



# THE MISSION TO SEAFARERS AT 160

Any 21st century seafarer transported back 160 years to the shipping world of 1856 would, at first sight, seem to have arrived at a very strange place. The vast bulk of the shipping industry was, as it had been for centuries, wind driven. Ships were far smaller, seafaring was infinitely more dangerous and shipwreck commonplace. The length of any voyage could sometimes be measured in years and sheer uncertainty about what the future might hold was the seafarer's lot. Foreign ports could be dangerous and unwelcoming, with the ship alongside for weeks awaiting a cargo, the surroundings far from salubrious and in some places, the sheer criminality of the waterfront overwhelming.

Seafarers 160 years ago were people apart from normal landside society, and in a world where communications were primitive, would find it difficult if not impossible to contact their families at home. Loneliness and isolation could be the accompaniment to their hard physical and hazardous work. And while the largest fleet in the world sailed under the Red Ensign, the workforce was surprisingly cosmopolitan, with seafarers from all over the world to be found in British ships.

The Mission to Seafarers began its life addressing a need that had been recognised as far back as the 1830s by the young Anglican clergyman John Ashley, who turned his back on a parish appointment to begin a ministry to seafarers in the Bristol Channel encouraged by the questioning of his small son as to where seafarers went to church. In his little schooner, he would spend 15 years visiting ships anchored and waiting favourable winds, holding services, bringing Bibles and effectively taking the church to his seaborne parishioners, who otherwise would have had no such opportunity for worship.

Ashley's work inspired others to minister to seafarers and by 1856, when the Mission to Seafarers was officially constituted, there were mission "stations" in a growing number of British ports and harbours, and within a short time, others opened abroad, with chaplains stationed on the Elbe, in Malta and Leghorn in the Mediterranean and on the other side of the Atlantic, in Halifax, Nova Scotia. By 1866, the "Flying Angel" flag would be flying over a station in Singapore. "The vast parish of the waters", it was observed around that time - "is no longer an altogether neglected parish."



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The steady spread of the Mission's work characterises its activities for the remainder of the 19th century, a period which saw unprecedented maritime expansion and dramatic technological change, with the unstoppable march of the steamship. Not that the sailing ship gave up the struggle, as the deep sea sailing tramp ship, and the sailing coaster would remain a feature of the shipping world well into the first third of the new century. The steamship's emergence might make shipping less prone to adverse winds, but seafaring remained a hazardous occupation. In 1881, more than one thousand British ships were wrecked. The reports of the daily work of chaplains around the Mission stations tell us of the very regular intervention of tragedy, with their melancholy task being to convey the sad news to the families of the lost. The winter storms and the uncertainties of position finding would invariably produce their harvest of shipwrecked mariners and those whose graves were the sea.

At the turn of the 20th century, there were more than seventy stations established; 56 around the home coasts and 18 overseas. On the staff there were, by then, 46 chaplains and 58 scripture readers, 3 lady workers and 10 lay helpers. There was a sizeable fleet of 12 steam and 8 sailing mission ships, along with 52 boats, providing services of all kinds, in the ports where the organisation was established. Lightships, offshore islands and vessels anchored in roadsteads all kept these craft busy, while in many ports, a launch would be the easiest conveyance for the chaplain or reader visiting ships.

Extracts from the journals of the chaplains and readers over the years provide insights into both their daily work with their shipborne parishioners and the changing face of shipping over the years. Behind these accounts are to be found real heroism, such as the efforts of the chaplain in San Francisco (in the 1870s one of the most violent ports of the world) to protect seafarers from the boarding house keepers and crimps who were not averse to murdering those who interfered with their trade.

There were chaplains who landed in foreign ports and established much-needed stations almost single handed, galvanising local support and the enthusiasm of volunteers, building and financing new buildings with a great deal of energy and faith, providing a welcome where once there had been none.

In each port where the Mission was established, there would be spiritual welfare freely available to all who sought it. It would be a welcome without conditions, available to seafarers of all races, colours and creeds. The maxim that "anyone may attend Mission services, but nobody must" has been an important rule to this day. Ship visiting was a vital part of the work, both to introduce the local mission to visiting seafarers who might not have previously been there, and to provide spiritual or other assistance and advice to individual crew members. If seafarers were left behind in hospital, the Mission staff would visit them and help with their rehabilitation and repatriation. There would hopefully be recreation facilities and entertainment, in many ports dances, picnics and sports were organised, the aim being to make a stay in port a happy one.

The successful station would invariably be well served by volunteers, who would offer friendship and a welcome to the visitors. Where large passenger ships regularly called and in large ports with a large number of ships, the degree of organisation required would be substantial.



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The Mission has also found itself engaged in other areas. At the end of the 19th century and into the 20th, it was an active agent for the Temperance movement. Later it was to become a venue for courses and instruction for First Aid and St John Ambulance certificates, a particularly sensible activity, bearing in mind that very few ships carried anyone medically qualified. Hundreds of seafarers benefited and lives were surely saved.

The two world wars were to place very great responsibilities upon the Mission. In both of these world-wide conflagrations, it was required to expand its activities enormously, ministering to the armed forces in addition to the Merchant Navy, working in the convoy anchorages and suffering itself, as the ports were devastated by air raids. And between the two wars, the great depression, with hundreds of ships laid up and unemployed seafarers in every port city, required a new dimension of care and assistance.

Throughout its life, The Mission to Seafarers has changed and adjusted with the industry and the seafarers it continues to serve. Just as the crew of a steamship, with its engineers and firemen, was markedly different to that of its sailing predecessors, the Mission has adjusted to each new challenge. The uncertain trade of sailing ships gave way to the scheduled services of liners, the often weeks in port shortened to days or even hours alongside, so the challenges of providing spiritual and physical welfare have also changed. Major ports, once famed the world over for cargoes like coal, found themselves empty of ships as their cargoes disappeared. Ports, once in the city centre, have been abandoned to deep water berths far down the estuary, so how are the seafarers to be adequately served? Access to berths or shore leave may be restricted for security constraints.

The second half of the 20th century saw these changes accelerate, with many implications for The Mission to Seafarers. Containerisation, with its furious schedule keeping and specialised terminals have changed the face of liner shipping completely. Scale economies, with gigantic ships staffed by tiny crews have brought social challenges of isolation and loneliness to seafarers hard pressed to enjoy any social life aboard their ships. Changes in communications technology and the internet have made it possible for seafarers to be in touch with their families, but only if this provision is available to them.

Would the time-travelling 21st century seafarer transported to the year of the Mission's birth find that there are common features of seafaring life between then and now? Certainly, seafaring is safer, but is it any less lonely in the cabined ships of 2016, with their small multinational crews and short port stays? The seafaring population which forms the Mission's clientele may be very different, but their need for a friendly welcome when their ship arrives in port remains very much the same.

### **Note about the Author:**

Michael Grey is a columnist and correspondent and has been associated with the maritime industry for the whole of his working life. At sea for twelve years with the Port Line of London and the holder of a British Foreign Going Master's certificate, he came ashore to work in the safety and technical department of the UK Chamber of Shipping, before moving into maritime journalism. Currently he is the London Correspondent of BIMCO and is the author of a number of maritime books. He lectures at the World Maritime University and Greenwich Maritime Institute.

