

# PORTCALL

## Seafarers International House

### MESSAGE FROM OUR PASTOR & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: *Changing of the Watch*

*"During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake."*

Matthew 14:25

Captain, oh my captain! Captain Rick Schoenlank has steered us through the storms of the pandemic and beyond. His service was exemplary as a devoted board president, who gave so freely of his time, financial support, and with his expertise helped us to reach a safe haven after the turbulent seas of the pandemic. Maybe he does not actually walk on water as Jesus does in Matthew 14, but he certainly has been a miraculous presence in the life of SIH. Kudos and thank you, Rick!

Since the board meeting in June, we have a change of the watch with our incoming board president, Rev. Susan Tjornehoj, who had been on the board for years. A native of Colorado, Sue was Sr. Pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Baltimore Harbor, where she learned about our ministry in that port. Recently she has served congregations in Minnesota, where she now resides and informs congregations about SIH's ministry, which now includes the busy port of Duluth, MN, - Superior, WI (see article on page 4). Pastor Sue is a steady presence who understands

*Top: Our Executive Director and Pastor Marsh Luther Drege (left) presents Captain Rick Schoenlank, a retired Pilot Boat Captain, with a wave globe for his unwavering piloting of SIH. Bottom: Rev. Susan Tjornehoj (left) reviews SIH's 150th anniversary commemoration with Pastor Marsh. Photos by Henryk Behnke.*

well that when the waves get rough on the sea as in Matthew 14, Jesus is with us to assure us: "Take heart. It is I; do not be afraid."


Our Christmas-at-Sea holiday initiative is around the corner, and we encourage you to start planning for it now. On page 2, Pastor Sarah Voorhees Hershberger makes the case how Christmas-at-Sea is mutually beneficial followed by instructions on page 3. Long time veterans of this project tell me that "back to school" sales are a good time to start stocking up on hoodies, socks, t-shirts, and other items that go into the satchels.

We have been welcoming a robust number of asylum seekers this summer and are thrilled that we can now offer them meal vouchers at the Markle Residence. On page 5, we share with you how the family from Ghana is thriving.

Let me thank the many supporters who responded after the horrific collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore. Because of your generosity,



our port chaplains were able to go the extra mile there, especially with the ships that were stranded in the harbor for weeks. You can see grateful crew members on the cover and on page 7.

Finally, on page 6 of this newsletter, we sadly announce the end of the watch of Rev. William C. Fensterer (1930 - 2024), who was our port chaplain for almost six decades! May his memory be a blessing. Peace, 

*Marsh Luther Drege*



# WHY CHRISTMAS-AT-SEA IS MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL

By Pastor Sarah Voorhees Hershberger of Grace Lutheran Church, Shamokin, PA (Upper Susquehanna Synod, ELCA)

Dear friends in Christ,

When I met my friend Rev. Marsh Drege, we had an instant connection. He was from North Dakota; I was on my way to my first call at a church in North Dakota. We talked at length about the good people there, and the heartiness required to withstand a normal North Dakota winter.

When my husband Chad and I learned that Marsh was going to be the Executive Director of Seafarers International House (SIH) in New York City, we knew it was the perfect fit for him. SIH is a ministry that helps seafarers in countless ways. Men and women who work on ships are frequently away from home for weeks or months at a time. This ministry gives them a home when they are away from their loved ones. Staff members offer counseling services and sacraments.

In 2023, Seafarers International House distributed more than 3,216 Christmas-at-Sea bags or "satchels" to seafarers away from home. They're filled with little things that mean the world to a seafarer; a sweatshirt; a knitted cap; a chocolate bar; a hand-written card. These bags have made an enormous difference to people who are away from their loved ones, and the Upper Susquehanna Synod has been collecting them for years. The churches that have participated have found that it turns out to be mutually beneficial for both the giver and the recipient.

How could it possibly be mutually beneficial? Imagine this scenario: You're out shopping. On your list, you have your own groceries, plus a few items for your Christmas-at-Sea satchel. You head to Walmart or Target, wherever you can get it all done in one stop. You



head over to the clothing department to find a sweatshirt. You find a plain sweatshirt in your favorite color and decide on that one. \$14.99 on sale, for a shopping win. You wonder if it's the favorite color of the person who will open it on Christmas. You continue to find a neat-looking hat that has a thermal lining. Into the cart it goes. You imagine a person smiling as they put it on, knowing that it will keep them warm when their ship comes to a cold place. Now you're in the candy section. You can smell the chocolate from the next aisle. You find your way to your favorite kind, because you want whoever gets their hands on this bag to know how amazing that kind of chocolate really is. Because it's a treasure, you lay it gently on top of the other items.

After checking out, you head for home. You find some stationery that looks friendly. You start to write your note. "Dear Seafarer..." You pause. Now what? How do I tell this person that I feel sort of connected to them, just from buying a few things for them? Here is an idea:

*"Merry Christmas! I hope this Christmas season finds you well. I chose these items with you in mind, and as I folded them and put them in the bag, I prayed for you. I prayed that you might be kept*

*Upper Susquehanna Synod volunteers filled two vans with satchels in 2022. Bishop Craig A. Miller (left), Rev. Sarah Hershberger (fourth from left) with Rev. Marsh Drege to her right.*


*warm and peaceful, just as the infant Jesus was kept warm and peaceful on the night that he was born. While you and I will likely never meet, I hope you know that we are connected as children of the most loving God.*

*May you be blessed with peace in this season. <your name here>*

*P.S.: I hope you like the color of the sweatshirt. It's my favorite."*

Imagine how it would feel to seal that envelope and tuck it into the satchel that you know will be received by someone who needs to read your words and feel the love of God. Imagine how it would feel to receive the satchel. Talk about a mutually beneficial ministry!

I hope that you consider filling a Christmas-at-Sea satchel this year. If you'd like to know how to get your hands on the bags, just contact the folks at SIH (see opposite page).

And I hope that no matter what, you remember God's love for you in the coming months. Because God's love is alive and on the move. 



**T**hank you to all 2023 contributors who helped us deliver a historic record of 3,216 satchels spreading Holiday Cheer among seafarers this past Christmas! Please help us make 2024 another banner year.

90% of global trade is transported on the world's oceans by crew members on container ships who remain invisible to most people, yet our supply chains depend on their services and sacrifice of being at sea for months on end.

Seafarers are often overworked and lonely. We invite you, your business, school group, or congregation to spread the joy of Christmas among those who will not be home with their loved ones.

Our port chaplains then deliver your satchels so that **mariners regardless of their faith or nationality will receive those gift bags filled with:**

**One Knitted Winter Cap (coordinating scarf optional; avoid pastels)**

**Three Pairs of Socks – thermal or gym**

**One T- Shirt (sizes M - L - XL)**

**One Sweatshirt – hooded or unhooded (sizes M - L - XL)**

**One Can of Nuts, Large Bar of Chocolate, or Health Snack Bar**


**A Holiday or Christmas Card from YOU!**

You pick the colors, styles and brands, but please no substitutions from the list. For the safety of seafarers, please do not add fringes or pom-poms to the hats and scarves. The Christmas-at-Sea satchels should be comparable for each member of the crew. Please assemble each satchel with sweatshirts and T-shirts of the same size and label the satchel with a M, L, or XL on the back.

**To order empty satchels and to coordinate delivery or pick up, please email Jeni Janis: [jeni@sihny.org](mailto:jeni@sihny.org)**

**Filled satchels may be mailed by December 2, 2024 to:**

Seafarers International House  
c/o Salvation Army  
120 W 14th Street  
New York, NY 10011

**Knitting patterns and details: <https://www.sihny.org/christmas-at-sea> **

*Crew members of the CMA CGM Beira with satchels for the whole crew of 22 from Port Chaplain Pastor Arnd Braun-Storck. December 2023.*

*Christmas-at-Sea is sponsored by:*

*International Organization of Masters, Mates & Pilots (MM&P)*

*Officers Union of International Seamen (OUIS)*

*Marine Engineers' Beneficial Association (MEBA)*

*Seafarers International Union (SIU)*

*Vans supported by: ITF Seafarers' Trust*



*A seafarer posed on behalf of the crew of the CMA CGM Neva appreciating the gifts of total strangers Christmas 2023.*

# EXPANDING TO THE PORT OF DULUTH – SUPERIOR

By Rev. Marsh Luther Drege and Henryk Behnke, Seafarers International House

In its 151st year of uninterrupted service to seafarers and immigrants, Seafarers International House (SIH) is forming a strategic partnership in the port of Duluth, MN, and Superior, WI, in accordance with our 2023 strategic plan that calls for the expansion of our services. Last year, we expanded westward by adding the Port of Albany through a partnership with Albany Maritime Ministry.

Last fall, our Executive Director & Pastor Marsh and Pastor Susan Tjornehoj, who is the Chair of our Seafarers Mission Committee and since June 2024 our new board President, met with Bishop Amy J. Odgren, Northeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA, to discuss a possible involvement in the port of Duluth, where Twin Port Ministry to Seafarers (TPMS) might welcome SIH as a partner. Meetings with the Rev. Douglas Paulson, who serves the ministry, as well as the TPMS board, proved productive and, since early April, SIH has officially partnered with TPMS, an ecumenical ministry of hospitality for seafarers visiting the Twin Ports of Duluth, Minnesota, and Superior, Wisconsin.

With this new partnership, SIH increases its reach to seafarers working within the US. With TPMS, we will be serving mariners from a multitude of religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds while respecting their faith traditions. Ship visitors like Pastor Paulson and other volunteers take time to listen to the concerns of crew members either in a van or onboard a ship. As a result, the lives of the port chaplain, the volunteers, and the seafarers are enriched.

Located at the westernmost tip of Lake Superior, the Port of Duluth (MN) – Superior (WI) is North America's farthest-inland freshwater seaport and is a global gateway for bulk and breakbulk cargo. Twin Port Ministry to Seafarers has served seafarers there since 1964.

Dry bulk commodities like coal, iron ore, grain and limestone have been the backbone of commerce in the region for well over a century. These bulk cargoes comprise a majority of the harbor's commercial shipping traffic, moving through the 20 privately owned and operated docks. These docks also include a fueling depot, shipyard, and tug/barge services.

Twin Port Ministry to Seafarers is renowned for faithfully visiting every ship that enters this harbor in the 9 months per year that it is open (the other three are winter).

Annually, nearly 800 vessels come and go, carrying more than 35 million tons of cargo. From here, global cargo can be transported through the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence Seaway, on major highways and direct rail service to the East, West and Gulf Coast.


TPMS is "the only game in town" when it comes to visiting seafarers who are often invisible to most others. SIH is proud to be a partner with them in providing a ministry of presence to thousands of seafarers per year.

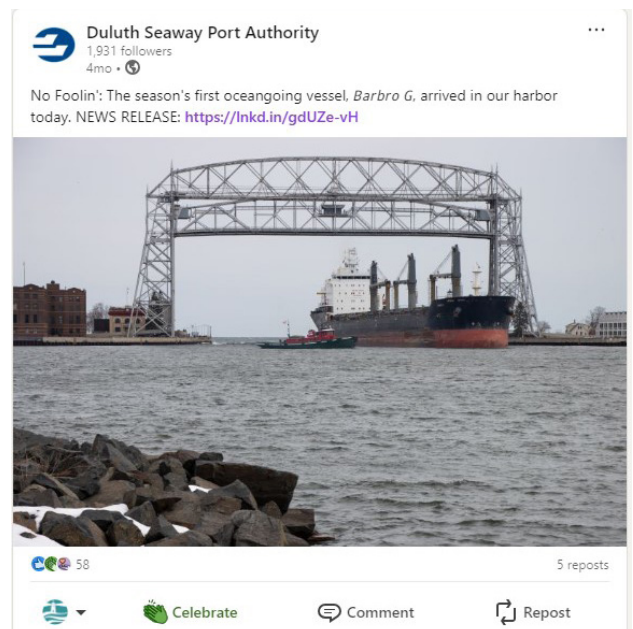
On the horizon is a joint effort between TPMS and SIH to expand the Christmas-at-Sea initiative which will connect hundreds of congregations in the region with the needs of seafarers at Christmastime.

The need for ship visitors and supporters is great in the busy port of Duluth – Superior. **If you care for those who are rarely seen and are isolated but who we all depend upon for 90% of the goods we use, then please participate as a volunteer and/or a contributor of prayers and finances.** Your contributions will be valued.

Please visit our web sites for more information or email your inquiries:

TPMS: Web site: <https://seafarerstwinports.org>  
Email: [seafarersduluth@yahoo.com](mailto:seafarersduluth@yahoo.com)

SIH: Web site: <https://www.sihnyc.org>  
Email: [henryk@sihnyc.org](mailto:henryk@sihnyc.org) 



# SAVED BY A TREE BRANCH, THIS FAMILY IS THRIVING

By Henryk Behnke, Seafarers International House, and Rev. Deacon Jill S. Singleton, The Lighthouse for Asylees

**D**o you remember Pastor Marsh's account in the Spring Port Call Newsletter of Jonathan [names changed to protect privacy] and his family who fled from Ghana, Africa? Courageously, Jonathan, his wife Thema, and their two young boys came to South America and then traveled on foot through the infamous Darién Gap, a region across northern Colombia and southern Panama consisting of a large watershed, dense rainforest, and mountains. They made it through one of the most inhospitable regions in the world and continued to travel about 3,600 miles only to almost drown in a river in Arizona, where they applied for asylum, the legal right to stay in the U.S.

While Jonathan carried the plastic bags containing their food, water, and meager possessions, Thema carried their 4-year-old son. The small 6-year-old waded through the river on his own two feet! At one point, they survived drowning by virtue of a single tree branch over that river. Later, they all found their first home in the U.S. with our partners at The Lighthouse for Asylees in New Jersey.

For the past 9 months, Seafarers International House has funded the family's housing at The Lighthouse. Like many legal immigrants, they have to shoulder a hefty attorney fee to make their case in immigration court. And, just as thousands of immigrants before them, each family member is integrating very well and is working hard to prepare to be on their own feet, a goal that Thema and Jonathan are about to achieve.

Last Spring, Thema finished the six-week training to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA). By mid-summer, she received the great news that she had passed the exam. And soon after, she found a permanent position assisting people who need the care of a nursing assistant.

In the meantime, Jonathan applied for and received his work permit. He then studied and obtained his security officer license. While he is still looking for a position as a security guard, he took a job at a local discount store. With both parents employed, the family is now looking for an affordable apartment of their own.

Their two boys have been thriving, too. The younger son, who did not yet attend school in Ghana, finished his first year of preschool. The older boy passed first grade with

honors! They both enjoy playing with the other children in the house, where they are all like brothers and sisters.

Similar to other asylum seekers, Ghanaians flee their homeland for fear of persecution and violence based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

Jonathan's family is among the 40 to 50 asylum seekers that Seafarers International House serves annually through our Assistance to Asylum Seeker program.

This important aspect of our ministry is supported, in part, by a grant from the Mother Cabrini Health Foundation and through donations from individuals and congregations.

In addition, we receive funding through the Accompanying Migrants with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities (AMMPARO) program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Fittingly, the Spanish word "amparo" means the protection of a living creature from suffering or damage.

Thema and Jonathan convey their thanks to all supporters.



*Above: A river scene similar to that the family may have encountered in Arizona, when a tree branch or trunk saved them from drowning. Stock image by icecube11 from Pixabay.*

# HIS WATCH IS OVER, HIS SERVICE KEEPS INSPIRING

By Henryk Behnke, Seafarers International House

On July 24, 2024, the earthly watch of Rev. William Charles Fensterer ended after a brief illness. He was surrounded by his loving family. He was 93.

*"All of us at Seafarers International House (SIH) give thanks for over 50 years of faithful service by Pastor Bill Fensterer, who now rests from his labors."*

*Pastor Fensterer came to SIH to help raise funds for the "new guesthouse" in 1964 and continued as the Head Port Chaplain for nearly 60 years. He was as diligent as he was kind, encouraging as he was young at heart, and as supportive of me personally, and the ministry in general, as he could possibly be - up until the completion of his robust life. Rest Eternal grant him, O Lord, and May light eternal shine upon him." - Pastor Marsh Luther Drege*

Born December 10, 1930, in Queens, NY, Pastor Bill was called as the first ordained chaplain/ship visitor of Seafarers International House in 1965. Eventually, he became Director of Chaplaincy and in that role, he made meaningful and compassionate contributions to the lives of countless merchant mariners.

Pastor Bill, who had served as a Chaplain in the U.S. Air Force, as a parish pastor and had lived at Seafarers International House while he was Director of the New York Synod Fund Appeal for the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, had an empathetic understanding of the needs of seafarers.

Just one of thousands of anecdotes of Pastor Bill going out of his way – by hundreds of miles – to assist seafarers is that of Ted Ingram, a mariner who, prior to his retirement, was a long-term resident and desk clerk at Seafarers International House's guest house. In October 1983, Pastor Bill drove him with his belongings all the way to North Carolina to take him to Sailors' Snug Harbor, a retirement home for merchant seafarers that had relocated from Staten Island in 1976. When Ted passed away in February 1984, Rev. Bill and the staff at SIH held a memorial service for him in the guesthouse's Chapel on Ash Wednesday.

Pastor Bill retired from working full-time in 1997, but faithfully continued visiting seafarers part-time - up and down the gangways as shown in the picture - until the pandemic of 2020, devoting close to 60 years of his life to seafarers.



A seafarer awaits Bill on one of his thousands of ship visits. SIH Archives.

## IN HIS OWN WORDS:

*"Hurrying on and off a ship, leaving literature behind as a memento, restricts one to the most surface relationships. Relationships of trust and understanding are nurtured only through patience and persistence. Ships which call regularly in port must be visited regularly. Time must be spent lavishly. Evident as it may seem, our concern is not with ships but with men, the first way of making this concern evident is by not grudging one's time with the men."*

*"Pastoral services to sailors aboard ships entering the Port of New York included counseling, writing letters to families, providing assistance to cope with immigration regulations, finding employment ashore for those wishing to enter the country. Pastoral care also included conducting, or directing, foreign sailors to a different view of New York, one not bounded by Broadway and Times Square."*

*"And on perhaps more occasions than one would imagine, there were the attempts to answer, or to guide, the sincere seeking quest of those trying to know and follow the Way." Winter newsletter and Report of Chaplain (1966)*

Pastor Bill's devotion to responding to the needs of seafarers shaped SIH's Ship Visitation Program and continues to inspire generations of executive directors, port chaplains, and ship visitors.

A Celebration of Life will be held at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Fairfield, CT, on September 18th at 2pm. [!\[\]\(5abce1a84a655b073239ab33e1199487\_img.jpg\)](#)

# AMAZING BRIDGE RESPONSE

**O**n behalf of the 159 seafarers on 7 vessels who were stuck after the tragic Scott Francis Key bridge collapse on March 26, 2024, we would like to thank all donors, volunteers, and our partners at the Baltimore International Seafarers' Center. Since then, a channel has been created and the ships have been able to depart while we have resumed regular service in the once again busy port of Baltimore. Thank you! ⚓



Port Chaplain Rev. Vitalii Guz, originally from Ukraine, shares our Port Call Newsletter with a Ukrainian seafarer on the tanker Chem Singapore at Hawkins Point in Baltimore with the remains of the Scott Francis Key bridge in the background in July 2024. Since, the tanker arrived in Finland as of August 2024.

## MISSION & PEOPLE SERVED

*Seafarers International House (SIH) is the Lutheran response to the urgent needs of vulnerable seafarers and immigrants. SIH offers pastoral/spiritual care, hospitality, social work assistance, and advocacy to a multi-national and multi-faith community in five ports currently (Albany, Baltimore, Duluth - Superior, New Haven, New York & New Jersey), and in NYC. In 2023, SIH served 18,004 people. This includes boarding 1,094 vessels, visiting 12,522 seafarers and delivering 3,216 Christmas-at-Sea satchels assembled by volunteers. SIH also provided 3,032 lodging nights in Manhattan for seafarers and asylum seekers. SIH provides its services to all people regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, or family/parental status.*

*Seafarers International House now fulfills its mission by leasing out the guesthouse to a not-for-profit partner that aligns with our work. This helps us to focus on our original purpose: to care for the urgent needs of vulnerable seafarers and asylum seekers. Therefore, we are no longer taking reservations for accommodations from the public for either rooms or meeting space. We still receive your mail at our guesthouse address.*

If you are a seafarer with a valid MMC in need of accommodation in Manhattan or other assistance, please email [res@sihnyc.org](mailto:res@sihnyc.org) or call us at (212) 677-4800. If you need to access mail or your locker, please make an appointment at least 24 hours in advance.

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Seafarers International House

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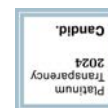
SAVED BY A TREE BRANCH, THIS FAMILY IS THRIVING

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AMAZING BRIDGE RESPONSE



Thumbs-up with appreciation from crew members of the bulk carrier Phatra Naree at Hawkins Point in Baltimore with the containership Dali and collapsed bridge in the background. Photo by Port Chaplain Rev. Bob Schmitt, April 12, 2024. Since, the vessel arrived in West Australia in August 2024. (See article AMAZING BRIDGE RESPONSE on page 7).



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 

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www.SIHNYC.org

212-677-4800

New York, NY 10003

Mailing address: 123 East 15th Street

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