



A friendly face and more: the crucial role of ship visitors in supporting our seafarers

We didn't quite know what to expect as we followed Charles up the loading ramp of the car carrier MV Morning Christina, midway through loading a consignment of Range Rovers at Southampton Port and greeted the crew member at the security point. We were there as guests of Stella Maris to get a better understanding of the work that ship-visiting charities do and a glimpse of life onboard one of the thousands of ships that visit the UK, carrying goods to and from our shores.

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Charles is a lay chaplain with Stella Maris. It was founded in Glasgow, Scotland over 100 years ago and now has a global reach with almost 1,000 chaplains and volunteers in 328 ports across 54 countries. The sheer scale of ship visiting is impressive and a testament to the charities' volunteers. Pre-COVID, Stella Maris volunteers made approximately 70,000 visits, of which 8,000 were in the UK alone.

Stella Maris is one of many maritime charities. Other leading UK-based charities include The Mission to Seafarers, Sailors Society and Seafarers UK. These similarly provide support, pastoral care, and for those visiting ships, token gifts for the crew, such as Easter eggs. Coincidentally, we greeted visitors from Mission to Seafarers departing the second car carrier we were about to visit, causing us to leave our gifts at the security point rather than further interrupt the crew.

Many of the ship-visiting charities have a religious affiliation. This might seem incongruous in our increasingly secular world. But whilst much of the work they do is pastoral, faith plays a hugely important role for many seafarers and particularly those from the Philippines whose nationals make up approximately 25 percent of the world's 1.5 million seafarers. It was an insight into the Filipino culture to see that there was more interest shown in the rosaries and prayer cards offered than in the chocolate biscuits and chocolate bars. As well as these comforts, the crew gratefully accepted the home-knitted woolly hats to keep them warm for their imminent passage across the North Sea. But perhaps most interest was shown in the SIM cards offered for sale (at cost) by the visitors, which give the crew contact with families and friends back in the Philippines.

During the day, we learned from Charles and his fellow lay chaplain, Gregory, about the work they do beyond ship visits and the differing living conditions they have found onboard ships.

Although COVID caused a particular set of problems, seafarer abandonments are an ongoing occurrence. Crews can be left for months without the payment of wages, supplies and even fresh water and fearful of leaving the ship at the risk of compromising their claims for wages. All too often charities step in to provide the basics. But these charities do so much more to help crews abandoned far from home, including hosting visits to the cinema, bowling, pub lunches and to churches, mosques and temples. Other problems are typically medical - we were told about one seafarer taken to Southampton hospital with a suspected head injury, who then had to be repatriated with assistance from Stella Maris after his vessel departed without him.

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Neil Henderson sharing the Mariners Medico Guide with one of the seafarers.

We learned that the differences between living conditions onboard can be stark. Charles remarked that a recent visit to a newly built Norwegian-flagged tanker had been like visiting a very smart hotel, whilst smaller, older tankers can have cramped living quarters often painted in dark colours and with little natural light. We were told that another important aspect of crew welfare is the food served on board: the all-Filipino crew we visited told us that their food was good, and we heard about some vessels where the officers and crew have separate cooks to cater for their own national preferences. But we were also told of another ship where the Eastern European cook would only serve potatoes and refused to cook rice for the Filipino crew.

We heard too about the consequences of the efficiency with which modern vessels are operated and the reluctance of some ports to allow seafarers to disembark to spend time ashore. This has meant that visits to the shops have been replaced by advance online orders on Amazon, delivered to Stella Maris offices, and then handed to the crew during visits. These orders may be for clothes, or essential items, but could equally be for presents or souvenirs which seafarers often feel obliged to bring home with them to give to family and friends.

What did we learn from our time with Stella Maris?

The enthusiasm for prayer cards, which included an image of a celebrated Filipino saint, and for SIM cards was a stark reminder of the distance of the crew from home during their 9-month contracts, as much as were the woolly hats which illustrated the unpreparedness for our colder climate.

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Whilst better food and smarter accommodation are almost guaranteed to improve the working environment for seafarers, internet access is potentially more double-edged. Immediate connectivity to friends and family can bring comfort but can also result in a feeling of helplessness when the seafarer is aware of problems back at home with no ability to assist from the other side of the world. It can also cause crew members to spend more time online by themselves than speaking to colleagues or engaging in communal activities, potentially undermining the sense of community, and ultimately generating feelings of loneliness.

We learned that there are significant differences between how shipowners treat their crews, and that many should do more to better the conditions for those entrusted with their multi-million-dollar assets. It shouldn't be the case that charities have to provide basic assistance when individual seafarers or crews are in need.

What can we, ashore, do to help support our seafarers?

P&I Clubs provide the certificates required under the [Maritime Labour Convention](#) to address the needs of abandoned crew. Should a shipowner abandon their crew on a ship insured by Gard, we have a direct financial responsibility to step in. In these cases, Gard will proactively assist the seafarers, ensuring that they have necessary provisions on board, that they are repatriated and that up to four months of unpaid wages are paid.

There is more to be done to support seafarers - we can champion their proper treatment and rights in our daily dealings with others in the shipping industry. We can encourage owners, charterers, and managers to treat them with compassion; and we can pressure governments to deal with them fairly and respect their legal rights when problems arise. We can support fund-raising efforts for seafaring charities to enable them to continue their valuable work until such time as change can be effected. Perhaps too, if we get the opportunity to meet them, we can thank them for the work they do for all of us.

Additional resource for seafarers

The Mariners Medico Guide is a free app available to all seafarers. The digital guide provides easy to understand medical information using a symptom-based approach. Find more information and download instructions [here](#).

Pictures courtesy of Stella Maris.

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