

NELCSA SYNOD 2025 REPORT DEUTSCHE SEEMANNMISSION (DSM) DURBAN

Introduction

The DSM, based in Hamburg Germany, is an organization dedicated to supporting the dignity and well-being of seafarers worldwide through Christian love and service. It operates as an independently registered diaconal institution, known as the DSM e.V. with its head office in Hamburg, Germany, within the ecumenical church organisation, the Evangelische Kirche Deutschland.



The organization provides support to all seafarers, regardless of their social, national, cultural, or religious backgrounds. It promotes tolerance and understanding among different cultures and religions. Collaboration with international seafarer missions and organizations is a key aspect of its work. It actively engages with public institutions and maritime organizations to advocate for seafarers' rights.

Over 700 volunteers and staff work globally to support seafarers, reflecting a commitment to Christian charity. The mission is rooted in over a century of history and is characterized by a spirit of cooperation and responsibility. Our aim is to emphasize the inherent dignity of seafarers and improve their living and working conditions.

Seafarers are essential to international trade, working under challenging conditions far from home. More than 1.7 million seafarers work on ships worldwide, facilitating global trade and the transport of goods. They often work seven days a week, spending months away from their families and familiar environments. They face difficult working conditions, including isolation and often unsafe environments. The DSM aims to address these challenges through support and advocacy.

I attach the document “DSM-Ausstellung-Exhibition” to demonstrate a colourful presentation of the work of the DSM.

I am happy to report that the work in the Port of Durban is going well and that the DSM Durban, with the support of the DSM e.V. and the NELCSA, continues to play an important role on various levels for the work with seafarers.

1. The Port of Durban

SA's rail and ports company, Transnet, has made a significant commitment to enhancing the infrastructure of SA's ports with a R3.4 billion investment aimed at upgrading its cargo handling capabilities. This investment is part of a broader strategy to improve efficiency at South Africa's ports, which have long struggled with outdated equipment and congestion issues. The company reported a R7.3 billion loss during the 2023-24 financial year. This loss stemmed largely from inefficiencies rooted in the infrastructure's degradation during previous state capture years.

The projects are part of the Durban Port Master Plan for the next 30 years to increase the port's annual container handling capacity from 2.9 million to 11.3 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs). Considering that 60% of SA's container volumes were processed in the Port of Durban during 2024, the upgrades will result in a huge increase in capacity.

During the course of 2024, the Philippine-based company International Container Port Terminals (ICTSI) closed a deal to partner with Transnet to revamp and run SA's largest container terminal. Its offer topped its rival, the Denmark-based company Maersk, by more than \$100 million. Maersk has taken Transnet to court over the deal, arguing that not only would it be a better partner to Transnet, but that unfair, i.e. ICTSI biased, tender processes were followed. This legal battle is ongoing and causing huge delays in the revamping of the Port of Durban. The tensions within the ANC have most probably also played a role in the awarding of Transnet's tender to ICTSI.

Furthermore, the Durban Port Captain (aligned to one of the ANC factions) received an unexpected promotion to the post of SA's National Port Captain. He moved to Cape Town in April 2024, leaving the post in Durban vacant until September 2024. This change in Port Captains was very unfortunate for us as ship visitors, since the building of relationships is tedious and requires a lot of patient diplomacy. The good news is that the new captain is sympathetic to our

purpose and to the needs of seafarers. Together with a team, I will continue leading and driving these negotiations, especially in the granting of access to the MSC-run Passenger Terminal.

For us as ship visitors the process of renewing, adding and privatising of several terminals continues to cause challenges concerning access. Safety and security regulations are constantly changing, and expectations of the necessary entry requirements vary depending on duty staff and their interpretation of the regulations.

Meanwhile, the widely reported backlog causing a huge number of vessels to stay in anchorage for longer periods has partly been resolved by Transnet's appointment of private crane maintenance companies. Transnet's neglect in the maintenance of cranes and infrastructure necessitated urgent action.

2. Durban Chaplains' Group (DCG)

The co-operation and teamwork between the ecumenical chaplains/ship visitors is excellent. We currently have 8 chaplains/ship visitors, of which 4 are fulltime and 4 parttime. We have divided the port into sections to enable us to reach as many ships as possible. One of the chaplains/ship visitors is responsible for the hospital visits and another one coordinates the crisis response interventions. Seafarers on arrested and abandoned ships are cared for by the chaplain/ship visitor in whose part of the port the ship is. This arrangement is also used for seafarers who are taken to prison.

Despite all challenges in the Port of Durban, the DCG managed to visit 1946 of the 2738 ships that entered the Port of Durban. To be noted is that repeat ships with the same crew on board are not always visited every time they enter the port. Also to be noted is that the quoted statistics exclude ships classified as 'Miscellaneous Ships' (e.g. barge, cable layer, dredger, hopper, naval vessels, search & rescue, research, tug, pilot boats, yachts) and 'Passenger Ships' to which we have no access.

We cared for 2 prisoners and seafarers on 4 abandoned/arrested ships. Through our Crisis Response Network member, we coordinated 72 local and international cases.

I personally visited 201 vessels, interacted with 729 seafarers and was able to give 107 seafarers one-on-one guidance and counselling.

I served as Treasurer on the DCG, responsible for the monthly and annual financial documents, fundraising, acquisition of quotations and payments. I also co-ordinated and planned events and special combined church services and the Christmas Parcel Initiative.

The 2024 Christmas Parcel Initiative was a huge success. We managed to pack and distribute a record number of 1822 parcels between 13 December and Christmas Day. Considering that only 4 of us (4 were on annual or sick leave) managed this, it is a mean feat. For the first time ever, we had to cancel the 'outer anchorage' distribution because we did not have enough parcels. Though small and seemingly insignificant to most of us, every gift was thankfully received, especially the handmade beanies and mittens, the home baked German biscuits and the packets of sweets and chocolates from the various NELCSA congregations. A special of word of thanks goes to our contributing congregations and the Germany-based foundation "Stiftung Deutsche Lutherische Seemannsmission" for another generous donation of € 2500.

3. DSM partnership with the Northeastern Evangelical Lutheran Church (NELCSA)

This partnership is working well and over the course of the year has proved to be of huge benefit to me, the DSM Durban and most of all to the seafarers.

To foster relationships, I conducted a total of 49 church services during 2024, 12 devotions, 2 funerals, 1 wedding, 1 Golden Wedding Anniversary, and did 2 presentations in various NELCSA congregations and other institutions. I also participated in the NELCSA Southern Circuit Pastors' Conventions. Meeting more than 5000 people and travelling a total of 35165 kilometres, I was well received on all occasions. To date I have visited most NELCSA congregations and apologise profusely to those whom I have not yet visited.

The NELCSA Southern Circuit Pastors' Conventions elected me as representative to the NELCSA Ministry and Discipleship Team (M&D). I attended most meetings and am grateful to be part of a team whose passion is to support and encourage congregations to further develop their ministries and activities in discipleship-making.

4. Durban Seafarer Mission Station (DSMS)

The ecumenical DSMS continues to receive an increased number of seafarers. We hosted a total of 6510 seafarers during the course of 2024 and provided and registered 697 sim cards at no cost. We continue providing airtime and data at cost, free Wi-Fi at DSMS and marginal markup on the pricing of items in the bar and shop. We have shown an encouraging increase in our financial income. Due to this and with the help of a grant funding from England, we were able to appoint a full-time Centre Chaplain on a 2-year contract. We have also been able to give our staff Christmas bonuses, and a wage increase of 6% for 2025.

Our improved finances have also enabled us to introduce a Seafarer Welfare Fund, with an initial startup of R10 000 and a monthly contribution of R4000,00 from April 2024. This fund was established to support and broaden the welfare reach of the DCG to seafarers.

With the increased number of seafarers, our 14-year-old vehicle fleet was no longer sufficient. We applied and received 2 new vehicles through the International Trade Federation grant funding and sold 1 of the old vehicles.

The DSM Durban-supported “Volunteer Programme” is still appreciated and working well, allowing DSMS to get extra help at short notice for the busy shifts. It also affords us the opportunity of finding possible candidates for permanent employment. To date we have been able to give 4 volunteers full-time employment. The programme also affords us the opportunity of providing unemployed young people a small income, and at the same time introducing them into the maritime industry for possible future employment.

Currently, the allocated funds for the “Volunteer Programme” are not fully utilised. With the encouragement of the DSM e. V. General Secretary, Pastor Matthias Ristau, I am leading a team to plan an extension of the Programme to various Durban-based institutions of learning that offer tertiary maritime studies. The idea is to offer a 6-month practical experience for students aged between 18 and 25. Funding for a project like this is catered for in the 2026/7 DSM e.V. budget but is dependent on the DSM Durban 2026/7 budgetary needs. This project may continue beyond that subject to the availability of funds.

We are also considering introducing a 12-month church-linked initiative for young people between the ages of 18 and 25, with the possibility of completing a ministry orientated experience either at DSMS or another international DSM station. Since DSM is the funding organisation, I commit to prioritise youth from NELCSA, the Cape Church and the Namibia Church (i.e. members of UELCSA).

Together with the Durban Port Welfare Committee, we are planning to host a Culture Day at the DSMS, which I represent on the Planning Committee. We are hoping to ‘showcase’ our mission station with local artists, musicians and performers. We are also aiming to create an awareness of the various cultures represented in the international seafaring fraternity.

I continued to serve as Deputy Chairman of Board of Management of DSMS, where I am responsible for preparing and chairing meetings in the absence of the chairman, the authorisation of payments, acquisition of quotations for specific projects and expenses, event planning and coordination, fundraising and liaison with the maritime industry.

Encouraged by the thorough evaluation of Risk Management, and Health and Safety issues of the DSM e. V., I introduced the importance of these matters to the DSMS Board of Management. It was well received, and we have subsequently appointed an independent company to do the risk analysis of DSMS and staff training. Repairs, additions and alterations have been done in accordance with the analysis, and appropriate signage has been affixed. We have completed First Aid and Fire Fighting training for staff members and chaplains/ship visitors. I have completed a draft Safeguarding and Professional Conduct Policy. This still needs to be adopted and implemented by the Board of Management.

In line with our vision statement, the DSMS leadership and its staff firmly believe that our station is a safe place of leisure for seafarers and a ‘home away from home’ within the Durban Port area. “Our vision is to offer world-class care to all Seafarers visiting the Port of Durban, while offering a safe, social and homely environment with a uniquely South African welcome. The Seafarers’ Centre will provide a focal point for welfare services within the Port.”

Fully convinced of the DSMS vision and its purpose, I continued to make concerted efforts in building relationships with shipping owners and agents. During these engagements, I always wear 2 hats: the DSM Durban Chaplain and the DSMS Deputy Chairman ones.

5. Local and International Relationships

Fostering relationships with chaplains/ship visitors from across the world is very important to me. It makes the referral of cases so much easier once you know your colleagues.

Together with the Mission to Seafarers Regional Director, Cedric Rautenbach, I helped plan the ICMA Africa Region Conference in Durban from 12-15 August 2024. The closing ceremony took place at the DSMS, with the Hillcrest Lutheran Church musicians, all dressed in DSM Durban golf shirts, giving the musical accompaniment. This was a proud moment for me.

It was good to have the DSM e.V. General Secretary present at the conference. After the conference he spent some time with me and my family at our home. I then took him on a road trip via St Lucia to Pretoria, where we had a meeting with the NELCSA Bishop, Theo Jäckel, and the NELCSA Treasurer, Vernon Filter.

On 25 August 2024 I travelled to Hamburg to attend the annual in-person international coworker conference, known as the "Auslands Mitarbeiter Konferenz" (AMAK). I truly treasure these moments of spending time with my DSM colleagues. The online AMAK conferences are equally important to me.

On 30 November 2024 I attended the Seafarers Mental Health study day at the Hamburg Catholic Academy, where I presented a case study. That evening I attended the DSM e. V. annual prize giving, where I gave a short presentation of my work in Durban. From 3 – 5 September 2024 I represented the DSM e.V. at the "SMM Hamburg", a leading international maritime trade fair.

On 09 June 2025 I again travelled to Hamburg. From 10-13 June 2025, I attended a "Mental Health" seminar, focussed on the religious response in crisis situations within a multicultural environment. 5 specifically trained professionals presented various aspects during the seminar.

DSM e.V. started an international 24/7 'Crisis Response Help Line' for seafarers and shipping agents in 2024. The use of this help line was slow in the uptake but has increased in 2025. I was asked to join the team. We are currently a team of 6 colleagues 'manning' the help line on a roster basis.

From 13 June 2025 in the late afternoon to 14 June 2025, I attended the DSM e.V. Members Meeting. A positive take out from the meeting was that the DSM e.V. is financially stable and will continue functioning, even if no further funding is received, until 2030. The Treasurer also affirmed that all DSM stations, including DSM Durban, will receive continued funding.

On the evening of 13 June 2025, I attended the DSM e. V. annual prize giving.

Conclusion

The DSM e.V. allows me to follow my passion of working with and for the seafarers. I proudly wear the 'smiley cross' logo and self-inflicted trademark of 'German meticulousness'. This is appreciated by most organisations within the Durban seafaring fraternity and an irritation for those whose focus is on quick execution rather than on the quality of their work.

Fully aware that my administrative and networking functions limit my one-on-one interactions with seafarers, I have increasingly come to realise the importance of good supporting structures. We need these for the benefit of our seafarers. I therefore also do these duties with conviction.

In closing, I thank the DSM e.V. leadership, its office staff and my DSM colleagues for their continued support. I thank the NELCSA leadership and NELCSA colleagues for their continued guidance and support. And most importantly, I thank our NELCSA congregation members for their support in providing gifts and donations.

Pastor Ron Küsel