



Caring for seafarers  
around the world

# the SEA

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## Enabling the disabled

By Felicity Landon

*Could owners and crewing agencies do more to support less able seafarers?*

**T**he rules are clear: all seafarers must pass strict medical examinations before they can set foot on a vessel.

The IMO's International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW) requires every seafarer serving at sea to hold a valid medical certificate.

In an attempt to 'harmonise' national fitness standards for seafarers, the IMO and the International Labour Organization published new Guidelines on Medical Examinations in 2013, taking STCW and also the Maritime Labour Convention into account.

"The aim of the medical examination is to ensure that the seafarer being examined is medically fit to perform his or her routine

and emergency duties at sea and is not suffering from any medical condition likely to be aggravated by service at sea, to render him or her unfit for service or to endanger the health of other persons on board," the guidelines state.

But are the requirements too inflexible? Could less able seafarers find a role onboard? Is there a case to challenge the accepted approach?

"Obviously disability is an evolving concept and maybe ten years ago nobody would have even thought to ask the question, because it was beyond their imagination," says Jürgen Menze, disability inclusion officer in the ILO's conditions of work and equality department. "But asking these questions is important because it can

help to promote the opportunities for disabled people and highlight the issue."

He says one of the key issues is that the guidelines "take a very medical approach and we need to be careful with that".

"Instead of taking the medical model of disability, which looks at the challenge or problem being situated in the individual, we try to promote the concept of the social model, i.e. that the environment and societies need to change so that people with disability can be included and fully participate."

Of course, it makes clear sense to have medical examinations for seafaring, says Mr Menze, "but it must be in a non-discriminatory way and needs to be aligned with the essential requirements of the job". >>

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“There are degrees of disability, and that is the challenge. Look at government statistics from different countries, some say 20% of their population is considered disabled but others say they have only 2% to 3% – so where do you draw the line?”

### Broadening minds

Broadly speaking, the ILO team encounters systems that don't make things easier for disabled people, he says. “We are pushing for a more inclusive and enabling environment – for example, through digital and physical accessibility. At least we must educate ourselves and engage with people with disabilities and ensure their voice is represented.”

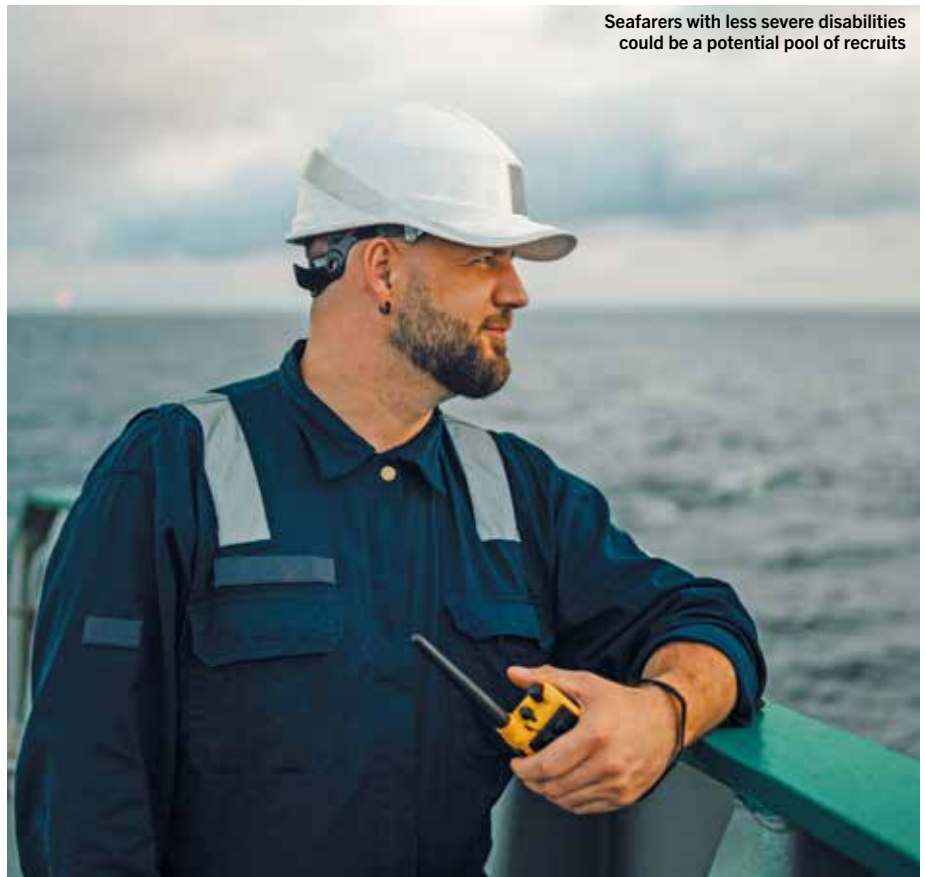
He suggests that bringing together the shipowner/shipping industry and disability organisations would be a positive step. “Discussions could take place on the basis that one side doesn't know much about shipping and the other doesn't know much about disability, but let's have a chat in a non-judgmental way, find out what is possible and what is not possible, and confront stereotypes on both sides. We find that even when employers do work on disability issues, they may not always involve expert organisations for people with disability.

“It could be about taking a more open and flexible approach, looking at what is really needed for a certain job, and ensuring people are not automatically discounted. Can the requirements really all be justified?”

Simon Frank, chief human resources officer at ship manager Thome, believes that engaging in such a discussion might offer huge potential gains for the industry.

“This is an intriguing topic,” he says. “We have not done much to explore the opportunity to work with disabled seafarers as a specific source up to now, and there are many reasons for that, but that doesn't mean it isn't an interesting debate to have. All the more reason for us to say – let's get into that subject and discuss what could be the opportunities.”

Companies like Thome are, of course, constrained by the rules, however much they might want to take a more flexible approach. “Being regulated so heavily as we are, we don't have the opportunity right now to be exploring this as a single and individual company,” says Mr Frank.



Seafarers with less severe disabilities could be a potential pool of recruits

*“Instead of taking the medical model of disability, which looks at the challenge or problem being situated in the individual, we try to promote the concept of the social model...”*

– Jürgen Menze, disability inclusion officer, ILO

“However, from the resource perspective, we are constantly looking for seafarers. Ever since I started in the crewing business many years ago, how we can expand our seafarer resource has always been an issue. It hasn't been improving over the past 25 years and I don't think it will improve in the next 25 either.” So, he says, it is very attractive to discuss out-of-the-box and non-traditional solutions.

“The industry is extremely regulated by authorities, including flag States. It is very mechanical – seafarers have to go through a very strict and rigid process with a medical examination every time they sign a contract. The demands are strict, and there are companies and players in the industry setting the margin even higher, so the health requirements/limitations are more and more intense.”

### Movement requirements

The physical elements can't be pushed to one side, of course. Seafarers need to move around on a vessel, including in rough weather, go up and down stairs, enter narrow spaces and work in the physically demanding confines of an engine room. But those elements should be part of the dialogue, says Mr Frank.

“My view is that we should have no limit in exploring the opportunities and not deny any discussion that might improve our seafarer resource globally.”

For example, seafarers undergoing their medical examination in the Philippines face some tough physical and psychological tests just to get the certificate allowing them to join their vessel: “If you sat down and really went through those points and asked whether some of them were excluding some very strong talent or potential seafarers that could



be an asset to our industry, I am sure the answer would be yes. There are good reasons for some of these rigid rules but are we missing out on some opportunities here?”

Mr Frank is enthusiastic about the idea of bringing together shipowner, seafarer and disability organisations to start the discussions, and points out that the IMO and flag States would have to be the drivers for change. There is, he says, probably a lot of prejudice and assumptions as to what is shipping and what is disabled.

The difficulty in attracting young people to a career at sea hardly needs repeating and the seafaring industry is not likely to be any more attractive after the Covid-19 pandemic is resolved.

Henrik Jensen, managing director of Danica Crewing Services, says that on its ships, each crew member has to be able to fully contribute to the mitigation of accidents and incidents, both physically and mentally. So, if a person has a disability and can still fulfil the above, he sees no reason why she or he should not be employed.

While he points out that in an emergency situation on a cargo ship, there are no extra resources to care for a crew member who is not able to care for themselves, he also compares this with passenger ships where there would be, in emergency situations, crew resources and contingency plans to manage and take care of passengers, including disabled people. That in itself might open up opportunities at least in one sector.

### ‘Reasonable adjustment’

Michael Paul, head of advice and information at Disability Rights UK, says the important phrase ‘reasonable adjustment’ comes into play in relation to the Equality Act 2010. “So it would be appropriate to consider what elements make an environment, and the roles within it, ‘dangerous’, as opposed to labelling each role as ‘dangerous’ based on the assumption of the sea as being dangerous,” he says. “It’s then applicable to look at adjustments that could be made to a role that are ‘reasonable’ to both employee and employer. Or, in fact, there may be no adjustment required, other than attention to the true requirements of a role.”

A lot of employers onshore and offshore will rely on previous experience and apply a ‘this is what we’ve always done’ attitude when advertising for and filling a vacancy, says Mr Paul. And there could even be support in the wider sense. In the UK, for example, the government’s




## Registries offer disability support

Ship registries can help ship operators looking to employ seafarers with disabilities. IRI, the manager of the Marshall Islands Ship Registry, says that in terms of employing less able people at sea, waivers can be approved for certain correctable disabilities such as hearing and vision, and most administrations review waiver requests on a case-by-case basis.

Some decisions depend on the detail: “While colour blindness may exclude service as a deck lookout,

service in the steward department may be possible,” says IRI’s Bob Fay. “Seafarers with manageable diseases which are under control with medication are often given waivers with stipulations that they must carry sufficient medication for extended service – for example, hypertension is common.”

However, he says: “The environment and demands of the work at sea do exclude waivers for serious physical disabilities – wheelchairs, missing limbs, for example.” 

Access to Work programme can assist with any financial impact of necessary adjustments and support to enable a disabled person to work – although, as Mr Paul points out, often there actually isn’t any financial impact at all.


Jürgen Menze at the ILO says work experience is another important point. “Returning to work for someone who was not previously disabled, but has acquired a disability, is never easy – but it is easier for them to go back to a job where they already had experience. It is not so easy for a disabled person starting out.”

The ILO has developed a range of guidance for employers on how to attract, recruit, employ and advance the careers of persons with disabilities, including setting out criteria and solutions that can be found, and considering what would create a reasonable burden or unreasonable burden on the employer.

Is this a controversial issue? “Not

necessarily,” says Bob Fay, senior vice president, maritime operations at IRI, the manager of the Marshall Islands Ship Registry. “Much like the military, the physical fitness requirements are well documented and enforced. All seafarers, for safety reasons, must pass regular physicals and be found ‘fit for duty at sea’ before they can be certified for service.”

He suggests that shipowners and others should provide more opportunities for disabled maritime personnel to serve ashore in the maritime industry. “There are many seafarers that developed physical disabilities from accidents or illnesses that are able to utilise their experience and expertise ashore in planning, training, scheduling, etc.”

With experienced mariners in high demand, utilising them to help assure safe vessel operations while working from less demanding shoreside environments is surely just common sense. 

# Giving a voice to fishers

*Why we need to improve safety for seafarers in the global fishing industry*

By Dr Kate Pike

**G**lobally, fishing is counted as the most dangerous occupation in the world, with an estimated 32,000 fishing-related fatalities annually. Worri-ingly, this number could be higher, but more research is needed to gather data about all aspects of health and safety which is sorely lacking within the industry. Worldwide there are approximately 4.5 million fishing boats and 95% of these are in the small-scale, subsistence sector. Those working on these boats are the seafarers that are the most exposed to risk but the least protected from it; compounded by limited regulation and enforcement. Safety is a vast problem and spans issues relating to social, natural, and anthropogenic causes.


In certain countries, particularly Asia, many of the small fishing boats have a complete lack of even basic safety gear, such as life jackets and fire extinguishers on board, and little to no equipment that help fishers operate safely, including GPS. Extreme weather conditions experienced by some countries, such as cyclones and hurricanes, can often exacerbate safety issues for small scale fishers with inadequate equipment. Apart from being ill-equipped, the boats can have very cramped living

and working conditions for the crew. The accommodation is often directly above the engine which means the crew have to sleep in an extremely noisy and polluted environment. This can lead to safety and health issues from fatigue and hearing problems and longer-term respiratory issues. In some countries, piracy has been a persistent issue and cases of modern slavery have been recorded on fishing boats around the world.

## Lack of protection

Although fishing is one of the oldest professions in the world there is limited regulation to protect those serving within it. Some legislation, however, does exist for the protection of fishers that requires health and safety measures to be in place on board (for example, the ILO's Work in Fishing Convention C 188) but some instruments are not yet ratified (for example, the IMO Cape Town Agreement on safety of fishing vessels) and most do not apply to small vessels that are less than 24 metres long. Much more needs to be done to generate political will for change within the industry and to promote a culture among fishers where safety is understood and respected.

Although a bleak picture is presented for safety of seafarers in fisheries, there are some inspiring organisations that have started to make a difference internationally. Among many others, these include The FISH Safety Foundation, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, WorldFish, CHIRP and Seafish. The FISH Safety Foundation was established to improve safety and health for fishing globally and works in many parts of the world where these issues are out of sight and definitely out of mind.

Projects such as fishSAFE and the Fisher Project run by the Foundation are taking innovative steps to make the fishing industry safer with train the trainer capacity building programmes through to a confidential event reporting system, which will be of ultimate benefit to all seafarers. The Foundation's re-FISH Project secures donations of end-of-life fishing safety equipment and operational gear – otherwise destined for landfill or dumping at sea – from countries such as the UK and re-services and re-uses them for countries that need them the most, such as Bangladesh. These donations are one of many solutions which will help to make a real difference to fishers. 

*If you are able to help with this in any way, please contact Dr Kate Pike at [kate@field-research.co.uk](mailto:kate@field-research.co.uk) and help make the industry and the fishing seafaring community safer. For further information please see: [www.fishsafety.org/](http://www.fishsafety.org/)*



Protection of fishers is often found to be lacking



The Mission has responded to seafarers' needs in different ways during the pandemic



## Support through extraordinary times

*The Mission has reached out to help seafarers during the Covid-19 pandemic*

By Verity Relph

**T**he Covid-19 crisis has hit crews and their families across the globe hard and The Mission to Seafarers has had to work quickly to adapt and explore new ways to support seafarers in this fast-moving and ever-evolving situation.

With most seafarers' centres closed and less than 40% of front-line staff able to meet seafarers face-to-face, one of the first questions was how to continue an effective ministry. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Mission launched Chat to a Chaplain, a 24-hour chat facility for seafarers and their families. The service means seafarers can engage instantly with chaplains from the Mission and member organisations of the International Christian Maritime Association.

In port, the Mission's chaplains have been responding on a request basis, working with port authorities, agents and seafarers themselves to discuss needs and offer whatever assistance they can. Teams have been providing phone cards via 'socially distant' ship visits at the top of gangways and lending MiFi units to ships so crews have access to Wi-Fi while they are in port. Good quality connectivity is a top priority for seafarers, especially now during these long and seemingly endless periods away from loved ones.

Local teams are used to dealing with requests in port but with crews unable to get ashore, chaplains and volunteers have been busier than ever helping seafarers

get everything from toothpaste to ping pong balls to guitar strings. Many have shown their appreciation for the efforts of local teams: "Thank you so much for visiting us. Sometimes we feel forgotten, but you have made us feel human again." "You might think that this is just a sim card, but to me this means life!"

One seafarer in Southampton expressed his thanks after the chaplain helped him obtain life-saving medication: "Thank you so much for your effort sir. I'm emotional a bit when I've got the package, tears of joy."

As seafarers' centres begin to re-open once again, the Mission has also been working to ensure its 121 centres and vehicles are safe for crew coming ashore. All centres are being equipped with PPE, sanitisers, and Perspex screens to protect staff and crew.

### Family support

Advocacy is another element of the Mission's work that has played an important role during the pandemic. With crew changes delayed and seafarers unable to join ships, many families have been struggling financially. In India, for example, the Mission team has been distributing essential commodities such as rice, oil and vegetables to hundreds of families of fishing and seafaring communities affected by the lockdown in Tuticorin. Meanwhile, in Manila, The

Mission to Seafarers Family Network has been providing transportation facilities to returning seafarers who have completed quarantine, and sending food to local dormitories for seafarers unable to travel and visit supermarkets.

In the UK, the Mission has recently helped over 100 stranded Indian nationals who were studying at maritime colleges and unable to get home due to the lockdown. With support from ISWAN's Seafarers Emergency Fund, the Mission provided urgent support with their rent and food costs.

One of those helped was Sanil, who had come to the UK to undertake his Chief Engineer exams. "I was totally upset and worried as there was no ray of light for getting back to my loved ones and uncertainty everywhere," he said. Now safely back in Kerala with his family, he described the Mission as a 'home away from home'. "It was a great relief for me and I started feeling that at least somebody is there to look after me in this crisis situation. Thanks a lot for the selfless and unconditional support given by the Mission to Seafarers."

Whether stuck onboard with no idea when they would be able to leave ship, or at home struggling financially, support from organisations such as The Mission to Seafarers is more important than ever. We can only hope that we will soon see a return to normality, and that seafarers will once again be back meeting with shore staff and using centres again. 📞 To access Chat to a Chaplain, visit [www.missiontoseafarers.org](http://www.missiontoseafarers.org) or [www.icma.as](http://www.icma.as) and click on the Chat function. Support in its many guises – Page 8.



By Verity Relph

## Knit one, purl one for the Mission

*An army of knitters offer literal and spiritual warmth for seafarers*

Even at the best of times, life on the ocean can be challenging. Rough seas, the threat of piracy and shipwreck, and distance from loved ones can make seafaring one of the toughest occupations. Add to this the harsh climatic conditions they contend with and one can see how a woolly hat would be an appropriate gift for someone working at sea.

Every day The Mission to Seafarers receives parcels of hats, gloves and scarves from a vast team of volunteer knitters. The knitted items are then sent out to ports where they are handed out to seafarers visiting centres or delivered on board by the Mission's port chaplains during their ship visits.

Out on the open sea, weather plays a major role in the life of seafarers. Many are away from the warmer shores of home and the hats, balaclavas and mittens are a welcome comfort as they brave rough seas and cold, biting winds. However, the knitted items offer much more than the gift of warmth. Receiving a gift is a reminder of home and home comforts and knowing that someone has taken the time to knit for them and that there are people out there who really care, can carry even greater importance.

This is something that The Revd Mark Lawson-Jones, port chaplain for South Wales, came to reflect on after an encounter on a large bulk carrier. He met with the cook who had a few minutes to spare before the crew arrived for their mid-morning break. "As I unpacked my bag, placing information, biscuits and woolly hats on the table, the cook joined me, regarding the hats closely. Eventually, he chose one, a magnificent woolly hat which looked warm and sturdy. The mixture of dark green and yellow yarn was complemented well by a flash of orange, which seemed to set it apart. 'Thank you! I now need to take a picture with you,' he said.

"As soon as he had taken the photo, he was quickly adding text to a message. 'Why the photo?' I asked. He responded, 'It is for my wife, children

and my mother'. Like many seafarers, he had been away for many months and had seen some severe weather and difficult voyages. His family were constantly worried about him, they wanted to make sure he would be home safe soon. 'The picture' he said, trying to find the right words, 'the picture will show them that even though I am a long way away, there are people who are caring for me, you brought me a hat and visited to speak, to see if I am happy'. He thought for a moment and continued 'When I go home, I will show them this hat and tell them about this place and you'."

Returning to the car and looking at the box, Mark saw for the first time the true significance of the woolly hats: "They are practical, they keep people warm when work is difficult. They are pastoral, they show there is a link between the generous and kind people who knit them and the seafarers who serve us so well. They are also permanent, once given they are a memory for both the seafarer and their loved ones of how, even though thousands of miles away from home, someone knitted the gift for them, and someone from The Mission to Seafarers took the time to seek them out and give them that gift, to show them they aren't forgotten and their work is appreciated."



Seafarers greatly appreciate the donated woolly hats



## Building on tradition

Knitting for seafarers is a long and well-established tradition, and indeed one that only seems to be growing. Who are these volunteers who put in hours and hours creating these hand-knitted items? What motivates these people to knit for seafarers? “We seem to have caught the imagination of a large group of people,” says Mark. “They feel that they can really involve themselves in our work and ‘do good’ from their armchairs.”

Cathy Kingsbury, office administrator for the Mission, has spent many hours parcelling up bags of knitting to send out to ports and corresponding with knitters. The letters she has received reveal some of the different reasons people knit for seafarers. Some have personal connections, perhaps a father or husband who was in the merchant navy, others find the knitting therapeutic and enjoy the sense of purpose it brings. “It is so positive to talk to the knitters and hear how much they enjoy knitting for seafarers,” says Cathy. “Whether in a group or at home on their own – one lady even taught an older gentleman in her care home to knit! They say things like ‘after my husband died, I was depressed and lonely and now that I have the knitting group I have a sense of purpose again’.”

For some communities, such as Selsey in West Sussex, it is the connection to the sea which drives the cause. The Missionary Working Group of St Peter’s Church has been knitting together for some 30 years – and possibly even longer. Currently, six members of the community meet twice a month to knit together. They take it in turns to host the group at each other’s houses, each putting £2 in the kitty for the host to provide tea and cake. With a centre not too far away in Southampton, the Mission has a strong presence in the town. Reflecting on what motivates the group to knit, one of the organisers says: “The hats keep the seafarers warm so they must be a bit of a blessing, and seafarers feel we are doing things for them.”


Another knitting group from Rudgwick, West Sussex, meet every Wednesday for a book exchange where people come for a cup of coffee and a chat, which is followed by a knit and natter group. Among the members is 90-year-old Joyce Bone, who specialises in balaclavas, which she can churn out at astonishing speed.

Marilyn Quail, who organises the group, explains how the knitting came about: “I suggested The Mission to Seafarers because there was a call out for knitting a few years ago. I knew about the Mission through my husband who was a merchant seaman.” She adds that he has very fond memories of “going down to the ‘Mish’” in his seafaring days. The group have missed gathering to knit and chat together during the lockdown, with some taking to WhatsApp to share what they have been knitting at home.

## Double meaning

The knitting has meaning both for the seafarers who receive them and for those who knit, which is perhaps why the tradition has endured for so long. In many ways, the hats act as tokens of love and friendship that manage to transcend geographical and cultural differences.

One seafarer from the Philippines was in Norway when he was given a hat for the first time. He gave his view on what it meant to receive a hat after nine months at sea: “One day someone gets onboard and gives you something, and honestly you feel like they give you a gold bar. It is like there is someone out there giving a care. You don’t know who they are, but they give a useful item to you that you can use at your work.”

That someone – a total stranger – should take the time to sit down with their needles and yarn, and knit a warm, colourful hat as a gift, makes seafarers feel cared about and appreciated. Yes, they provide extra warmth, but they also provide a feeling that seafarers are not forgotten, which in these challenging times, when crews are having to stay on ship well beyond their contracts, is more important than ever. 

*Verity Relf is the project support officer at The Mission to Seafarers.*



90-year-old Joyce Bone specialises in knitting balaclavas



## Support in its many guises

*Chaplain Jake Pass' journey with the Mission has led him to think outside the box to help seafarers*

By Carly Fields

It was a chance conversation with the former Archdeacon of St Albans that set Jake Pass on a path to The Mission to Seafarers. As Jake was preparing for his 'A' levels in 2014 he was also discerning a call to priesthood, prompting his school headmaster to put him in touch with the Archdeacon. After a service, the two spoke over coffee about Jake's options and the Mission soon came up in conversation.

"It turned out that the Archdeacon had been a chaplaincy assistant in Singapore for the MtS before he was ordained," recalls Jake. After reading up on the Mission, Jake was invited to the International Headquarters in London, UK and readily agreed to join the Mission for a year's placement as a chaplaincy assistant. Six weeks in Belfast followed, then 10 in London at the port of Tilbury, and then three months in the US.

Today, Jake is the proud MtS chaplain to the Humber Ports, a job that inspires and humbles him in equal measure. He is thankful for the excellent team of volunteers that have supported him since he was appointed to the Humber chaplaincy on a permanent basis in 2017. He is particularly proud of the team's achievement in setting up a new seafarers' centre on the River Trent. "That's been a pet project of mine from the beginning, really," he says. "When we initially started talking about it the local

authority said no, but we kept talking and eventually they said yes. Since then, they've been wonderful and really supportive."

Covid-19 may well set back the opening of the new centre, but renovation plans went ahead over the summer to prepare for a time when the centre can open its doors. The original plan was for it to be a 24-hour operation, with seafarers able to

*For me, the biggest worry is the mental health and the family well-being*

let themselves in and out. However, the pandemic complicates that.

"Obviously with all the Covid-19 restrictions that becomes more difficult," says Jake. "If there's only one ship in the port that's absolutely fine and we can open it up. The trouble comes when we've got several ships in the port because we then have to get into social distancing and deep cleaning and so on."

### Seafarer centres

Jake stands firm on the continuing need for seafarers' centres in the modern-day shipping industry, but he acknowledges that it's right to have a healthy debate

about their role and purpose. "I think that we have to rethink what seafarers' centres are for, and what they offer in 2020. We need to remember that the model of seafarers' centres is from the 1990s and 2000s. The needs of today's seafarers aren't the same. This means that seafarer centres have to evolve.

"We still need a space where seafarers can go that is away from their ship, ideally, within the port. Rather than saying we don't need them anymore I think we need to ask the question: what sort of centres do we need? It's the same question for the mission of the church: if we use the same model of church that we've used for the past 50 years, we'll be left behind."

If the Covid-19 pandemic has taught the world anything, it is that there needs to be greater flexibility in general. While this is true for questioning the role and future of seafarers' centres, it is also true for the pastoral services that chaplains can offer to ships in times of social distancing and lockdowns.

Like so many chaplains, Jake has had to adapt his traditional ship visiting model to ensure that seafarers are not left without support. "That has meant that for the vast majority of the time we're visiting ships from the deck and not going inside their accommodation blocks; we're having to dress up like doctors, with masks, gloves and hand sanitiser; and we're having to respond in really different ways."

When we spoke, those 'different ways' included visiting by request (as opposed to doing the usual rounds in the port), fulfilling requests for shopping, and acting as a pseudo-fulfilment house for online deliveries.



“Seafarers have asked if they can have items delivered to me; at times my living room looks like an Amazon warehouse,” says Jake. “Is it the job of the chaplain to sort out Amazon deliveries? Probably not. But the delivery of new headphones or protein powder, for example, just helps to bring a bit of normality to their lives.”

### Visiting rights

While most ships are open to visitors – as long as visits can be done safely – there are broader concerns of crew welfare as the pandemic drags on. Jake raises the issue of repatriation of crew, which has become extremely difficult because of national lockdowns prohibiting crew changes.

Recently, a seafarer on a 10-month contract spoke with Jake about the personal challenge he faced. The seafarer had been onboard for 14 months and his crew change had been cancelled five times. “I could have cried for him. To be told five times that you’re going home and then not go? That does a lot to your head. He said to me: ‘How long do they expect us to carry on? How long do they think we can sustain this? When are they going to pay attention? What is it going to take? Is it going to take crew committing suicide? Is it going to take one of the seafarers that have been onboard for 14 months to snap and kill somebody? Is that what it will take before they pay attention?’ When you hear that you hear the desperation in somebody’s voice.”

The seafarer also confided in Jake that arranging crew changes for European and Russian officers has been easier. More of them have been able to go home, rest and then return to their regular ships, but then re-joining the original seafarers that have not been able to take their scheduled leave. The seafarer said that some of the officers do not realise that not all of the crew have rested, and they treat and push the crew just as hard as they would if they had had a break. “For me, the biggest worry is the mental health and the family well-being,” says Jake. “14 months is akin to a prison sentence, isn’t it?”

Putting it in perspective, it is seafarers, he says, that keep supermarket shelves stocked. When people were panic buying bananas and toilet roll it was the seafarers who were ensuring that shelves remained stocked until the next horde of panic buyers came

in. “You could be in the most remote part of the UK but still reliant on seafarers,” says Jake. “So, we’ll continue

to promote the good work of seafarers and continue to bang the drum for them.”



Jake undertakes ship visiting maintaining social distancing



By Professor Helen Sampson

## Combatting loneliness and isolation at sea

*Crews can work together to engender a better social life onboard*

The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that seafarers are working for extended periods on board and are largely incarcerated on their vessels given that shore leave is generally off-limits. Since I began research on cargo vessels, in 1999, I have encountered numerous seafarers who describe life at sea as 'like being in prison'. It saddens me that today, that observation has never been more apposite.

In November 2019, we published a report on the findings of a study of seafarers' mental health and wellbeing (<https://iosh.com/media/6306/seafarers-mental-health-wellbeing-full-report.pdf>). The research was funded by the British-based Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH). It involved stakeholder charities, employers and seafarers completing interviews and questionnaires and it sought to establish what supports, and conversely what undermines, good mental health and wellbeing at sea.

The study found that although the overwhelming majority of seafarers (93%) regarded themselves as happy or very happy when they were at home, only two thirds of our participants (67%) described themselves as generally happy or very happy at sea. One reason for this is that seafarers suffer the absence of friends and family when they are working. Loneliness is relatively common at sea, and one in five seafarers reported feeling always, or very often, lonely when they were on board.

I know from personal experience that the time when shipboard researchers feel most isolated on a cargo ship is when they first join. The same is true for seafarers. On one vessel, I witnessed a significant crew change involving about half of the shipboard personnel. Several of the on-signers surprised me by confiding, relatively quickly, that they felt miserable, homesick, and very alone in their first week on board. They suggested that things, generally, tend to improve after seven to ten days as they

become embedded in the crew, known to their colleagues, and accepted as members of the onboard team.

### Social agenda

Many seafarers find that being socially embedded on a 'happy ship' helps them to stave off the feelings of sadness associated with missing their loved ones at home. However, they also report that all too often contemporary ships lack any kind of social life. Schedules can be tight, crews can be stretched, and opportunities for social interaction can be constrained by lack of space (e.g. small crew lounges), company rules (e.g. alcohol and barbecue bans), and lack of recreational facilities (e.g. basketball 'courts' or swimming pools). Even in this context, however, some seafarers manage to create a 'happy ship' which provides a supportive environment for all those on board and protects their collective emotional and mental wellbeing. In doing so, our research indicates that some seafarers play a pivotal role, most notably chief cooks, captains, and chief engineers.

Mealtimes are described by seafarers as highly significant in relation to their sense of wellbeing. When the galley team produces food that the whole crew enjoy (which is no easy task) seafarers find themselves looking forward to mealtimes. This in turn promotes a happy, more social atmosphere in messrooms which creates the conditions for beneficial social interaction. It is therefore important that chief cooks make maximum use of the funds they are allocated to provide the most varied and delicious meals they can manage.

Chief cooks often find it tough to cater for 20-plus adults with different needs and tastes on board and it takes a great deal of imagination to keep menus varied and exciting. Nevertheless, those who can meet this challenge achieve a great deal for ship morale and they are key to the atmosphere which characterises a vessel. Seafarers can help too by ensuring they provide strong positive feedback when they enjoy meals. Sometimes chief



Seafarers can overcome loneliness with some social interaction



cooks encourage seafarers to show them how to make their own national speciality dishes. This generally pleases all crew members, as it offers variety alongside an insight into the popular cuisine of other countries. With slashed galley crews, it is difficult for cooks to make extra 'treats' for the crew to enjoy at break times or on special occasions such as birthdays. However, when they are undertaken, such activities play a significant role in lifting morale.

### A captain's role

Seafarers also report that captains are key to the social life which is found on board. Where captains suggest to a junior officer that they organise some kind of collective activity, it is usually of great benefit. A darts tournament, or a session of 'horse racing', alleviates shipboard monotony and provides a focus for conversation and banter long after it is over. Some captains put up prizes to support such events and where these are edible sundry goods which are unavailable on board, they are particularly welcome

as they add variety to the monotonous gastronomic landscape.

Captains can also encourage ship visitors (agents or superintendents for example) to think of providing crews with local delicacies when calling into port – doughnuts in the US, Cornish pasties in the UK, samosas in India perhaps? They can schedule barbecues when these are permitted by companies and can encourage birthday celebrations on board. Where a captain jovially participates in such events, crew spirits are generally raised and these kinds of situations strongly set the tone for more serious daily interactions, imbuing them with a spirit of collaboration and goodwill.

Finally, chief engineers are significant in establishing good relationships within their own teams and to a lesser extent across their whole vessel. Simple gestures such as making a jug of coffee and supplying ship's cookies at tea breaks can be effective in stimulating social conversation, joking and good-natured banter.

However, it is not only these individuals who are significant in creating a 'happy ship'. Everyone has a part to play. By taking part in social activities (even if they are not precisely to their taste) all seafarers will benefit from the added variety in their lives. Tournaments, games, karaoke sessions and mealtimes give seafarers the opportunity to forge better relationships while on board and they also provide them with something more interesting to tell their loved ones about, when they next engage in a text or video chat. In the current situation, when companies may struggle to make crew changes at designated times and dates, attention to these details of shipboard life is more important than ever. Remembering to try to have fun, even amid this serious crisis, will have a substantial beneficial effect on morale and wellbeing. ☺

*Professor Helen Sampson is director of Seafarers International Research Centre at the School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, UK.*

## Life is better together

**S**ocialisation is integral to a person's wellbeing. Face-to-face interactions have been proven to have a positive effect on fighting depression, helping one stay sharp, and in building camaraderie. This is important to seafarers who are out at sea for months at a time, away from friends and family, and who must rely heavily on fellow crewmates to do their part in making sure the ship stays safely on course.

During this pandemic when seafarers are deeply concerned about their loved ones at home given the prevalence of the spread of Covid-19, made anxious by the incessant news coverage and reporting inaccuracies, and the constantly changing port restrictions, socialising is vital.

It is our view that if there are no instances of crew showing symptoms related to the virus, and the proper precautions are taken, consciously isolating from peers on board is extreme and unnecessary. Abiding by the safety measures (as recommended by the International Chamber of Shipping) whenever port officials visit on board and carrying out the necessary cleaning and sanitising steps upon departing each port will alleviate concerns and greatly lower the risks of a Covid-19 outbreak developing among crews.

**Socialisation onboard**  
**Risk isolation with wi-fi**



**Don't isolate yourself in your cabin.** Share the rigours of life at sea with your fellow seafarers.

**Socialisation onboard**  
**Multiply with wi-fi**



**Build crew cohesion.** Use your onboard wi-fi to spend time with others.



**Standard Club**

**By your side**

Socialisation should occur to create an outlet for concerns, to share movies, a session of karaoke, or better yet, a communal workout following exercise videos on YouTube so everyone can stay healthy and fit on board.

If everyone takes the necessary precautions seriously, life on board can continue with minimal disruptions. Life is better together.

Using a smartphone camera to scan the QR code, seafarers can access

valuable advice and tips on how you can look after your wellbeing. Print and share the full set of posters to encourage a healthy and happy crew! ☺

*For more tips, information and advice follow us on Facebook: StandardClubPandI.*



# New skills for future ships

*Who will be the onboard expert for future fuels or electronic equipment?*

By Michael Grey

**W**hat a lot there is for the modern seafarer to learn, beyond the old established skills passed on from their predecessors! Ships still have to be sailed from A to B in a safe and sound fashion and the cargo cared for, but that's just the start of the complex accumulation of knowledge that the future seafarer will require.

In a world which is turning away from hydrocarbons, the expertise of future engineers is surely going to take in the complexities and behaviour of all sorts of exciting different fuels – even life beyond the big diesel that has powered shipping for three generations or more. It's already happening with the curious characteristics of some of the modern biofuels now being trialled. And while liquefied natural gas – seen as a sort of bridge between fuel oil and some clean-burning composite – might be reasonably well understood, it is clear that the future engineer will have to cope with fuels of extreme volatility or which might, if handled wrongly, cause serious damage to an engine's internals. Hydrogen, ammonia, methanol; they are all possibilities in the mix of future fuels.

There are already people talking about the all-electric ship, although it may not go deep-sea for a while, implying entirely new skill-sets. And somebody will have to be trained to maintain the various

devices now being trialled to harness the wind – the rotors, foils, kites and sails that will (we are told) be increasingly employed in the search to reduce the vessel's CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. You probably don't need too much training to keep the salt off the ship's solar arrays, which might be a relief.

You might suggest that a ship without an electro-technical officer (ETO) on the staff is already inadequately manned, as the amount of electronic and digitally driven equipment aboard ship multiplies. And if advanced control and communication equipment is going to be increasingly part of maritime life, you probably cannot expect an ETO to remain a department of one. Might future chief engineers come from such a background? It's something to think about.

## Green roles

And in a world where care for the environment is at the centre of our thinking, it is not too fanciful to suggest that a shipboard environmental specialist, conversant with the fast-changing environmental regulations, ought to be readily available to ward off trouble from any unexpected legal contraventions. It is not too daft an idea, when you have drones sniffing the ship's exhausts and divers counting the number of limpets adhering

to the bilge keels, along with the marine biologists probing the ballast water for alien life. You just can't have too much expertise in these environmentally conscious times.

With bye-laws, regulations, and a whole mass of bureaucracy apparently conspiring against anyone actually trying to run a ship, maybe it is time to take the bureaucratic burden off the backs of masters, who could probably think of more useful things to be doing. Maybe we should bring back the purser, writer, clerk or in modern parlance 'executive assistant' to the Captain. One of the oil companies tried such a scheme a few years ago, with an additional third mate, but sadly it didn't last as it was (perhaps understandably) somewhat unappealing as a career move because the seafarer wanted to get back to navigation.

What is abundantly clear is as ships get more sophisticated, we probably can't just go on the way we have. There are new skills to be learned, training has to adapt, and the growth in more specialised shipping means that there needs to be better means to help people wishing to change ships in midstream – or move from one trade to another. It is not enough to demand 'experience' in specialised trades or ships if there are no facilities for training, and more training places will have to be provided aboard ships to help people adjust to new vessels or equipment. The old ways are disappearing and the whole industry will have to get its collective head around a changing maritime world, in more ways than one. ☺

*See Mike Grey's cartoon on page 14.*



Crews need to understand fuels and propulsion means of the future including Flettner rotors, shown here on the *Maersk Pelican*





## Staying apart

The SHI responses also spoke of heightened loneliness and isolation, with vessels practicing social distancing. Separate dining, no sports, fewer people in shared areas... all in all the impact of social distancing is making things very difficult for seafarers. While there is general acceptance that life now looks different, there are worrying reports of different nationalities treating social distancing differently, which is causing consternation and sometimes even conflict onboard.

There is also frustration, especially where empathy and realism are missing. Despite well-meaning shore management missives about nutrition and the importance of healthy food for boosting immunity, according to respondents the actual food spend has not increased, no additional training has been given to cooks, and there are no signs of increased stocks of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Stresses are being magnified further still by concerns about other health issues, and seafarers are very worried that they will not have access to medical treatment ashore if it is needed.

All in all, there is a growing sense that anxiety is building and tensions are rising, and there is a sense of a dam that is about to break. Couple this with a tired, irritable, stressed and overworked group and it cannot be long until the pressure gets too much. There will likely be episodes of self-harm and there is already talk in the industry of a rise in suicides. The feedback we are receiving does nothing to ease those concerns. Then there is the likely rise in accidents too: people do not perform at their best when under such stress. There are real concerns that seafarers are at breaking point. 📢

*Steven Jones is the founder of the Seafarers Happiness Index, in association with the Shipowners' Club and Wallem Group. The Index is designed to monitor and benchmark seafarer satisfaction levels by asking 10 key questions and serves as an important barometer of seafarer satisfaction with life at sea. Questions focus on a range of issues, from mental health and well-being, to working life and family contact. If you would like more information, to see the data or read more in-depth reports, visit [www.happyatsea.org](http://www.happyatsea.org) for access to the latest results and to have your say.*

## Crewing crisis causing distress

*Real concerns that seafarers are reaching breaking point*

By Steven Jones

**T**he quarter two Seafarers Happiness Index (SHI) results have been published, and the report reflects the problems caused by the global crew change crisis.

Given that hundreds of thousands of seafarers are facing extended periods onboard ships it was unsurprising that the average results showed happiness levels of seafarers at 6.18/10, down from 6.30 in quarter one. Actually, we have seen consistent falls since the middle of 2019.

Even more concerning, however, is the fact that the answers to the SHI questions all showed a downward trend, with the singular exception of wages and salary. Seafarers are feeling dissatisfied across the board.

Seafarers have shared issues as they have struggled to get home, their worries over the safety of family and friends, frustration surrounding extended contracts and fears about entire careers.

People at sea are tired, fed up, lonely, homesick, and sometimes even suffering illness and pain. They desperately want solutions to get back home. The message from seafarers is

clear: crew changes are needed, and those who can make them happen must do so, now.

The responses showed that seafarers are experiencing other problems too, with reports of sexism, racism and bullying seemingly on the rise. There was also talk of heightened tensions, and some resorting to alcohol, perhaps to numb the pain. There were reports in the SHI of drunkenness, and suggestions of illicit cabin drinking.

Stress onboard is also being exacerbated by workload. Crews are sailing with fewer people, and there are reports of heightened sickness onboard. This is creating a toxic environment, especially when seafarers are expected to work harder than ever with the pressure of keeping hygiene at virtually hospital levels. Demands are relentless, with no sign of let up.

Ensuring cleanliness and sanitation is all well and good, but there needs to be the training and tools to do so. These seem to be lacking on many vessels, which is resulting in even greater levels of stress. Frustrations are being intensified further as some instructions are difficult for seafarers to deliver on.

# theSea Leisure Page

There are many health benefits to spending down-time solving puzzles. Lower stress levels, better memory, improved mood, improved problem-solving abilities, and better work performance are just some of them.

## Sudoku

The aim of Sudoku is to fill in the empty cells so that each column, row and 3x3 region contain the numbers 1 to 9 exactly once. Find the answers to both puzzles in the next issue.

### EASY LEVEL

9						3	8	
	1		9			2	7	
2	8			4	6	5	1	
4					2	9		
		9	5		7	4		
		2	1					7
	2	3	7	6			4	5
	5	1			3		9	
6	9							3

### TRICKY LEVEL

4	6	8						
8	9		1	3				
		5			7	8		
	5				1	9		7
				7				
3	8	2					4	
		3	4			7		
				1	8		3	2
				6		4		8

Credit: www.sudokuoftheday.com

### EASY LEVEL

solution (Summer 2020)

4	2	3	7	9	1	5	8	6
8	9	6	4	3	5	1	7	2
7	5	1	6	2	8	3	4	9
1	7	2	3	5	6	8	9	4
6	4	9	8	1	7	2	5	3
3	8	5	2	4	9	7	6	1
9	1	8	5	6	2	4	3	7
5	6	4	1	7	3	9	2	8
2	3	7	9	8	4	6	1	5

### TRICKY LEVEL

solution (Summer 2020)

6	4	7	3	5	1	2	9	8
2	1	3	6	9	8	4	5	7
5	9	8	7	4	2	6	1	3
3	2	9	1	8	4	5	7	6
7	6	1	9	3	5	8	4	2
8	5	4	2	6	7	1	3	9
9	3	5	8	1	6	7	2	4
1	7	6	4	2	9	3	8	5
4	8	2	5	7	3	9	6	1

## Jumble

Can you correctly unscramble these anagrams to form four words? If so, send your answers by email to [thesea@missiontoseafarers.org](mailto:thesea@missiontoseafarers.org) by January 31, 2021. All correct answers will be entered into a draw for a chance to win a Mission to Seafarers' Goodie Bag, containing a pen set, mug and handmade woolly hat. Please include your answers, name, the vessel you are working on, your nationality and finish this sentence:

"I like The Mission to Seafarers because..."

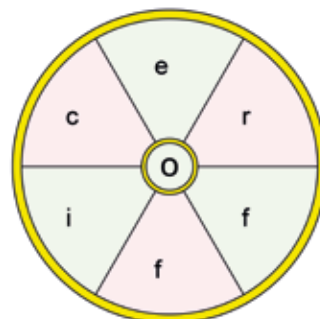
1) GENIRENE 2) HORTLETT 3) EDKC 4) GIANRT

Summer issue solutions:

1) Sulphur 2) Bunkers 3) Weather 4) Sailing

## Word wheel

This word wheel is made from a seven letter word. Try and find that word, then make as many words of any length as you can from these letters. You can only use each letter once, and each word must include the letter O.



Answer for Summer issue: 232 possible words, eight-letter word was STEAMING

## Flag code

Can you tell us what word these flags are communicating? Answer in the next issue.

Answer for Summer issue: Quarantine



See Michael Grey's feature on page 12



"...and this is our fuel technologist, biologist, environmentalist, IT consultant, AI officer, lawyer – and the dog keeps the dog watches!"



# Help for seafarers around the world

Are you one of the 1.5 million people around the world working at sea, or a loved one of someone who is?

The Mission to Seafarers is a great source of support for anyone working in the industry, and we've been helping people like you since the 19th century.

We work in over 200 ports in 50 countries and are available 365 days a year. We can provide help and support, no matter your nationality, gender or faith. Our network of chaplains, staff and volunteers can help with any problem – whether it's emotional, practical or spiritual help that you need.



## Our services include:

- **Ship visits** – we carry out approximately 70,000 ship visits a year, welcoming crews to ports, providing access to communication facilities and offering assistance and advice on mental health and wellbeing.
- **Transport** – Our teams can arrange free transportation to the local town, shopping mall, doctor, dentist or a place of worship.
- **Seafarers' Centres** – We operate over 120 Flying Angel centres around the world, offering visiting seafarers a safe space to relax between voyages, purchase supplies, seek support for any problems they might have and stay in touch with their families.
- **Emergency support** – Our teams are trained in pastoral support, mental health first aid and critical incident stress counselling. We can also provide advocacy support.
- **Family networks** – We operate these networks in the Philippines and India where seafarers' families can meet, share information and access support.

Our mission is to care for the shipping industry's most important asset: its people.

To find out where we work, visit [www.missiontoseafarers.org/our-ports](http://www.missiontoseafarers.org/our-ports). Here you can find information about all our centres, including contact details, facilities and opening times.

## CREW HELP CONTACTS

### SeafarerHelp

Free, confidential, multilingual helpline for seafarers and their families available 24 hours a day, 365 days per year, provided by ISWAN.

Direct dial: +44 20 7323 2737

Email: [help@seafarerhelp.org](mailto:help@seafarerhelp.org)

### Chat to a Chaplain

You can now connect instantly with a chaplain via our new 24hr chat service. Whatever you want to talk about, simply go to our website and click 'Chat' in the bottom right corner of the screen:

[www.missiontoseafarers.org/](http://www.missiontoseafarers.org/)

### CrewHelp

The Mission to Seafarers can provide help and support if you have a welfare or justice issue.


Please get in touch with us at [crewhelp@mtsmail.org](mailto:crewhelp@mtsmail.org)


### Get in touch!


Have you got news or views that you'd like to share with The Sea? Please get in touch with the Editor, Carly Fields at [thesea@missiontoseafarers.org](mailto:thesea@missiontoseafarers.org).

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 [FlyingAngelNews](https://twitter.com/FlyingAngelNews)

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Are you a seafarer missing your seamen's club visits? You can now connect instantly with a chaplain via our new live chat service.

Whatever you want to talk about, whatever time of day, our global team of chaplains are here to help.

Click to Chat to a Chaplain.



Chat to a Chaplain is an ICMA project managed by The Mission to Seafarers.



## Dealing with the storm

*Seafarers should have hope in this disorientating and disruptive time*

**P**salm 107 is a wonderful piece of writing. It is famous for its section on seafarers, on those who, as the author puts it, “go down to the sea in ships”. It speaks of the experience of storm. Courage “melted away” and “they reeled and staggered like drunken men”. So, they “cried to the Lord in their trouble”.

Their prayer is apparently answered (although we do not know how long it took) as the storm is stilled, the waves were hushed....and “he brought them to their desired haven”. As I write, Covid-19 remains a huge issue, not least for seafarers. Severe and unresolved crew change issues mean big numbers remain working long beyond their contract end, including many of our readers. Shore leave is often very limited or even cancelled. Anxiety about family at home remains high. Uncertainty, worry, exhaustion, anger can make for great stress. Equally, of course, those unable to start their contracts – or those who have lost work – face financial hardship.

The storms of life come in many forms and this is a big global storm and one which is highly disorienting and disruptive for seafarers. Many must feel that they are “reeling and staggering like drunken men”. Much of the shipping industry has been working hard to change the situation – but there have been so many blockages, especially at government level. I hope that by the time you read this, things will be much improved. I know that very many have prayed and cried to the Lord in their trouble.

Some of you may wonder if God is listening, as the months roll by without obvious change. I do not write with easy answers. Praying is certainly not



Credit: Mr.TinDC, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

necessarily a rapid response helpline, not in the way we might wish. Hope, however, lies at the heart of Christian faith. Better times do lie ahead. We will get through this. I remember that poster I saw many years ago. “God does not promise freedom from the storm, but peace amidst the storm”. Whatever

your circumstances I hope you will find that peace. I also hope that all who need it will find their desired haven as quickly as possible – a haven where crew change is possible. ☺

*The Revd Canon Andrew Wright is secretary general of The Mission to Seafarers.*

## A prayer from the Book of Numbers

*May the Lord bless you and keep you;*

*May the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;*

*May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

*Amen*