



“THE FLYING ANGEL”

The Mission to Seafarers was founded in 1856 although it had first come into existence over twenty years earlier.

It was in 1835 that the Reverend John Ashley, a young Anglican priest, began visiting ships at anchor in the Bristol Channel. The realisation that no one from the Church took any notice of sailors in ships had been brought home to him by his son who, when walking on the cliffs and seeing the ships at anchor, had asked his father, with the innocent wisdom of a child, “Daddy, where do sailors go to church?” With his interest aroused by this simple question he soon discovered that not only the majority of them never did, but also that no one from the ministry ever went to visit them.

He was so moved by their isolation and need he gave up a secure living to devote his life to helping those who served at sea. John Ashley’s work soon inspired other ministers in other ports and it was decided in 1856 to coordinate and expand this mission. It was called The Missions to Seamen. In the same year it adopted a flying angel as its sign, inspired by a verse from the Book of Revelation, “Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people.” (Revelation 14:6)

It became known as The Mission to Seafarers in 2000, to reflect more accurately what in reality it had always been, namely a missionary society of the Anglican Church which cares for the spiritual and practical welfare of all seafarers regardless of gender, nationality or faith.

Lord Shaftesbury, the Mission’s inaugural president, opened the first reading room for sailors in Deal in 1861 and a network of chaplains soon extended to ports around the country. One notable Mission figure in the late 19th century was the Reverend Thomas Treanor. He was chaplain in the Downs roadstead off the Kent coast from 1878 to 1910 and spent 200 days a year afloat visiting ships. He was also a frequent visitor to the Goodwin Lightship, anchored on the notorious stretch of sandbanks off the Kent coast. It was



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reported that his seamanship, even by professional standards, was of a high order. He could board sailing vessels from his Mission boat before the ships had come to anchor and leave them after they had weighed.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the Mission was involved from the first day. The **SS Athenia**, which had just left Liverpool for Montreal, carrying more than 1,400 people, was torpedoed off the Irish coast with the loss of 112 lives. Survivors were visited in hospital by the Glasgow chaplain, and from then on the Mission was heavily committed to providing accommodation, food and support for thousands of sailors. In Dover a disused building was 'fitted up' for the crews of minesweepers to have somewhere to rest. After the end of hostilities, in appreciation of the way the Mission had looked after seafarers, the Admiralty made a gift to the Society of 1,000 guineas.

The 1950s saw the beginning of enormous changes in the shipping industry. One of these changes, containerisation, brought larger ships and smaller crews. It also led to quicker turnaround times and the practice of flying crews to their ships. This cut the lengthy waiting periods in ports and there was less need for accommodation. So the big hostels in port centres were phased out and the Mission opened smaller, more accessible clubs. By the 1980s changes in the world economy led to differences in the nationalities of seafarers. Previously the world's merchant navies had predominantly come from the West, now two thirds came from developing countries such as India, the Philippines and China.

Today the Mission has a network of chaplains, staff and volunteers in over 200 ports worldwide, reaching out to visit seafarers on board their ships and offering a welcome when they arrive in port. In 118 ports the Mission runs centres where crews can relax away from their ships, obtain local information, discuss problems and share worship. In 2014, the Mission made 68,000 ship visits; distributed 175,000 bibles and other items of Christian literature; connected 280,000 seafarers by minibus to centres; and managed over 3,000 justice cases.

"Technology, multi-culturalism and criminalisation", says the Mission, "are now the key issues affecting sailors' welfare. But some things remain the same. Loneliness and homesickness are still a problem, and today's seafarers suffer the dehumanising effects of corner-cutting and cost-cutting, especially as regards safety, practised by an unscrupulous minority of shipowners. The characteristic problems that so many chaplains and volunteers in the Mission face are anxieties about security, which lead to isolation for seafarers in port for they cannot visit the shore, and chaplains cannot visit them."

To address these problems in Dubai the Mission built the world's first floating seafarers' centre. This purpose built 27 metre boat was named **MV Flying Angel** by The Prince of Wales at a ceremony in Dubai on 28 February 2007. It is designed to serve seafarers whose ships use the east coast anchorage of the United Arab Emirates, the second largest bunkering anchorage in the world. At present, as many as 2,000 seafarers who crew these ships are unable to go ashore to contact their families. Since the boat's commission,



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seafarers have been able to enjoy the facilities onboard which include an internet café, telephones, a medical clinic; and a book and DVD library. The Mission's two Dubai chaplains each spend a week on board operating around the anchorage five days a week during daylight. This support boat is the 21st century equivalent of the cutter **Eirene** built by the Reverend Ashley for visiting ships in the Bristol Channel 160 years ago.

The Mission to Seafarers, like all major charities, relies heavily on a devoted band of volunteers. Throughout the United Kingdom dozens of men and women act as the parish link between their church and the Mission. They try to make communities aware of the Society and its work, and help with raising funds.

The Mission's President, HRH The Princess Royal, in paying tribute to the work of the Mission, said, "[We know that many seafarers' lives would be much harder if they were not able to turn to the Mission. If it did not exist, someone would have to invent a similar organisation](#)". Fortunately, thanks to John Ashley's foresight and dedication over a century and half ago, there is no need.

Note about the Author:

This history of the Flying Angel was written by Roger Paine, author of 'Clear the Decks: A Collection of My Naval Yarns' which is available from Amazon.



