

THE MINISTRY TO SEAFARERS

(THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH)

401 East Waterfront Road, Vancouver, BC V6A 4G9

Phone: 604-253-4421 Cell: 778-549-4944 E-mail: ernstd.mission@gmail.com

After almost nine years of visiting ships and meeting seafarers in the Port of Vancouver, I had a strong desire to see some other ports, meet other chaplains, and visit other seafarer centers. The Seafarers' Committee graciously granted me a two-week sabbatical to visit the ports of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Hamburg earlier this year. I combined the sabbatical with two weeks of vacation and was then able to celebrate my 60th birthday in the Netherlands while visiting with family and friends.

For some 42 years, from 1962 to 2004, the Port of Rotterdam was the largest in the world. Today it is ranked number four, having been overtaking in size by ports in the far east due to the increase in container traffic. This port was my first visit and I was overwhelmed by its size. I took a harbour tour by boat and visited the Maasvlakte, a gigantic part of the Port of Rotterdam—more than 40 kilometers of oil refineries, coal, ore and container terminals! One of the container terminals is fully computerized—no people to be seen anywhere—everything is run by computers. It is absolutely incredible!

I spent a day with Felix Hendricks visiting ships on the Maasvlakte. Felix is a German evangelist, supported financially by churches in Germany. He works from his home. We shared a lot of information about work and had a great time together.

While the port is incredible, the seafarer centers in this 4th largest port in the world are quite the opposite. Sadly, within the last five years, three of the four centers have closed. The only remaining center is the Flying Angel Club/Mission to Seafarers in Schiedam and I visited it on a Sunday evening. One old volunteer showed up. I asked him, "Are you the only one here tonight?" "Ja" was the answer. "But what if a crew wants to be picked up to come visit the center?" He looked at me and said, "Dan hebben ze pech gehad meneer!" or *Then they're out of luck, sir!* The place looked rather dead; it is struggling financially; has a very difficult time finding volunteers, etc. I spent several hours there that evening and only two seafarers showed up.

I also met with Ryk van Lent who has done diaconal work in the Port of Rotterdam for the Nederlandse Zeemans Centrale for the past 22 years. When I asked him why these seafarer centers are closing he answered that the main reason was the sheer size of the port. It takes too much time to get to the terminal, security is extremely tight and time consuming (I can attest to that!), and many ships are in and out of the port within 24 hours. Another reason is financial. The centers relied heavily of government subsidies which have been eliminated due to government cutbacks.

In the port of Amsterdam I visited ships with volunteer evangelist/chaplain Theo van Zuilekom and had my best experience of the four weeks when we boarded the MV Cape Oasis. The first person we met was a Filipino seafarer who looked at me and said, "I know you from Roberts Bank! I was on the MV Linda Fortune." He couldn't believe his eyes. Three other sailors, including the captain who invited us to lunch, knew me from different ships which had visited Roberts Bank in the past. Rather amazing when you realize that there are more than 1.5 million seafarers worldwide, the world fleet has more than 50,000 vessels, and the number of ports in the world is equally large. And then to meet these seafarers at the other end of the world! It was hard to say goodbye.

Another eye opener was the visit to Duckdalben, a seafarer center in the Port of Hamburg. I had heard much about this place from seafarers and was looking forward to seeing it. I wasn't disappointed. What a busy place! At ten in the morning they begin picking up sailors and continue until nine in the evening. They average between 100 and 150 visits daily. When I arrived at 4:00p.m. it was bustling. "Why is this center so successful? What's its secret?" you ask. Well, I met Jan (a German Jan), the senior chaplain who looks like a 1960's Hippy with his long hair and beard. He explained that the port of Hamburg is very compact – the farthest distance from one end to the other is 12 kilometers (compare that to Rotterdam's more than 40!) – and that they make sure that every ship is visited, something he explained was extremely important. However, I also noticed Jan's excitement, energy, and love for seafarers, qualities of inestimable importance, especially when on average a seafarer has less than two hours to spend at the center.

It was good to come home again, and the first seafarer I met upon my return to Roberts Bank was an officer from Myanmar whom I had met two and a half years ago when we shared in each other's grief: both his 48-year old father and my brother had recently died.

When I reflect on my experiences of visiting ports, seafarer centers, and meetings with chaplains I must say that I am extremely thankful and blessed to be able to work in an ecumenical environment where chaplains and staff members are able to support one another. I am thankful that I can not only meet seafarers as I visit ships, but also that there is a physical building I can invite them to where they can relax, connect with family, etc. and where I can interact with them in an entirely different environment. I am also thankful to be a member of the Christian Reformed Church in Canada which had the vision and desire to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in both word and deed to this very needy group of people from coast to coast (Montreal to Vancouver).

In closing, I'd also like to tell you about a very exciting initiative of the Montreal and Vancouver CRC Seafarers Ministries. In partnership with *The Back to God Hour*, which would provide the editing expertise, printing, etc., we hope to produce a devotional (along the lines of our *Today*) written especially for seafarers using words and concepts with which they are familiar. (A couple of unedited sample pages are attached to this report.) We are very excited about this and hope to do a small initial printing of about 5,000 copies in English. After that we hope to print it in different languages, such as Tagalog (Philippines), Mandarin/Cantonese (China), and Russian as the majority of seafarers with which we have contact

come from these three countries. In addition, in the future we also hope to "sell" the devotional to other seafarer missions/organizations around the world. Please pray for a successful venture!

Soli Deo Gloria!

Ernst de Vries
Ministry Chaplain

Day 2 - Worry and Grace

Text: Matthew 6:25 and 33 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life...But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Scripture Reading: Matthew 6:25-34

I once met a seafarer who was deeply concerned for his family. He had two children, one of whom had a mental disability. I asked him if it was difficult to care for his child as his 9-month contracts kept him away from home for so long every year. “Yes,” he replied, “but I am not really worried for him.” “What do you mean?” I said. “Well, I am not worried because it is not only me who takes care of him, but also my wife and especially God.”

This seafarer had a good point. It is one thing to be concerned about our loved ones and think about them often, but quite another to worry about them. Worrying is, in a way, trying to mentally control that which is uncontrollable. We do not know what tomorrow may bring, so we cannot control it. However, the Bible tells us that we do know someone who does control the future. The God of Scripture knows the route we will take before we begin on it. Therefore, we can trust that he will guide us.

The problem with worry is that it can consume all our thoughts and emotions. We think so much about the ‘what ifs’ of life, that we cannot live with freedom and joy in this moment. When we trust that God will take care of us in the future, we can have confidence to live today without worry.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you have created me in your image. I confess that I often forget that you are in control of my life. I thank you that you take care of me every day. Help me to live a life that glorifies you. Also, take care of me on the ship and my family back home. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Questions for further thought:

What difference does it make today that we know that God will take care of us in the future?

Can you remember a time when your worry consumed all your thoughts and emotions?

How should we rely on God’s promises more and worry less?

Day 3 – Jesus’ Commands

Text: John 14:15 “If you love me, keep my commands”

Scripture Reading: John 14:1-15

I once heard a chief officer give a very important command to another crew member about lifeboat safety. The command was very important, yet the officer took the time to explain it with care and respect. I was struck by this because it has not always been the case that officers would be this gentle with such an important command for a common crew member.

'Commands' or 'Commandments' often are described in negative ways. No one likes to get bossed around. No one likes to be told what to do. But when we consider the matter more closely, we realize that they are an essential part of life. We can command people in a mean or prideful manner, but most often our commands are helpful. For example, if one's ship is in distress and the Coast guard commands the stranded crew to make this or that maneuver, it is not for harm, but for salvation.

The same is with the commands of God. Some think that the commands of the Bible take the fun out of life or ruin the party, but the reality is that they are instructions for how to find salvation in a time of ruin. We have noted in other meditations that humans are in a lifeboat, struggling to survive. God's instructions are not to harm us, but to give us freedom.

Prayer: Dear Lord, you have give me life in Jesus Christ. I ask you forgiveness for often failing to follow your commands. Thank you for building my faith every day. Please be with me and my family as we seek to be more and more faithful people in your Kingdom every day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Questions for further thought:

How do you react when you are commanded to do something?

What do you think of when you hear the commandments of the Bible? Are they easy to follow?

What can we do to better listen to the commandments of our Savior?