83 (2010), 539–64.
[11] Helen Sampson, *International Seafarers and Transnationalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Manchester, 2013).
[12] Down, *On Course Together,* 33.
[13] Down, *On Course Together,* 33.

Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) in 1999, and increased automatisation saw the further reduction of crew complement on ships.

The continued drive to cut down costs of crew expenses also impacts on the variation and availability of recreational facilities and social activities onboard. For instance, it used to be that ships would conduct barbecue parties onboard, but today very few ships hold such activities regularly. Coupled with strict regulations in a number of ports where seafarers found themselves unable to enjoy shore leave, these developments in the shipping industry have contributed to the feeling of increased social isolation and deteriorating mental health of seafarers.[14]

Port chaplains in the UK and around the world responded by more frequently going on board vessels to serve seafarers, rather than waiting for seafarers to come to centres on land, many of which closed as they saw fewer and fewer seafarers utilizing them. More ships started to operate under flags of convenience in the mid-twentieth century, working conditions changed and port chaplaincy organizations increasingly advocated for the rights of seafarers.[15]

The attacks of September 11, 2001, also greatly impacted how the pastoral work of chaplains is accessed and enjoyed by seafarers. There had been a heightened awareness of the vulnerability of ports to possible terrorist attacks and as such measures were adopted to secure the safety of ports worldwide. For example, The International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS Code) was introduced in 2004 to codify measures to protect ports and ships from any potential threats both from within and outside the ports. On top of other port state safety regulations, international measures in relation to port security have greatly impacted the mobility

[14] Robert Iversen, 'The Mental Health of Seafarers', *International Maritime Health,* 63 (2012), 78–89.
Erol Kahveci, 'Fast Turnaround Ships and Their Impact on Crews', *Seafarers International Research Centre: Cardiff, Wales*, (1999).
Helen Sampson and Neil Ellis, 'Seafarers' Mental Health and Wellbeing', *IOSH and Seafarers International Research Centre: Cardiff, Wales,* (2019).
[15] Sampson, *International Seafarers*.

of seafarers, and those who work for seafarer welfare like port chaplains.[16] With strict port security measures, port chaplains face greater difficulties in accessing ships, as some seafarers are denied shore leave in some ports due to lack of a visa.[17] As seafarers experience shore visit restrictions and additional work as a result of port security, there is an even greater need for port chaplains to have access to them to be able to provide them with welfare assistance when and if needed.[18]

From its origins in 1856, Mission to Seamen – now Mission to Seafarers – has included salaried, shore-based chaplains as well as shipboard volunteers. They initially provided sailing sanctuaries and later transitioned to more shore-based support. In 1906 Mission to Seamen was operating 62 locations in Britain and 24 overseas. By the start of World War I, Mission to Seamen had 150 chaplains and lay leaders world-wide, as well as 80 honorary chaplains.[19] The Mission to Seamen changed its official name to the Mission to Seafarers in 2000. Currently the Mission to Seafarers has chaplains serving in more than 200 ports in 50 countries.

Even as the nature of port chaplaincy has changed over time, the relationships between seafarers and port chaplains have been and remain central to the work. This is the case among port chaplains across organizations and contexts. As Cadge and Skaggs argue, chaplains serve in moral, religious and advocacy roles and connect seafarers to broader communities, what they call an "invisible global safety net." This work starts in relationships between seafarers and port chaplains; "chaplains mostly function as a pastoral lubricant that helps keep the economic system

[16] Carolyn A.E. Graham, 'Maritime Security and Seafarers' Welfare: Towards Harmonization', *WMU Journal of Maritime Affairs,* 8 (2009), 71–87.
[17] Helen Sampson, *Sea Time: An Ethnographic Adventure* (Routledge, 2024).
[18] Alsnosy Balbaa, 'Protecting Seafarers' Rights: The Need to Review the Implementation of the ISPS Code', (2005). Neera Malhotra, 'Balancing Seafarers' Welfare and Maritime Security with Biometrics' (Unpublished MA thesis, World Maritime University, 2007).
[19] Kverndal, *The Way of the Sea*.

running at the micro-level rather than as prophetic change agents whose actions lead to systemic change" (Cadge and Skaggs 2019).[20] We explore how this work changed over time in the UK through reports of port chaplains working for Mission to Seamen/Seafarers in the 1950s and 2010s. We identify four components of the work: individual support for seafarers; work around death; support for community building; and religious gatherings and events. While there is evidence for each of these components of the work in each decade, there is a clear shift in the shapes of the work over time with more emphasis on the individual and less on the communal dimensions.

Research Methods

This analysis draws from a larger UK Economic and Social Research Council-funded project (deleted for anynomisation purposes) considering the ways that faith is experienced and negotiated by seafarers on board as well as the provisions for faith and welfare made by charitable organisations based in ports ashore. We used primarily qualitative research methods. Non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews were utilised by a researcher who sailed for 89 days (combined total) on board two different vessels crewed by individuals from different countries. Whilst on board, detailed fieldnotes were made to record observations and these were subsequently analysed and thematically coded using Nvivo 12 software. Fifty-five interviews with seafarers were also carried out on board and these were digitally recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed and thematically coded using Nvivo 12. A researcher also spent time at two UK-based sites, Riverside Seafarers' Centre and Porton Seafarers' Centre (both anonymized), interviewing port chaplains and seafarers.

[20] Cadge and Skaggs, *Humanizing Agents*.

In an effort to put these contemporary materials in historical context, a researcher spent time in the Archives of the Mission to Seafarers (hereafter AMS), Hull History Center (hereafter HHC). For this article, we looked primarily at reports from chaplains in specific centres in the UK. The choice of 1950 archival materials and fieldwork data in 2019 is based on the assumption that the period of 60 years will allow for a greater and deeper exposition and scrutiny of continuities and developments in the shaping of the welfare work of the Mission to Seafarers. The 1950s is also a good stretch of time as it is the period when the more dominant currents and new developments in maritime welfare provisions were equally prominent in the maritime welfare landscape. We looked across the ports where chaplains were working in the 1950s.

The activities of local Mission to Seafarers centres were reported annually to the central office. Some activities were counted: ships visited, visits to hospitals, services held, beds and meals offered, objects distributed (which included New Testaments, woolen comforts and books), and entertainment (which included dances, cinemas, theater parties and whist drives). Some reports mentioned the work of chaplains, readers and lay helpers while others were more sparsely indicated. Ships visited by port chaplains were listed by those in the dock and those visited by launch, and visits to hospitals indicated the number of visits and the number of people visited. We compare these reports to contemporary interviews.

Findings and Discussion

Individual Support for Seafarers

In both decades included in this study, individual support for seafarers in the forms of private conversation and material assistance was central and the basis for all the rest of the work. In the 1950s seafarers often stayed one or more nights in Mission to Seamen's facilities, while in the 2010s they passed through centres usually in just a few hours as ships were loaded and

unloaded before returning to sea. The report from a port chaplain in Tilbury in 1955, for example, explained, "There was an almost constant stream of men to my office some seeking advice on a variety of matters but most seeking that which is so difficult for the seaman to find outside, the friendly chat with someone who has his interests at heart. I feel that this demand upon us is much greater than in former days and I am sure that time simply must be found for this."[21]

Port chaplains and volunteers were having similar conversations in the 2010s though on-board ships as well as in seafarers' centres. Nelson, one of the lay volunteers, kept a list of seafarers that he had met over the years in his phone, and sometimes sent text messages letting them know he was thinking of them. During time in the seafarers' centre in Porton, Nelson frequently sat with port chaplains as they spoke with seafarers. From fieldnotes,

> For more than 30 minutes we sat there listening to the story of the Filipino chief engineer... I thought we were there to perform the role of a listening ear. The chief engineer spoke about his poverty in the Philippines and how he supported himself by working as a cook in a school to be able to send himself to college. He started out as a messman on board and by the time he was 35, he was already a chief engineer. Now, he had a relatively comfortable life, he said. His children were going to top schools in Manila and he hoped to retire by the time he reaches 50. The chief engineer seemed to relish the opportunity to have a captive audience and spoke for close to half an hour. He only stopped when the third engineer came in to inform him that a shore personnel wanted to see him. Once the chief engineer was away, we decided to leave the ship. (Fieldnotes Porton).

Port chaplains spoke directly about being this listening ear in interviews. One said, "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. Everybody else turns up and – sign this captain, show me this, or… put the gangway there, or, you know."[22]

[21] 1955 Tilbury.
[22] Interview Chaplain 4.

Specific requests in the 1950s included visits for seafarers not able to get to shore due to dock workers' strikes, support for individuals suffering from mental and spiritual distress, and help for those whose vessel sunk. These kinds of requests and assistance were consistent in the 2010s. In the case of the sunk vessel in the 1950s, reports from the chaplains indicated there were only minor injuries. The port chaplain at the time met the seafarers after the incident, brought them to the Mission, and arranged for them to bathe and to have clean clothes and travel to London.[23] The Mission to Seafarers continues to care for seafarers whose ships either sunk or met troubles at sea. In 2023 a large car-carrying ship hit rocks off Land's End in Cornwall. The ship was towed to Falmouth and the rescued seafarers were looked after by the Mission to Seafarers. In the words of a centre manager there,

> We were very well-received, and the free SIM cards were extremely welcome as there was no Wi-Fi on board, or available alongside the wharf. As well as handing out goodies, we left some Falmouth maps and Mission brochures, explaining that the Mission was inside the port and just a short walk away. The captain said we could be 300% sure that the Mission would be visited by the crew as soon as they were able to do so![24]

As in the 1950s, port chaplains in the 2010s continued to help with shopping, transportation and other personal issues. In the 1950s, port chaplains would help in looking for everyday essentials like soap. Nowadays, ships were in general well provided with these goods, regularly supplied by ship chandlers carrying out provisioning onboard. Requests for shopping in 2010s, therefore, were much more personalised, like buying goods needed for certain occasions. One port chaplain recalled being asked to do Christmas shopping for the ship, "the Chief mate phoned up and said, because you know, the company gives them some money for Christmas. He phoned me up…and said, Captain's asked can you go and buy 23 tubs of Roses? Yeah, but why?

[23] 1955 Tilbury.
[24] https://www.missiontoseafarers.org/appeals/summer-2023-appeal

'Cause it hadn't clicked at that point. I was thinking, Captain's got a sweet tooth. And he went, oh it's from our Christmas fund money that's the leftovers..."[25] These shopping errands were often to get supplies for the crew. In another example, a different port chaplain explained, "One Russian Captain asked me for a favour. "Could you take me to the local supermarket? I just need 20 minutes to buy something, some goodies or something for the staff and then I will go back to my ship."[26] The chaplain also helped with the currency exchange needed to make the purchases.

In more personal examples in the 2010s, chaplains assisted with interpersonal and payment issues on board including problems with contracts. In one such example, a chaplain explained,

> So we get this email from this guy saying, can you please help me? My contract extension is up, and they just told me they're not gonna let me go home for Christmas. I just want to go home. In his 50's. Filipino, retired. He'd done all he's supposed to do, but now they just told him arbitrarily he can't go home because he's a fitter. And fitters are few and far between, so they wanted him to stay. And they weren't listening to him. So he sends an email and says, can you please help me? You know me, you brought chocolates on our ship. So that was the identifier, we brought him chocolates. So we got in touch with him and he sent us pictures of his contract. And his contract information extension information, which I forwarded to a colleague, (name). And (name) just – in a week – he got a hold of everybody, magically, the president of the country – and said, "You let this guy go home. He's done his stuff." You're telling me you can't find a fitter? No. You just don't wanna look for a fitter. And you need to do that. Now. And so when he got to (place), the chief came in and said, "You're going home."[27]

In this example and others, chaplains work with others in the industry to help solve problems as well as with chaplains at other ports. In another such example, a chaplain received an email from a chaplain colleague in Madagascar requesting assistance for a vessel that would soon be coming into port and they worked collaboratively to support the seafarers on board.

[25] Interview Chaplain 4.
[26] Interview Chaplain 6.
[27] Interview Chaplain 9.

Port chaplains in both decades regularly worked around illness, injury and death. In 1951, for example, a report from Victoria Dock told of a young man who was injured onboard a vessel and taken to the hospital. "In his semi-conscious state he called many times for his Mother," the chaplain wrote. "We were able to prevail on the Ship owner to fly her down to see him…We made her as at home as we possibly could at the Mission. The boy, of course, was delighted and is now making good progress."[28]

Also in the 1950s, chaplains made regular visits to seafarers in the hospital to support mariners, get news to their families, and provide places for them to stay once discharged. They also helped locate assistance for non-English speaking seafarers, a need more common in the 1950s than today when English is the common language in multi-national ships. A chaplain in Tilbury in 1958 saw seafarers in the hospital from New Zealand, China, and Greece; "a Greek who was very ill had got out of bed and demanded his clothes so I had another chase around for my Greek interpreter. Taking him back to the hospital we did our best to make the man stay in hospital and have the operation which would put his troubles right, but he would have none of it and said he would go whatever happened…."[29]

In another example from the 1950s, a port chaplain wrote about a Chinese sailor who was not getting better. "I went over and had a talk with him, and later, a member of our staff who had a long spell in China produced some Chinese newspapers and chopsticks which quite cheered him up, and a visit from sailors of his own nationality again added to his happiness in a strange land."[30] Older seamen were also helped by the Mission to Seamen. In a 1954 report from Victoria Dock Road a port chaplain wrote, "An aged seamen, at the death of his landlady, was

[28] 1951 Report for Victoria Dock.
[29] MtS Chaplain Report, 1958, AMS, HHC.
[30] 1954 Report for Victoria Dock Road.

left alone in the house where he had lodged for the last 25 years. We were successful at getting him admitted to the Royal Alfred Homes at Belverdere, where we saw him safely…."[31]

Such visits remained central to the work in the 2010s and continued to take place largely in person. A chaplain remembered one situation, "with a chap that was injured, he was in hospital quite a long time and I didn't, never really felt that I was getting through to him, but I kept visiting all the time and then when he came back he sent me a lovely letter saying, oh, because he was in hospital quite a long time and he said, oh, thanks very much for everything you do…"[32] In another example, a chaplain visited a seafarer twice a week for five weeks while he was hospitalized. In the chaplain's words, "He ought to see a regular face, a regular… friend, in (place) in a hospital. You know, things weren't going particularly well. And then January this year, he's back on board and his ship came through (place)….And he was going around the ship, and the Chief Officer came and said hello and, you know… the friend said and (Name) was the one that looked after me when I was in hospital in (place). I just thought, I was touched by that – that he was willing to say that."[33]

Death

Port chaplains in both decades also regularly worked around death. In the 1950s they supported crew and broke bad news to relatives when seafarers died. In the 2010s the work was entirely focused on supporting crew. In 1954, a port chaplain in Tilbury described a seafarer who had an "epileptic fit and died." The company asked the chaplain to deliver the news to the seafarer's wife; the chaplain wrote, "As added tragedy was the fact that they had been married ten years and lived with in-laws, and then during the voyage their turn had come for a house and

[31] 1954 Report for Victoria Dock Road.
[32] Interview Chaplain 3.
[33] Interview Chaplain 4.

the wife was busy preparing it for her husband to come to. I have had very many of these cases in my time but this one shook me badly…"[34] In another example in 1954, a port chaplain wrote, "After breaking the death news of his uncle to a young seaman, I received a letter from the boy's mother in which she said, 'May I, a very humble mother, thank you from the bottom of my heart…"[35]

Work around death was also present in the 2010s in supporting crew members around deaths on board or in news they heard from their families. In one case in the 2010s, chaplains present just after a death continued to visit the ship and support the crew over time. The chaplain explained, "This was an accident onboard a vessel at (place) which initially (name) and his colleague were involved in and then we became involved and so we were just going, it was a very tragic accident and it was a youngish man that had died and initially in these situations, like I said before, there's lots of state people on and police and everything…" The chaplains aimed to meet the crew where they were. In the chaplain's words, "In that kind of situation we would just sit in the crew mess and people would come in at different times and some people would, you say are you okay and some people want to talk about it and some people wouldn't, but you have to understand it's a process…" Chaplains visited the ship over its next few times in port to continue providing support.

Port chaplains also helped organize funerals and memorial services in both decades. Following an accident in 1955, a port chaplain wrote, "we were directly affected here at Tibury by a local man (Mr. Jospeh Ryan) being one of the seamen lost in the tragedy of the Stratheden's lifeboat on the 13th of the month, it is true to say that this incident dominated our thoughts throughout March. I was asked to accompany the Company's official to break the news to his

[34] MtS Chaplain Report, 1954 AMS, HHC.
[35] 1954 Report for John Ashley.

family on the 14th. The ship was due to arrive on the 21st March and the Vicar of Grays and I felt that a local Memorial Service ought to be held and together we arranged for this to take place on the 22nd at the Parish Church of St, John the Baptist, Tilbury Docks…"[36] Also in Tilbury in 1959, a seafarer at the Mission stood up from watching television, collapsed and died; "we saw to all his affairs and arranged for his cremation a few days later," the chaplain reported. They also arranged for the burial at sea of other former seamen who died during the decade and helped to facilitate memorials for seamen whose loved ones had died while the seamen were at sea. In notes from 1960, "One of the men received the sad news that his mother had died, and I was able to arrange a memorial service that evening in the parish church. This service was conducted by the Vicar."[37]

In the 2010s, this was more informal with the chaplains themselves offering words or a service usually on board the vessel. In the example mentioned above, the chaplain and a colleague "went onboard and just did a little service for the crew just to remember the guy the next day." In another situation when a seafarer died following an accident the chaplain was called and took a priest with him to the vessel; "the two of them drove like a bat out of hell up to (place) to do a service of a requiem mass of the guy who died because they were devastated. He was in his 20s, he had a little girl – 3 – a wife who was 6 or 7 months pregnant. It was just a nightmare. A total nightmare."[38]

Community Building

The role of port chaplains in building community among seafarers shifted between the 1950s and the 2010s. While seafarers in the 1950s stayed in the mission over a few days and

[36] 1955 Tilbury.
[37] MtS Chaplain Report, 1960, AMS, HHC.
[38] Interview Chaplain 9.

there were opportunities for various forms of gathering and entertainment, those who visited a seafarers' centre in 2010 stayed for only a few hours. Mission to Seamen reports through the 1950s describe social events. In Tilbury, social events – mostly dances – were popular with seamen and a new television was placed in a newly refurbished lounge. A 1954 report stated, "The weekly dance has been a great success but undoubtedly the television (screen 4' x 3') is the most popular 'draw'… sporting events are always keenly watched. We could do with a second billiard table erected and we shall be glad to see this done."[39]

At Victoria Dock a weekly meeting of the Flying Angel Fellowship was held regularly with reports noting that "although the numbers are still small, they are gradually increasing and the tone of the meetings is excellent."[40] British and seamen from abroad all engaged in social activities. In a report from 1951, "On Monday 1st March the 'Worcester' Cadets who were leaving at Easter came to see the Mission, have tea, see a film and those who wished to join the Fellowship. On this occasion all choose to join. We feel that this visit every term is infinitely worthwhile as every Cadet leaving the 'Worcester' has made first hand contact with the Flying Angel before he joins his first ship."[41] Also in 1951, reports described seamen from other countries attending dances at Victoria Dock Road. "Argentinean seamen from 'Eva Peron' have been regularly to the dances while their ship has been in port. Many offers of meat for the mission were forthcoming but regretfully declined. Dutch and Indian seamen have also joined in happily."[42]

In the 2010s, most social events organized by chaplains revolved around Christmas parties in seafarers' centres, attended by seafarers, staff and some community members.

[39] 1954 report for Tilbury.
[40] 1950 MtS Victoria dock.
[41] 1951 Report for Victoria Dock Road.
[42] 1951 Report for Victoria Dock Road.

Chaplains at the seafarers' centre in Riverside held a party on Christmas Eve though it was not very well attended. The organizers learned that many ships docked in the port were also holding their parties at that time and they might change the date in the future.[43] Other port chaplains described having "a carol service at the centre, we take Christmas presents. So we take donations and we buy some stuff. So we take all the crews a Christmas present…And we also give out Christmas and Easter cards."[44] Dances and other related social events are not held anymore. This likely results from changing social norms as dances would entail inviting local women to participate as well as a lack of space in centres, fast turn-around time of ships, and changing interests among seafarers. Some centres organized sports like basketball tournaments, but this only happens in centres with suitable facilities, which are few. Some shipping companies also prohibit their crew in participating ashore and organising similar events on board as this can result in physical injuries.

Religious Gatherings and Events

Attendance at religious services held by port chaplains declined between the 1950s and 2010s. Mention was made throughout the 1950s of church services, prayers, and other explicitly religious gatherings and events though they were on the decline overall. Specific reports outline the types of religious services offered and attendance which varied but was typically low. A report from Tilbury in March 1950, for example, stated "Church Services: Attendance practically nil. Services were held twice daily, totaling 62 Services, which were attended by only 8 seamen…"[45] More seamen seemed to be attending services in Tilbury in 1954 as a report noted, "Attendance at the Services was the most pleasing feature of all and at least two men we know

[43] Fieldnotes, Riverside.
[44] Interview Chaplain 4.
[45] Report for Tilbury March 1950.

received definite spiritual help. Talking over our experiences with the staff when the Festivities were over we all agreed that the Holy Spirit had been very much in our midst during the whole time and we have all received inspiration and encouragement."[46]

At the Mission to Seamen on Victoria Dock Road, reports described church services including a visit in 1951 from Bishop Kerney, "who spent the weekend 16th-19th March at Victoria Dock Road. He preached in Albert Dock Hospital at the Ward Service on Palm Sunday and in our Chapel in the Evening."[47] Church attendance in the early 1950s was higher at Victoria Dock Road where a 1951 report explained, "Church attendances have been encouraging…I am particularly pleased with the increase of communicants and on one Sunday morning it was a great joy to collect three apprentices from their first ship and bring them along to communion and breakfast. I was more pleased when I heard they had been working until 4 am and in spite of very little sleep were ready to come."[48] Another report noted that church services on dance nights are especially well attended and include "many Roman Catholic and nonconformist seamen who have joined us in worship."[49]

Programming and social events on Christian religious holidays were also the norm in the 1950s. Services at Easter and Christmas in Tilbury were highlighted in reports from the 1950s, including support provided by local women that made these holidays special. On Easter in 1955, the "Lady Wardens" surprised the men with a meal served at decorated tables, including "gaily painted eggs, many of them painted by the men themselves."[50] In 1957, about 125 seafarers (mostly African, according to the chaplain's reports) gathered on Good Friday in Tilbury, with

[46] 1954 Report for Tilbury.
[47] 1951 Report for Victoria Dock Road.
[48] 1951 report for Victoria Dock Road.
[49] 1951 report for Victoria Dock Road.
[50] MtS Chaplain Report, 1955, AMS, HHC.

fewer attending the Easter breakfast, Communion service, and Easter Monday evening gatherings.

Similarly, a 1954 report from Tilbury explains, "We were able to give the seamen a very fine Christmas program indeed. We hired two dance bands ourselves and the Shipping Federation staff provided a band from Gravesend for one evening, so, with a gramophone night, we were able to give four dances over the ten day period, all of which were well attended…Besides British seamen we had what the press called 'Tilbury's Own League of Nations' with us in the shape of Greeks, Spaniards, Germans, Dutch, Swedes, Danes and one Pakistani and although the language was a problem at times we managed very well – indeed the Spaniards came every night."[51]

Much less was happening in the 2010s around religious services, especially apart from Christmas and Easter. The religious demographics of the seafarers themselves were more diverse in this decade and the overall ethos of port chaplaincy had moved more firmly away from evangelistic outreach to its central focus on social services. At the seafarers' centre in Porton, there is a chapel which hosts a weekly service every Sunday evening. The attendance of seafarers in the service varies with the port chaplain saying the highest number of seafarers that he had was seven. Most of the time, he said, he was alone doing the service.[52] Chaplains sometimes offered religious services on board vessels. One chaplain described offering communion in the officer's lounge on board,

> And I remember doing the communion from the reserved sacrament of the ship, and they did the service in the officer's lounge. Then the captain said can you go down to the engine room, because the engineers can't come up. I said, yeah no problem, and so we went down, and I remember standing in the engine control room. You know, the noise of the engine, the alarms going off… the engineers covered in oil because something had gone wrong and they were having to pull apart part of the engine. Full of oil, the stink of

[51] 1954 Report for Tilbury.
[52] Fieldnotes, Porton.

> the stuff. But I was standing there in my cassock with the sacraments. And there was something about being there in the presence of Christ… and it was an example of being in the midst of all the dirt, the noisiness, the chaos – you know, doing the small part of the service that I did in the engine room – you know, running off to turn that alarm off. And I thought… this… is where Christ would be. Would he be in the tabernacle at the church? No, he'd be down in the engine room.[53]

In another example, a chaplain offered a service – including ashes for it was Ash Wednesday – on board a vessel. "The service was short but solemn. It was an Anglican service but the Filipino seafarers who were all Roman Catholics were only too happy to hear mass. Many of them had not heard mass for months, I was told, and being able to take communion and anointed with ash on the forehead was highly significant for them. The second mate said that his visit to the church was a welcome relief after some 18 days at sea. He said he felt refreshed. One of them said that he rarely got the opportunity to hear mass in a foreign country and it was his second time only in his eight-year service at sea."[54] Unlike in previous decades when religious services, even if sparsely attended, were the norm, they were the exception by the 2010s.

Conclusions

Port chaplains have met, and continue to meet, seafarers where they are and build personal relationships with them. Examples across decades show port chaplains at work even as the environment and contexts in which this takes place have changed. While chaplains continue to be called to offer individual support, especially around illness and situations involving death, their role as community builders has declined as the time seafarers spend in ports has declined. While relationships between seafarers and port chaplains used to be completely dependent on physical time spent together, the ability to call, text and email has shifted the shape of those

[53] Interview Chaplain 4.
[54] Fieldnotes, Porton.

relationships. Seafarers are no longer in ports long enough to attend scheduled events and activities or to spend time with port chaplains save for short visits to seafarers' centres.

The religious dimension of port chaplains work has also shifted. The earliest evangelistic orientation of port chaplains was fading in the 1950s as social activities and practical support for seafarers became more common. This trend continued into the 2010s with some – though very limited – talk of engaging with seafarers in religious rituals or services. Rather than any explicit religious conversation, engagement between seafarers and port chaplains in both decades was relational focused on care and concern more generally. While port chaplains – then and now – may have been personally motivated by religion or spirituality, this did not infuse their work with seafarers.

Yet chaplains, while not distinctively religious, are still not interchangeable with other existing seamen's welfare charities, especially secular ones. Our emphasis on religious organisations of port welfare services belies the fact that secular organisations also actively provide assistance to seafarers.[55] However, unlike religious maritime charities like the Mission to Seafarers, which have presence in many ports of the world, these secular charities have none and make their presence felt only through funded projects like free service vehicles (ITF) for seafarers. These secular organisations also directly fund the salary of staff of seafarers' centres run by some religious maritime charities. As such they complement, widen and strengthen the welfare provision available to seafarers in ports or wherever help is needed. The face of

[55] For example in the UK and elsewhere, ISWAN, ITF, The Seafarers' Charity and Merchant Navy Welfare Board (MNWB) engage with seafarers by providing them with online resources for health and wellbeing, financial assistance and practical help in ports when needed. ISWAN has an office in the Philippines that provides practical assistance to Filipino seafarers in relation to their health and financial wellbeing.

"ministry of presence" and kindness to strangers[56] remains the chaplains and centre staff who directly interact with seafarers on a daily basis.

Most consistent over time is the work port chaplains did to care for seafarers who are ill, injured, and in other vulnerable positions, including economic ones related to their employment status. They have become seafarers' most trusted allies in every port, helping crews in distress to connect to institutional intervention and support. It is this relational work that leads to their positions in moral, religious and advocacy roles and connects seafarers to broader communities, what Cadge and Skaggs call an "invisible global safety net."[57]

The needs and concerns of seafarers continue to evolve as technologies on board ships change and as developments in geo-politics also shape how seafarers manage and experience their (im)mobilities and access to forms and means of welfare services ashore. Amidst all this is the continued presence of maritime welfare charities in ports which also face internal and external challenges as to how welfare support to seafarers is maintained, enhanced and curated. In recent years, many seafarers' centres have closed down for financial reasons as they struggle with diminishing resources, and lack of support from both the maritime industry and national governments.[58] Other centres though continue to thrive, aided by strong community support, grants from labour unions, and charities.

As seafarers continue to face unprecedented challenges to their safety and wellbeing, as shown by the COVID-19 global pandemic and threats of violence/bombing in the Black Sea and Red Sea, the welfare services provided by port chaplains, ranging from meeting their practical

[56] Nelson Turgo, Wendy Cadge, Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Helen Sampson, and Graeme Smith, 'Relying on the Kindness of Strangers: Welfare-Providers to Seafarers and the Symbolic Construction of Community', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 52(2023), 139-162.
[57] Cadge and Skaggs, *Humanizing Agents*.
[58] Sampson et al., 'Overstretched and Under-Resourced'.

needs like internet data for mobile phones, to attending religious ceremonies, have never been more relevant, prominent, and urgent. Maritime charities like the Mission to Seafarers remain the dominant and constant force in looking after the welfare of the workforce that feeds and clothes the world. Regardless of being 'overstretched and under-resourced,' seafarers' centres in ports ceaselessly cater to every seafarer needs.[59] From their early beginnings in the 1850s through the 1950s, and today, the Mission to Seafarers, like many maritime charities running seafarers' centres in ports all over the world respond and adapt to the changing land/seascape of seafarer welfare needs.

[59] Sampson et al., 'Overstretched and Under-Resourced'.

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