

# Serving Seafarers by Serving Volunteers

An interview with **Ken Hawkins**, Seattle Mission to seafarers



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**E**very seafarers' center knows the joys of seeing volunteers serve mariners: dedicated individuals give of their time and talents to visit ships, transport seafarers, or staff the center. In practical terms, volunteer service helps take some of the pressure off centers' tight budgets. On the other hand, relying on volunteers can create problems unique to seafarers' welfare. The invisibility of seafarers to most Westerners extends to potential volunteers, too, which can make recruiting difficult. Cumbersome port security regulations, the need for flexible working conditions, and cultural barriers between volunteers and seafarers can create a true challenge to recruiting volunteers. These factors (and more) merit careful consideration, yet volunteers remain a vital segment of the seafarers' welfare community.

Among the centers most successful in recruiting and retaining volunteers is the Seattle Mission to Seafarers<sup>1</sup>, run by Executive Director Ken Hawkins. In 2016 the Mission earned over 20,000 volunteer hours; it comes as no surprise to those who talk with him for any length of time that Ken spent a career in sales before devoting himself to seafarers' welfare. He puts those talents to use running the Mission's volunteer programs. I spoke with Ken to pick his brain on what makes his volunteer program successful, what's unique to his circumstances, and what other centers could adapt for themselves.

Ken says that when it comes to the volunteer program, he sees his job as serving volunteers by connecting them with the things they want to do. "They want to contribute in a meaningful way"; the Mission can better serve seafarers by making sure volunteers are able to use their individual skills and talents. Volunteers at the Seattle Mission serve in three general capacities. One group transports seafarers, which offers both drivers and seafarers an opportunity for conversation with someone often different from themselves. As NAMMA President Marsh Drege has observed, those stretches of time in seafarers' center vans can also witness sublime but intense moments of human interaction: the casual setting can help seafarers relax and speak freely about their concerns. Another group does ship visiting, a more hands-on ministry. A third group crafts and stuffs ditty bags; this is a diverse group, including many who will never step foot in the seafarers' center itself. As one volunteer put it in a TV news feature, "nobody ever thinks of these people, so this is a nice way to say thank you to those people that we don't really know."<sup>2</sup>

Generating contributions from people who rarely (if ever) come to the center is one of Ken's signature accomplishments. Yet it's one he insists any other center can achieve. "I like to tell stories," he said, "and different stories appeal to different audiences." Sometimes he visits congregations, even preaching, and tells stories about individual seafarers he has met or offers a general explanation of what the Mission does day in and day out. One of his favorite ways to connect with audiences is to adapt the parable of the sheep and the goats from Matthew 25: "I was hungry, and you bought me a burger; I was thirsty, and you gave me a soda; I was a stranger far away from home, and you welcomed me to your center; I needed a hat and you gave me a ditty bag; I was sick and you took me to the drugstore; I was a prisoner, fifty feet from shore but without a visa, and you brought wifi on board so I could Skype home with my 2-year-old daughter." This adaptation speaks both about seafarers in need as well as how we in maritime ministry see seafarers: they are Christ in our midst and as St. Matthew wrote, "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

Telling stories is just one of the things Ken does within a broader program of outreach. He has targeted dozens of churches, mostly visiting Episcopal congregations but also a growing number of Catholic and Lutheran parishes. These local faith communities are key to the effort, he says, and provide the core of the Mission's volunteers. He's on the road - a lot - speaking about the Mission to Seafarers and the mariners it serves. "You have to follow up with congregations you visit," he advised, "or else they might forget about you." That's not a commentary on the congregations, though. There are many worthy causes that need support, and congregants are asked to help a great many organizations. Ken devotes his initial visits to explaining what it is the mission

does; when he comes back, he tells volunteers how they can get engaged. In his visits to parishes, congregations, and civic organizations, Ken brings to life the joys of seafarers' ministry and the challenges of seafarers' lives for the people there - and he goes back again and again. He attributes the Seattle Mission's volunteer success to this persistence and knack for storytelling, especially as it helps grow the number of volunteers who sew ditty bags or knit watch caps. Following up accomplishes more than just keeping the Mission on congregants' minds: it lets Ken show those groups how they've helped in the past, making their contributions of time, talent, and treasure real.

If we think of storytelling as the tactic of recruiting volunteers and other support, then we can use Ken's baseball metaphor as the overall strategy: "focus on bunting or hitting singles, rather than swinging for the fence every time," he explains. Ambitious goals are important, of course, and every center dreams of the congregation or other benefactor that will send a budget-saving check or a well-coordinated team of volunteers. But getting a commitment that a knitting group will craft 50 watch chaps, or sew 25 ditty bags, is important, too - and much more achievable on a regular basis. One congregation, or civic club, or school may be unable to fill the van driver roster for an entire month, but they might be able to

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contribute one or two volunteers who can drive three days a week.

A key challenge, Ken says, is the high turnover facing all volunteer organizations. A lot of this has to do with age: older adults tend to have much more time to volunteer than younger people, but health concerns, family commitments, and other life changes can see the volunteer roster changing frequently. With that high turnover comes a need to train constantly, which takes resources away from other important aspects of the Mission's day-to-day operations.

Related to the high turnover of older volunteers is the challenge of recruiting younger people. Part of that difficulty is a product of American history. Americans are less involved in service organizations than ever, part of a long trend since the last third of the twentieth century: while they may belong to various associations, their participation increasingly takes the form of being on a mail-

<sup>1</sup> The Seattle Mission to Seafarers is the Episcopalian component of the Seattle Seafarers Center, in partnership with Roman Catholic and Lutheran seafarers' welfare organizations. The three groups overlap in their work and do so gladly. While the Mission to Seafarers draws most of the Center's local volunteers, area Catholic and Lutheran churches are sending more and more volunteers as the Mission's model catches on.

<sup>2</sup> Ted Land, "Seattle mission serves foreign ship crews who cannot come ashore," KING5 News, December 28, 2016.



Volunteers packing ditty bags

ing list in exchange for financial contributions, rather than direct service.<sup>3</sup> Paradoxically, even as fewer young people give of their time, the outlets for those contributions have multiplied. In short, it's hard to attract a younger generation on both the supply and the demand sides.

Another challenge of coordinating volunteers is safety and security regulations within the port. Navigating that environment, both literally and figuratively, introduces yet more moving parts as regulations and port administrations change. Even without high turnover, however, volunteers are (by definition) not professionals, which introduces another layer of complexity when addressing the requirements of moving about the port. With the addition of the US Coast Guard, environmental advocacy groups, and other stakeholders, making sure that volunteers can contribute without violating the many necessary (but sometimes overlapping) regulations can be challenging.

In the end, these challenges are far outweighed by the benefits that volunteers confer on the seafarers' center and the rewards of seeing them serve mariners. It's in Ken's interactions with volunteers and the Mission's approach to them that the Seattle example

is most unique: by viewing the volunteer program as a system of serving those who want to contribute, of connecting their talents with real needs, the Mission ultimately serves seafarers, too. Ken has mastered the art of helping people identify what interests them and how they might want to help. As simple as that sounds, it's quite radical, as it divides a center's operations into two distinct segments. Rather than an administration relying on volunteers as non-paid labor in the mission of serving seafarers, treating a volunteer program as a separate service of the mission, one that connects generous women and men with service needs that match their talents, ultimately serves both the seafarers and volunteers

<sup>3</sup> Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6:1 (1995): 69-71. Fifteen years later, Putnam and Thomas Sander observed that not even a national crisis like the 9/11 terrorist attacks was sufficient to inspire sustained voluntarism, especially among youth. Sander and Putnam, "Still Bowling Alone? The Post-9/11 Split," *Journal of Democracy* 21:1 (2010): 12-16.

<sup>4</sup> *Purgatorio* 15: 73-75; Teodolinda Barolini, "Divine Multiplication," *Commento Baroliniano*, Digital Dante. (New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2017), <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/purgatorio/purgatorio-15/>.

more effectively. It's a subtle difference but an important one.

In *The Divine Comedy*, one of the most significant pieces of Western literature, the pilgrim Dante cannot fathom how dividing something amongst more people can make that thing grow. Virgil, his guide, instructs Dante that God's gifts work according to divine multiplication rather than earthly division: "And when there are more souls...who love, there's more to love well there, and they love more, and, mirror-like, each soul reflects the other."<sup>4</sup> That same principle is at work in Seattle. Serving volunteers doesn't take away from serving seafarers. Quite the opposite: it makes the Lord even more manifest in caring for the people of the sea. **MS**

**You can watch Ken's brief talk on transforming how we see volunteers at <http://tiny.cc/kenhawkinsvolunteers>.**

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