



WHETHER BY PRAYING with a Christian far from home, taking steps so that a crew gets paid, or helping a sailor talk to his young child a half a world away, the New England Seafarers Mission is the face of Christ to thousands of seafarers who come to our shores each year from around the world.

# HOME PORT

BOB SMJETANA

It's about 10 o'clock on a Thursday morning in early August, and Steve Cushing's minivan is weaving its way through stacks of railroad-car-sized containers being unloaded off two cargo ships docked in Boston Harbor. Cushing dodges the enormous forklifts unloading the cargo—they look like mechanized dinosaurs—stops for a few minutes to talk with a dock electrician working nearby, then parks near the end of the pier.

His destination is the *MSC Boston*, a container ship that arrived the night before. Cushing, senior chaplain and executive director of the New England Seafarers Mission, gave some of the crew a ride into town to do some shopping when the ship arrived. Now he—like Covenant chaplains at the Seafarers Mission have done for the last 123 years—has come to check up on them.

The first chaplain was Olaus Olson, a Swedish immigrant and ex-sailor who became a Christian during a revival meeting held by Boston-area Mission Friends (as Covenanters were then known). He began visiting Scandina-



New England Seafarers Mission chaplain Steve Cushing on the gangplank of the *MCS Boston*

vian sailors in 1880, using a small skiff purchased by local churches.

The mission was formally organized in 1892 by the East Coast Missionary Association. It's now a ministry of the East Coast Conference and a cooperative ministry of the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

"You're not afraid of heights, are you?" asks Cushing, who's been a chaplain since 1999, as he ascends the gangplank to the deck of the *Boston*, about thirty feet up. At the top, a sailor in a

blue jumpsuit and hard hat waves him aboard. Cushing, with a port chaplain badge around his neck, is carrying a backpack laden with Bibles, magazines, prepaid phone cards, money-order forms, a map of the Philippines, and a few pads of yellow Post-it notes. The Post-its are not just for jotting down messages. Sometimes when he's walking through a ship and visiting with sailors, Cushing comes across posters that can be a bit distracting.

"It's kind of hard to talk with someone with a naked lady staring you in the face," Cushing says with a wry smile. Out come the little yellow notes, the offending parts are covered up, and the distraction is taken care of.

There's no need for Post-its today as Cushing makes his way through the *Boston's* hallway to the ship's galley.

"How did it go?" he asks, seeing some of the guys he gave a ride to the night before. "Did you get a taxi okay?"

Finding their way in a new port can be a challenge for sailors. The taxi carrying the seamen from the *Boston* made

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Bob Smietana is features editor of the *Companion*.



In 1901, East Coast Covenanters opened the Sailors and Immigrants Home in Boston (inset). Today, the entrance to the Seafarers Mission is tucked inside a warehouse on the Black Falcon Cruise terminal.

a few detours before getting them back to the ship. But the shopping trip was a success—one of the sailors shows off a pair of jeans he bought for \$7.50 on the bargain table at Sears.

### Security Concerns

The twenty-three crew members, who are all Filipino (the officers are Ukrainian, the captain German), are luckier than other sailors coming to the U.S. these days. In New York and ports along the Delaware River, like Philadelphia, some officials refuse to let sailors from ships like the *Boston* come ashore

at all, citing post-9/11 security risks. In a few cases, they have even refused to allow chaplains aboard ships, even for humanitarian or “welfare visits,” as they are known.

Cushing and some of the other Boston-area chaplains have kept in close contact with local Coast Guard officials, whom he says are very concerned about seafarers’ welfare. For the most part, sailors can get ashore if their paperwork is in order. It does cost them more—a crew list visa for a ship that was \$50 before 9/11, now is \$1,300, a price that shipping lines can be reluc-

tant to pay. (An individual visa costs several hundred dollars and several days hassle in a sailor’s home country.)

And where port officials might have been willing to overlook minor discrepancies in the paperwork in the past, that’s no longer the case. If something is out of order on the paperwork, “Forget it,” says Cushing.

On the *Boston*, Cushing sits down at the galley table, pulling out his map of the Philippines. “Where’s home?” he asks a couple of the sailors, and soon there’s a lively discussion at the table, with several of the sailors showing him

their hometowns on the map.

One by one the sailors excuse themselves, getting back to their duties. A few others wander in, looking for Cushing—they want to buy pre-paid phone cards. Since most have families, the cards are an essential tool in keeping them closely connected to home. And they know that the chaplain won't rip them off.

Cushing says that the sailors have learned they can't always get reliable cards from just anyone. "Lots of cards get sold—our job is to find what is legit," says Cushing, who also has with him lists of country codes for each card. The cards prove to be the most popular item he has, along with devotional magazines like *Our Daily Bread*.

"They should start one called *Our Daily Butter*," says one of the crew.

When the ship's captain stops in, he's eager to tell Cushing about the new digital camera he bought in Germany, showing off pictures he took of trees outside of his home. The captain says he's pleased to have Cushing aboard.

"We are disappointed if a chaplain does not show up," he says, adding that the crew is happy to have company. He also has a question—is there a place nearby where he can get a copy of *Der Spiegel*, a German newsmagazine?

There's no newsstand nearby, says Cushing, who offers to get the captain a copy for his next visit. "It's no trouble," he says. "It's easy when I know what people want." By getting them a phone card or a magazine, Cushing says he's showing a sailor or a ship's captain that "God loves him, even when he is on the job."

### Watching over Seafarers

The *Boston* seems to be a happy ship—it's well maintained and the chief cook keeps the crew well fed. Besides caring for the spiritual needs of sailors, and providing practical care, chaplains like Cushing also keep an eye out for unsafe working conditions or violations of seafarers' rights.

Some shipping lines, like the Mediterranean Shipping Company, which

owns the *Boston*, take care of their ships and their crew. Others, Cushing says, treat the ship and the crew "as if they were disposable." One of the first things to go is the crew's paychecks.

In 2000, Cushing was aboard a ship when an officer pulled him aside. The ship was leaving for Bremerhaven, Germany the next morning and the crew, mostly Russian sailors, had not been paid in seven months. Could he do something about it?

Cushing told the officer that if he could get a hold of the ship's payroll records, "we can help."

"We got the payroll records, photocopied them, and sent them to the ITF (International Transport Federation) in Washington," Cushing says. The ITF called ahead to authorities in Germany where the ship was arrested—held by port officials until the sailors got their money.

"They got paid in five days," says Cushing. "That's the kind of thing you have to know how to do. Because if they ask you and you don't know what

to do, you make yourself irrelevant."

Still there are times when a chaplain sees something wrong, but the crew is afraid to make a complaint. Most come from countries where work is scarce and they know they could be easily replaced.

Since 9/11, Cushing and other chaplains have noticed an increase in the number of Bible study groups among sailors. "They are scared too," he says, "and that fear has prompted a need for spiritual comfort among themselves." His job is to give those groups the tools they need to grow and develop.

As Cushing starts packing up, Librano Rojas, the chief cook of the *Boston*, asks if he's got any books on sermon preparation. "I'll take anything you have," says Rojas, who does street preaching when he's home in the Philippines. He tells Cushing the story of his conversion—how he felt God speaking to him in a service—and about his home church. He's been using his phone cards to call home and pray with his pastor.

## MINISTRY TO THE WORLD



**THE MISSION** of the New England Seafarers Mission is to bring the presence of Christ to men and women who live and work on the sea through works of service, advocacy, evangelism, and discipleship. Each year with the help of many volunteers and a small staff, chaplains Steve Cushing in Boston and Ashley Peckham in Providence, Rhode Island, visit more than 500 different merchant and cruise ships and provide services to about 30,000 crew members from 112 countries (and counting).

Every year at this time, members of the Women's Seafarers Friend Society, a group of mostly retired women who have long supported the mission, assemble 1,500 ditty bags as Christmas gifts for seafarers. Included in the homemade bags are hand-knitted caps, socks, t-shirts, food, pens, toiletries, and a Christmas card with a prayer. Another 800 packages are supplied by Covenant Women and Lutheran groups. When Chaplain Steve Cushing delivered some ditty bags to a ship's captain, explaining that they were a small gift for Christmas, the captain replied, "The package is small but what's inside is huge to us."

Churches, individuals, and groups like the Women's Seafarers Friend Society provide thousands of volunteer hours and as much as two-thirds of the funding for the mission.

For more information on the mission, visit their website at [www.neseafarers.org](http://www.neseafarers.org) or contact Steve Cushing at New England Seafarers Mission, 1 Black Falcon Ave., Boston, Massachusetts, 02210; (617) 443-0282; [nesm@neseafarers.org](mailto:nesm@neseafarers.org).



Though Rojas doesn't say it, it seems evident that there's no one on ship he can pray with.

"Can I pray with you now?" Cushing asks, and the two spend five minutes in prayer, standing in the galley.

"It just takes time," Cushing says later. "People ask me if I preach the gospel when I am on board ship. When I go aboard ship, I am doing the gospel. If the Holy Spirit brings someone to me, I'll talk with them. I am sharing Christian love and that sticks with them."

### A Safe Haven

The connection between showing God's love to seafarers and telling them about God's love has been a hallmark of the mission since the beginning. When Olaus Olson first began visiting sailors in 1880, there were lots of places willing to take their money—an estimated 300 saloons and 150 "houses of

ill repute" as the centennial history of the mission put it—but few safe havens for them. By 1901, East Coast Covenanters had opened a Sailors and Immigrants Home at 111 Webster Street in Boston. The four-story building had room for seventy-five guests, and included reading rooms, offices, and a chapel.

The Seafarers Mission, which relocated five times from 1932 to 1997, is now housed at the Black Falcon Cruise Terminal, a former Army munitions warehouse that is the departure point for Boston's thriving cruise ship industry. About 210,000 cruise passengers will pass through the terminal in 2003, according to the *Boston Globe*. The four floors of the mission function as a community center for seafarers, with an Internet café and phone room, a store and post office, the "money room" where sailors can wire funds back to their family, and a chapel.

Then there's the water. More than 140 cases of Monadnock bottled water are stacked by the door and waiting for the crew of the Norwegian *Majesty*, which is docked at the Black Falcon on a Sunday morning in early August. About 200 of the crew, many with as little as forty-five minutes of free time in port to take care of their personal business, will stop in today.

The water is one of the most popular items at the mission. "It's a lot better than the water on ship," says one of the crew after picking up a bottle. "It tastes better, and it's not yellow." The same gallon of water that costs \$1.50 here is \$5 in Bermuda, the *Majesty's* other port of call.

Visitors to the mission are greeted by volunteers like Marilyn Moore and Susan Fahestack from Trinity Covenant Church in Lexington, Massachusetts. "This is the closest I get to taking a cruise," says Fahestack, who volunteers



Sailors use the mission's Internet café to connect with loved ones at home.

two or three weekends a year with a group from Trinity.

Upstairs, Ruth Demone, also from Trinity, is helping out in the money room. While crew members are anxious to get their money home—most are the sole support of their families and are worried they won't have time to wire it there—the mood in the money room is friendly. There's doughnut holes and coffee for the sailors, who banter with volunteers as they wait in line. Many of the crew—who come from twenty to thirty different countries—are regulars. The *Majesty* will spend about six months making trips between Boston and Bermuda.

"We get to meet the world right here and share God's love just by a smile on our face and a 'How can I help you today?'" says Demone. "That really makes them relax, shows them that someone really cares."

Knowing he will be treated fairly is one of the reasons why Yeshwant Baliga, an engineer on the *Majesty*, has come in to wire money home, and then to call his sixteen-month-old daughter in India.

"I just call and we have the speaker phone and she just keeps gibbering about whatever she wants," he says. "She's not able to hold the phone and talk—she gets very confused about where the voice is coming from."

Balinga, who is Hindu, says that in other ports, crew members have to pay exorbitant fees to get their money wired home. "This is not a lottery for me," he says. "It's my hard-earned money, and I don't want to waste it on pass-through fees as well as someone who is trying to make a fast buck on me."

Mr. Thomas, the controller of the ship's hotel and a twenty-two-year sea veteran from Jamaica, stops in looking for Cushing. A \$500 money order that he sent home a year earlier was lost in the mail and Cushing has finally tracked it down for him.

"I am grateful for Rev. Cushing's effort because he did not have to do that for me," says Thomas, who has



Steve Cushing poses next to the *MSC Boston* just after visiting the crew.

been coming to Boston for three years. Besides getting his check, he stopped in at the store and picked up some Ramen noodles for the times when he's busy with work and needs a quick bite to eat.

For Thomas and other crew members, the mission has become a kind of second home. That's a different feeling than when they are in Bermuda, where he feels the crew are seen as second-class citizens to tourists.

"You go in there and you have a laugh and you feel like you are with family," Thomas says of the mission. "Knowing that you are with Christians makes a big difference. You don't have to feel like you are being ripped off because it is cordial—it's almost like a service rendered to us."

Cushing says that volunteers work hard at being servants to the crew and other visitors. "These guys have very little personal time and they spend all of their time serving others," he says. "So now they come in here and we serve them—we turn the tables on them and it generates an enormous amount of gratitude and creates a

chance for us to interact with them."

That means trying to make sure that the mission has Bibles in as many languages as possible. Cushing figures he has met sailors of 180 nationalities, and many of them have asked him for a copy of the Bible in their own language. On this Sunday he's got Bibles in about twenty languages, including Tagalog (spoken by many Filipinos), Nepalese, Greek, Chinese, Russian, Italian, German, Croatian, Polish, Spanish, and Indonesian.

The mission got a grant recently for purchasing Bibles, and Cushing was awaiting a new shipment to replenish his stock. He hopes to get as many as 180 different language versions, so that anyone who comes in can get a Bible in their language.

Taking care of sailors also means making sure that the store stocks necessities that crew members need—shampoo, toothpaste, laundry soap, socks and underwear, as well as Snickers and Milky Way candy bars, Go-Go coconut juice, Ramen noodles, and even Spam, which is surprisingly popular, says

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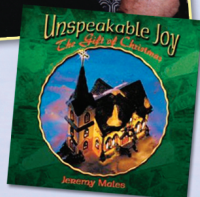
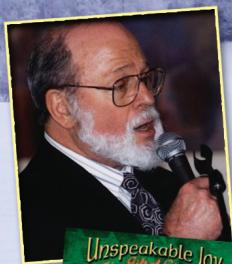
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## HOME PORT

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Michael Audette, who directs the cruise ministry.

"Many of the sailors grew up where there is no refrigeration, so canned or tinned meats are a taste of home," Audette says.

Even in the homey atmosphere, there are reminders of the difficulties that seafarers face. A poster in the phone room commemorates eight crew members from the *SS Norway*, who were killed when the boiler on the cruise ship exploded on May 28 in Miami. Three of the men killed were familiar faces at the mission.

In the midst of all the activity on this Sunday morning, there are small moments where the staff and volunteers can show God's grace to crew members—whether it's an impromptu prayer session in the hall for a sailor who's been bothered by a nagging leg injury—or reassuring Kendall Harris, a young Canadian crew member who's been on board ship for just three weeks, that the envelope carrying her first month's pay will be sent out overnight that day.

Harris, a recent college grad who is the TV coordinator for the *Majesty*, says she enjoys the life on board ship. There is the short commute to work (up three flights of stairs) and the fact that she doesn't have to cook or wash dishes. But the work days are long—twelve to fourteen hours a day with just one day off every three weeks. And there's a bit of panic in her voice as she hands over the envelope to Audette.

"That's my whole month's work in there," Harris tells Audette.

Down in the first-floor phone room, Fermin, who coordinates the light and sound systems for shows on the *Majesty*, is getting ready to call his wife and three sons. He knows that by working on the ship he can send his kids to college, but that doesn't make the time away any easier. "It's hard to be away," says Fermin, adding that his weekly calls home keep him going. "As long as I can call my wife and kids, I am okay." □