

Report of the Deutsche Seemannsmission (DSM) Durban

Seafarers often refer to DSM chaplains as the people of the “*smiley cross*”. For me this aptly summarises God’s Good News and willingness to accept all people. Through the cross of Jesus Christ, He continues to smile over us, stretching out His hand of forgiveness, saying: *I love you in spite of all your shortcomings and situations you may find yourself in.*

DSM chaplains are privileged to be referred to as bearers of the “*smiley cross*”. Our message and mission is particularly important for those who regularly find themselves in an environment of hostility and danger such as piracy and shipwreck; who work in an industry where the suicide rate is very high and on the increase; who often feel desperate and alone; who are separated from loved ones for long periods of time; who at times feel socially isolated because of mixed nationalities on board vessels; who, once at home again, feel unneeded and frustrated, because the families seem to cope better without their physical input.

I share an example with you. While on board a ship, a captain of East European nationality invited me for a cup of coffee. This is a seldom occurrence, since captains are usually very busy while the ship is docked and East Europeans are generally not very open to Christians. After much small talk he shared his story. Three years ago he went on early retirement to care for his wife, who was diagnosed with cancer. He spent all their savings on her medical expenses, food and schooling of their 16-year old son. He again applied for work and was given the captain’s job 3 months ago on this particular vessel. He took the job in spite of knowing that the ship owner was ruthless, allowing no privileges such as private internet access for the crew. His son is now taking care of his wife 24/7 and was forced to leave school. Since leaving home, the captain had not communicated with his family, because his whole income was needed at home. After listening to his story, I asked for permission to leave and return later. An hour later, I was able to give this man a sim card, loaded with data, and a small packet with some eats and a Bible. I left behind a man with tears running down his cheeks, promising that I would pray for him and his family. I have not seen or heard of him since.

We as bearers of the “*smiley cross*”, unfortunately do not always have the privilege of doing follow-up visits, nor can we reach every seafarer. With around 1.6 million seafarers worldwide, there are not enough chaplains and support structures to cater for the needs of every seafarer. Added to this, the international maritime industry has undergone dramatic changes over the past two decades due to increasing economic pressures, necessitating ship owners to expect faster turnaround times between destinations, reducing the number of employed seafarers and increasing the capacity of the vessels. The increased performance pressure on individual crew members leads to fatigue and unnecessary physical injuries. This pressure and the stricter security measures within the port parameters since 9/11, have had an enormous effect on seafarers, both physically and mentally. Leisure time, be it on board ships, inside the seafarers’ clubs or in the port cities, is a luxury very few are still afforded.

A number of factors, some predominantly relevant for the context of South Africa (RSA), further exacerbate the ability to successfully care for the well-being of all seafarers. I will elaborate on these factors below, but firstly wish to state the following: already challenged by only having a half post position in which 50% working time is never enough, I was challenged over the past 2 years to make decisions to get involved in matters that have effectively allowed me less time to spend on board vessels visiting the seafarers. I am hoping that the decisions I have taken in conjunction with a team of others who had similar objectives and goals will have a long term benefit for the seafarers.

(i) Tensions amongst chaplains of the respective mission societies

Chaplains are very often seen by seafarers as the only ones who can be trusted with problems on board ships, because they are understood to be “neutral”. Every other visitor, be it agents, chandlers, port authorities, etc., all have an agenda from the ones they represent. Differing theological understandings and styles of working of the chaplains are healthy and beneficial to seafarers. They create and promote opportunities of reaching out in unique ways to individuals that are also unique. The differences, though, become problematic and can even be destructive, if there is a lack of respect and a sense of competition amongst chaplains. This is unfortunately true for many chaplains working in RSA ports.

Numerous meetings took place in Durban, several of them preceded by much groundwork and effort to get all individuals to attend and to see the bigger picture. We now have a functioning 9-person Chaplains’ Group with a good relationship, allowing robust discussions when dealing with crises that require a group effort. We regularly inform each other of the ships visited to ensure that most ships entering the Port of Durban receive at least 1 visit by a chaplain. We also inform each other when problems are identified on board and possibly need somebody else to look into the matter. There are, unfortunately still 1 or 2 exceptions of chaplains who do not co-operate and prefer to work in isolation.



I am now in my second year of serving as secretary to the Chaplains' Group, responsible for calling meetings, drafting of agendas, minutes, official letters and documents.

From 20–25 October, I will be attending the 2019 World Conference of the International Christian Maritime Association (ICMA) in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. The theme is “50 Years of Working Together for Seafarers, Fishers and their Families”. The Conference will focus on our present and future “Working Together”, thereby emphasising that we as chaplains are stronger, and seafarers are better served, when we work in partnership with one another. I am looking forward to the conference and the opportunity of building possible networking relationships with chaplains from all over the world. I will visit DSM Hong Kong from 26-27 October.

(ii) Financial constraints for most active Mission Societies

Most Mission Societies are dependant on funds from the member churches and/or congregations. While most member churches and/or congregations are financially strained because of the economic climate in RSA, fund allocations for the respective societies are systematically being reduced. More and more chaplains are encouraged to find donors. The impact this has on individual chaplains is self-explanatory. Worldwide, the chaplaincy is already struggling to meet the increased demand for catering for the well-being of seafarers. Rather than diminish its funding, societies should increase it and employ more chaplains.

As are all DSM chaplains outside of Europe, DSM Durban is financially totally dependent on the mother organisation Deutsche Seemannsmission e.V., based in Germany, who again is dependent on funds from the Evangelische Kirche Deutschland (EKD). Over the past 2 years, the EKD has more than halved its contributions. Most posts outside of Europe are consequently in jeopardy. According to current projections and investment returns, DSM Durban is financially stable until the end of 2021, since it is funded by proceeds from the sale of the DSM house. These funds are administered by ELCSA(N-T) and invested through the investment fund of ELCSA(N-T). The financial security is 2 years short of the partnership agreement with ELCSA(N-T) of 6 years. Understanding the financial situation of DSM Germany, ELCSA(N-T) and our congregations, the DSM Durban Board of Management (BoM), will need to source donors outside of our church to fund the Durban post and possibly expand by employing more chaplains through partnership agreements in other RSA port cities.

Durban is the busiest shipping terminal in sub-Saharan Africa. It handles up to 31.4 million tons of cargo each year. It is the fourth largest container terminal in the Southern Hemisphere. Richards Bay, is RSA's premier bulk port and handles in excess of 80 million tons annually. It is the country's largest port in terms of volumes handled, and would be the next most sensible place of assigning a chaplain through a partnership agreement.

I am happy to inform you that we have secured local funding for the salary and training of Udo Ortmann as ship visitor in Durban. He officially started in August 2019 and is currently receiving training from myself and some chaplains from the Chaplains' Group. He will travel to Germany in September 2019 to receive a 3-week practical training course from Diakon Leon Meier.

(iii) Financial difficulties in the Seafarer Mission Stations

Mission stations are generally understood to be safe places of leisure for seafarers and a “home away from home”. Ideally, they should therefore provide equipment for leisure, e.g. pool tables, dart boards, table tennis, karaoke, basketball, free Wi-Fi, shop with essentials, coffee and alcohol bar, and a place of worship. Seafarers need a hospitable place to relax with a coffee/beer, be able to easily communicate with their loved ones, have the opportunity to experience spiritual growth and most importantly, have the opportunity of receiving pastoral care in a non-threatening environment. Profit margins are to be kept at a minimum so as to compete with other worldly orientated places of leisure. Most stations cannot survive without the voluntary ship levies from shipping owners and agents. Due to economic pressures and lax station management, some stations are facing closure.

The Durban Mission was not spared from such a possible outcome. In July 2018, a decision was taken to investigate the implementation of a turnaround strategy. A voluntary group was appointed and given the task for the investigation. I was one of the volunteers. At the AGM on 30 September 2018, we presented a possible strategy, with a generous R1 million interest free loan from Mission to Seafarers (Anglican). It was unanimously agreed to keep the station open and implement the turnaround strategy. A new BoM was elected from members of all participating Mission Societies. By default, I was therefore also elected onto the BoM.

After following due protocols, one of the first steps taken was to replace the manager, who was found guilty of pilfering money and gross mismanagement. A consequence of the mismanagement was the loss of our liquor licence in October 2017. After a very arduous process, we managed to attain a new liquor license. In April 2019 we were able to appoint our BoM Vice Chairman as assistant manager. In July, I was elected as Vice Chairman. Due to excellent management, good relationships have been built with shipping owners and agents. The atmosphere and service is equally excellent, and we have experienced a steady increase of visiting seafarers with the necessary support from chaplains. We are

currently running at almost break even and should be able to start repayment of the loan within the next few months. Part of our strategic planning for the near future is to extend our services at the Mission to provide space for a medical expert, customs official and hair dresser.

(iv) Mismanagement, poor service delivery and disregard of international laws by port authorities

As is the case with many RSA institutions, Portnet is rife with political appointees, unqualified and unskilled employees, and corruption. I dare to say that mismanagement, poor service delivery and disregard of international laws by port authorities are no surprise. All of this ultimately affects the well-being of seafarers in our ports negatively. The change in political leadership has to some extent made matters worse by causing nervousness and fear of making necessary decisions amongst some employees. It took me 6 months to get approval for port access and begin ship visits. Official reasons given changed from week to week. The unofficial reason given was that chaplains are known to be critical and fewer chaplains are therefore better than more.

In the International Labour Organisation's Maritime Labour Convention 2006 (MLC 2006), of which RSA was a signatory and reaffirmed its membership in 2013, one of the regulations state that ports should provide access for active or retired seafarers to shore-based welfare facilities and services within its area. Until recently, no port in RSA implemented this regulation. With the support from the London-based International Port Welfare Partnership (IPWP) team, the Durban Seafarers Mission BoM initiated the establishment of the first Port Welfare Committee (PWC), of which the official launch was celebrated on 29 May 2019. Again with the support of IPWP, we supported the Richards Bay Seafarers Mission in starting a PWC. We celebrated the inauguration thereof on 29 August 2019. These are 2 classic examples where the church leads worldly organisations in the way forward. In both cases the mission stations were accepted as the chosen shore-based welfare facilities.

The purpose of a PWC is to foster partnerships amongst role players in the various ports for the welfare of seafarers. Their role is manifold: provide a forum where all those involved with seafarers' welfare can better network to understand one another's roles and also provide a base of valuable contacts in times of need; identify areas of concern such as restricted access to and from port areas and ships, and the need for better access to transport; monitor the level of welfare provision, lobbying for improvements, if necessary, to ensure effective coverage and minimize duplication; provide mutual support during a crisis e.g. an incident involving casualties, abandoned or hospitalized seafarers; assist in producing port information such as leaflets with maps, important phone numbers, etc. to hand out on board ships arrive. Membership of a PWC should ideally include port authorities, local ship owners, shipping agents, port state officials, trade union representatives, local authorities responsible for health and hygiene aboard vessels, pilots, immigration and any other organizations providing port welfare services. Durban also has city and provincial representation.

While visiting Durban from 26-30 May 2019, representatives from IPWP also provided PWC ambassador training. The purpose of the ambassadors is to promote the MLC 2006 regulations, explain the benefits of partnership working and give the necessary support for the establishment of PWCs in all RSA ports. The Regional Director of Mission to Seafarers and myself received this training and certification to do this work. All travelling, accommodation and material is paid for by IPWP. We spent 14-15 August in Cape Town, visiting a number of possible role players. Unfortunately, relationships between the respective chaplains are very strained, making any kind of team effort and the combined use of the Mission to Seafarers station for the welfare of seafarers, an impossibility at this stage. In our report to IPWP we stated the following: "For an effective launch of a PWC in the Port of Cape Town, ways should, preferably, be sought to resolve the relational strain amongst the chaplains, possibly with the help of the leadership of the respective mission societies."

Despite all the difficulties and constraints, I am still encouraged by our logo of our "smiley cross" and our moto "*support of seafarer's dignity*". Regardless of creed, nationality or culture, we always strive to be loving and caring ambassadors of Jesus Christ in word and deed to all seafarers, their families and their support structures within the seafaring industry.

In closing, I wish to thank all congregations who have donated homemade biscuits for the Christmas gift parcels. Telling a seafarer who cannot be with his/her loved ones over Christmas, that these are homemade, brings a huge smile to their faces and a big "thank you". They really appreciate any gift, but the home-made ones particularly give a message of: *you are important and loved enough for someone to take time to make something for you!* Thank you again and please continue; this seemingly insignificant ministry really makes a huge difference in people's lives. May I also request all our church members to carry our brave men and women, who go to work at sea to make sure we receive our essential and luxury items, in prayer.