

A helping hand along the docks; Phila. mission befriends foreign sailors.

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Inquirer Staff Writer

Body

The Seamen's Church Institute has been a fixture on the **Philadelphia** waterfront for 166 years, providing friendly **help** to 40,000 seafarers a year whose ships **dock** in ports **along** the Delaware River.

The Rev. James D. Von Dreele, an Episcopal priest, is head chaplain and executive director of the interdenominational ministry.

Father Jim and his staff, including five part-time chaplains and eight to 10 volunteers, visit more than 1,700 ships a year. They offer counsel to **foreign sailors**, **help** with immigration issues, and intervene in ship problems such as pay disputes. They also escort the **sailors** off ships for a few hours of R&R. Seafarers' favorite pastime? Shopping.

Because of stringent post-9/11 immigration regulations, many crews cannot leave ship because they do not have U.S. visas. Those who do, often head for the institute headquarters at 475 N. Fifth St. to watch TV, call home, reflect in the chapel, or surf the Web.

Question: How do you learn a ship is in port?

Answer: We have access to the Maritime Exchange ship lists, so we are able to tell where the new arrivals are. We cover 125 miles on both the New Jersey and Pennsylvania sides of the river. And there are 33 terminals that we serve.

Q: What do you do for **sailors**?

A: Part of it is simply **befriending** them. Being on a ship for eight to 10 months with the same guys, they get really tired of each other. We are the fresh face that comes aboard. We care for their emotional, spiritual, and physical welfare.

Shore leave is extremely important because of the monotony of the ship and the pressure of being on board. They need time to get away, and that's what we provide. We also do advocacy work. If a seafarer has not been paid, we will intervene.

Q: How often does that happen?

A: Not as much as it used to, but we have seen situations where the crew has been owed \$50,000 or \$60,000. We move in with some **help** from a labor inspector. We pressure the captain and the owner. We negotiate the issue.

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About 95 percent of the seafarers we see are foreign, from more than 100 nations. About one-third are Filipinos. The rest are primarily from Asia, Eastern Europe, and Europe.

Q: How did the 9/11 terror attacks affect your work?

A: Since 9/11 it has been very difficult for seafarers to get off ships because of all the governmental regulations and requirements. Only 20 percent to 25 percent take shore leave now. Before 9/11, we just said, "Hi" and "Goodbye" and the guys got off. Now we have to go through elaborate procedures going into the terminal, signing in, and showing a TWIC card [Transportation Worker Identification Credential].

Q: Where do the sailors like to go?

A: Walmart and Best Buy are their two favorite places. At Best Buy, they are looking for computers, laptops. The U.S. is the cheapest place to buy electronics. For those who cannot leave ship, we sometimes go shopping for them. We bring cell phones so they can call home. We take clothing and gifts. We do worship services.

Q: Does the institute get involved in waterfront issues?

A: Yes. We have taken a stand on deepening the Delaware River. Dredging is essential to the business and livelihood of the port community. Ships are only going to get bigger. We need that extra five feet of draft in the water in order to accommodate those ships. Otherwise, the port will become obsolete.

Q: You oppose the proposed Foxwoods Casino on the Delaware River site?

A: I think casino development will destroy the port, particularly in Philadelphia. Have you ever driven South Columbus Boulevard? It is 60,000 cars a day now. With a casino, it would be 120,000. The only way to get cargo on and off the terminals from Washington Street south is by truck. If traffic congestion gets worse they will not be able to operate. I think the terminals near the casino will shut down permanently. I wrote to the politicians my concerns.

Q: How did seamen's centers in North America begin?

A: One hundred fifty or 200 years ago seafarers were really treated badly. They were basically dragged out of bars and imprisoned on the ship. So the church - not only the Episcopal Church but also the Presbyterians and a couple of other denominations - began to respond in seaports like ours to be an advocate for the seafarers. Because they are very vulnerable. Once they get out to sea they have no control over their lives.

Q: Where do you get funds to pay staff and expenses?

A: A variety of sources. The port community is fairly generous. Churches and individuals also donate. We have an endowment, which we use to subsidize our work. We charge a \$110 fee to every ship that comes into port to help subsidize the work we do. It costs us over \$200 to service the ships. We are able to raise about \$750,000, and use our endowment to bridge the gap.

Q: Do captains and ship owners welcome you aboard?

A: They are grateful that we come. We take care of the morale issues of the seafarers, so they have fewer problems with loading and unloading cargo. We are a release valve for these guys, so by providing the hospitality services we take a little bit of the tension out of their lives. I call it a moment of grace.

The Rev. James D. Von Dreele

Occupation: Episcopal priest and executive director for 13 years of Seamen's Church Institute of Philadelphia.

Age: 62.

Background: Grew up in Wilmington, where he still lives. Spent 25 years in parish ministry in Pittsburgh and New Jersey.

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Personal: Wife, Betsy; children, Sarah, 34, and Joshua, 32.

Pastimes: Golf; relaxing in Rehoboth Beach, Del.

Best-Kept Secret: Volunteer priest at St. David's Episcopal Church in Wilmington. Preaches 25 to 30 Sundays a year about the institute's work to congregations that invite him.

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Graphic

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