

We do it with volunteers

Ken Hawkins, Executive Director of the Seattle Seafarers' Center, talks about the importance, and the benefits, of volunteering for The Mission to Seafarers.



Ken with volunteer knitters at the Brittany Park retirement community

The story is the same in every seaport in the world. Ships are bigger and faster, crew sizes are shrinking, automation has shortened times in port dramatically, and seafarers continue to endure the same sense of isolation and loneliness that has plagued their profession for centuries. Cruise ships are an increasing part of our professional mix, and over time renovations and dramatic shifts in port businesses have forced us to rethink and redefine our service model. Events of the past two decades have had an enormous impact on port security and how the world sees “the stranger.”

In the midst of all this change, resources are shrinking. So how can our local Mission to Seafarers team get its important work done? How can we provide on board services to the 30,000 seafarers, greet and offer transportation to more than 10,000 cruise ship employees each summer, and how can we grow?

We do it with volunteers

For 39 years we struggled to provide hospitality and service to visitors. But in 2010 we made a real attempt to grow our ministry, as we built partnerships with local Episcopal (Anglicans in America) Churches. These partnerships increased our funding, but more importantly we found many people with a strong desire to get involved. Today we have more than 200 volunteers from local

Episcopal and Lutheran congregations, and will soon be adding more helping hands from the local Catholic Archdiocese.

Cruise ship driving

Each summer the major cruise lines begin service from Seattle to Alaska, hosting more than 900,000 visitors and bringing millions of tourist dollars with them. Underpinning that effort is the hard, and often invisible, work of thousands of staff – housekeepers, bartenders, waiters, engineers, sailors, and other professionals – who find themselves with little time in port to go shopping, visit places of interest, or just get away from their ships.

Beginning in early May, The Mission to Seafarers offers a shuttle service between the largest cruise terminal and downtown Seattle. This involves two or three 15 passenger vans per day, shuttling back and forth from 8.00am until 15.00pm, Friday through Tuesday until late September. We offer this service, requesting only a \$5 donation for the round trip, which the seafarers gladly contribute – a taxi ride would cost \$20.00 or more each way. More than 10,500 crew will take a ride, and all the drivers will be from our wonderful pool of volunteers. In the end, the donations will provide us with some of the revenue needed to continue our work, our seafarers will get inexpensive, safe and timely transportation, and our volunteers have



Volunteer drivers at the Seattle Seafarers' Centre



Volunteers at an urban garden

an opportunity to meet the world as it comes to our doorstep. We have more than 35 drivers from more than a dozen congregations and civic groups, and many have been engaged in this work for a decade or longer. One of our drivers has taken over our van maintenance supervision, making sure that all is in working order and the vans are in great shape.

On board chaplaincy

For nearly a decade, we have depended on several retired priests and pastors to handle our on board chaplaincy needs. As these men have grown older and unable to meet the physical demands of ship visiting, we are seeking alternatives, including deacons and lay ministers. Starting this autumn, we will begin training at least five new ship visitors. While some of our guests will need clergy, we are finding that deacons, lay ministers and others can make a real impact. The publicity about the dangers of seafaring life – piracy, poor working conditions, etc. – belie the real enemies: loneliness, isolation and boredom. Seafarers have high rates of suicide and divorce, and many leave the profession with health issues related to poor diets and a lack of exercise. We are confident that our volunteer ship visitors can be effective hosts and become great friends. A few of our visitors are young adults, and we also find that a connection with a peer enhances the experience for all. Much of the Lord's work is simply being present; listening, praying (when asked) and sharing stories.

“Every encounter with a seafarer provides an opportunity to change a life”

'Ditty bags'

Each year we try to provide a Christmas gift to all arriving seafarers. For us this takes the form of a ditty bag: a gift bag filled with a hand knitted woolly hat, a good supply of toiletries and a whole lot of love! Last year, more than 120 volunteers stuffed more than 1,600 ditty bags, and we distributed them from late November to well into 2015. The seafarers love them! About 200 volunteers knit hats and sew the bags (nearly all are sewn by hand), and many more collect the supplies. We officially begin the effort in September, but some groups of knitters and seamstresses work year round. The work brings great joy, and a sense of community to knitting and craft groups around the Seattle area, and beyond. We get hats from North Carolina, Minnesota and Nevada, and donations from Florida, Arizona, and Pennsylvania. Our ditty bag stuffers include Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, young people and young families, and long-time volunteers (some more than 20 years!). They represent more than 20 churches and congregations, and a dozen or so civic organisations.

Urban gardens

Our principal sponsor, the Episcopal Diocese of Olympia, has a growing Urban Garden Ministry, which is dedicated to using available space to grow and provide food for local groups and individuals in need. Last year a handful of volunteers built and cultivated 3 above ground garden plots – donating several hundred pounds of food to local food banks and shelters. This year 16 volunteers from more than half a dozen churches have built six plots, with two or three more awaiting supporters, and a couple of compost beds. Our goal is to provide several thousand pounds of vegetables, more than 10,000 servings, in 2015. We believe that our center is more than just a place to host visiting mariners – it can be a community center that connects our world to those who benefit directly, and indirectly, from the work of seafarers. All this work is done by volunteers.

Wonderful and bright future

With just three or four part-time employees it would be impossible to provide transportation to so many, or on board visitation for 1300 or more ships, WiFi and SIM Cards for thousands, and wonderful gifts each Christmas. By enlisting several hundred volunteers we can accomplish all this and more. Our growing number of friends and volunteers ensures that the Mission has a wonderful and bright future. With so many hands, skills and loving hearts we can adapt to just about any change. And for the volunteers there is an opportunity to become Missionaries and Ministers – a chance to live our Baptismal vows to seek the dignity of each human being. Every encounter with a seafarer provides an opportunity to change a life – not just the guest's, but the volunteer's as well. Every life we touch is important. ■