



> **Life at Sea:**  
Mental health and the human touch

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STELLA MARIS

> **Stella Maris:** the world's largest ship-visiting network  
Improving mental health every day of the year



**70,000** ship visits  
around the world each year



**350+** ports served  
by Stella Maris chaplains



**57** countries with  
Stella Maris chaplains

## > The enduring need for human connection...



Seafarers are tough – they have to be.

You know, as well as I do, being part of a small crew in a vast ocean is inherently challenging. The work is relentless, and emotions such as loneliness, fear and boredom are difficult to endure.

But it can be hard for seafarers to talk about their worries. The fear of being judged or lowering morale among crew often keeps them silent. When seafarers are concerned about their families, they can feel powerless and isolated.

That's why the shipping industry must prioritise seafarers' wellbeing and mental health.

After all, a happy crew makes for a safe, efficient ship. Caring for people's wellbeing is good for seafarers and the global shipping industry. When industry leaders like you invest in people, it's a win/win situation.

But what do we mean by 'investing in people'? For us at Stella Maris, it's not just the basic physical requirements. We're interested in the building blocks of good health and welfare. And at the cornerstone is one thing: face-to-face interaction.

A friend in port. A listening ear. A welcoming smile. When you ask seafarers about life at sea, they often say they miss the feeling of being connected...

Human connection is what Stella Maris chaplains provide.

Stella Maris is a Catholic charity, but we are not exclusive. Religion has always played a part in the maritime industry, it's still important to many seafarers. But as well as offering Mass, ecumenical worship, or pointing seafarers in the direction of a suitable place of worship, our chaplains are simply there to ask questions and allow someone to share their troubles over a coffee.

Our people have years of experience of day-to-day ship visiting, so know how to provide practical advice and help. But we also bring warmth and care that seafarers simply can't get from an employer or a helpline.

Plus, we're a global, connected network. We maintain regular contact with seafarers, primarily through WhatsApp, and can provide support through our chaplains in over 350 ports. We also assist seafarers' families, wherever help is needed.

Sometimes it's hard to measure the impact of a friendly chat in the mess room, or a quiet prayer, or the time spent with an anxious seafarer. But you and I know that even the smallest interaction with another person can often leave you happier and more positive about your day.

Connecting together is a deeply human experience. It can change everything. And it's one we all deserve.

**Tim Hill MBE**

Chief Executive Officer, Stella Maris UK

## > The lifeline when it matters

Seafarers face the perfect storm when it comes to challenges on their mental health. The face-to-face support of Stella Maris chaplains can be a lifeline...



When clinical psychologist Charles Watkins started looking into the mental health of seafarers in 2018, he couldn't believe how little information there was.

No books on maritime psychology, no quality specialist support, no organisation to research or provide help. And when you consider the dangerous, risky world in which seafarers live and operate, it's not just surprising – it's shocking.

*"The challenges facing seafarers and their mental health... where do I start?"* says Charles.

Working at sea means sleep, food and medication options are limited, and seafarers face daily practical, technological and geopolitical stressors which are often out of their control. It all conspires to create a standard of 'normal' for seafarers which is way beyond most people's daily experiences.

*"Seven to eight hours of sleep is the usual range for healthy function,"* said Charles. *"Seafarers get between four and five hours maximum. It's true that seafarers are resilient, but if you lose four hours of sleep out of eight every night, your immune system's response to bacteria and viruses can decrease up to 50%."*

*"When it comes to mental health, sleep is the basis of everything. It helps you to remember things, focus, regulate emotions, stay alert, notice things that are dangerous. Our brain needs a certain length of rest and sleep. That just doesn't exist for seafarers."*



*It's not just sleep that's the problem, says Charles. "Seafarers spend less and less time together. They are in their rooms on cell phones contacting home, and there's less time socially. That's problematic. Technology is actually compounding seafarers' isolation."*

Several years ago, Charles set up a new company, Mental Health Support Solutions, which now provides vital help to the shipping industry.



If there's a mental health crisis on board, MHSS staff can fly to a vessel in person to stabilise and clinically evaluate the situation. And on numerous occasions they have collaborated with Stella Maris in order to provide chaplaincy support in various ports around the world.

Charles is clear that caring for seafarers' mental health is good for the industry as well as crew. "If there's nobody taking care of regulating the seafarers' stress response, that impacts retention rates and companies will lose staff," he says.

And there's no doubt industry leaders are stepping up to take responsibility, with a series of major shipping companies already working with MHSS. But Charles says there's nothing like the face-to-face support that Stella Maris chaplains can offer to seafarers.

"One of the most important things the industry can invest in is making sure seafarers continue to get caring, compassionate human contact," says Charles. "Stella Maris has chaplains around the world, in all cultures, and they have a really good feeling for culture and what that means for mental and physical health.

"These small things – going on board, chatting to crews, asking about their families – they are not small at all. They are huge. I've been on board vessels with Stella Maris chaplains and have seen for myself. This is significant, impactful work."



## No substitute for a real person

As our understanding of human health and wellbeing has grown, the tools available to help us support our health have proliferated. Meditation apps, devices to monitor sleep quality, online therapy... All play their part.

But no device can provide the same physiological benefits as face-to-face contact with another human being.

"If you come face-to-face and connect with someone, your body releases oxytocin and decreases cortisol," says Charles. "Oxytocin improves relationships and is a huge protector of your heart. It's the hormone you release when you spend time with loved ones."

Remarkably, that's what happens when chaplains spend time with seafarers. "Just that little sit-down with a Stella Maris chaplain offering help of any sort is already reducing stress for seafarers. And the more it happens, the stronger your resilience to stress is," added Charles.

What's more, having a healthy emotional response to stress can also help us physically.

Charles cites a Harvard study which put people under duress, and said, "How you think about stress actually influences how you respond to it on a cellular level. Our natural biology rewards us for helping one another. The support provided by chaplains undoubtedly leads to seafarers being as resilient as they are. There's no denying it."

## > View from the gangway



"I've met a lot of Ukrainian seafarers. They show us photographs of their bombed-out homes. It's hard when they have no news from home... A captain broke down in front of us because he hadn't heard anything from his mother-in-law. A growing problem for Ukrainian seafarers is the need to go home to renew their passports and work contract... But if they set foot in Ukraine, they will be conscripted.

"We sit quietly and listen, and we also ask questions about home and about the war. It's important because people need the chance to talk. We've met Ukrainians working alongside Russian seafarers who support the actions of President Putin, and that's difficult.

"Even within a crew that's sympathetic, it's tough for Ukrainian seafarers. They don't want to keep talking about their anxieties. When they talk to us it's completely different, because that's what we're there for. They know we're there to listen and support them. Seafarers go back to sea knowing we are thinking of them.



"We had a wonderful experience when we visited the crew mess of a tanker at Fawley, Southampton, recently. Everyone seemed to pile in to see us. They were incredibly welcoming, and the captain said Stella Maris chaplains are always welcome on board because they know we care.

"On another occasion, I was in the mess room with a seafarer who was just about to eat his lunch. 'I'll go and leave you to eat before it gets cold,' I said. 'No, no!' he replied. 'I don't care about food, I get lunch every day, but I don't get visits from you every day!'

"Although crews generally get on well, with a kind of fraternal feeling, one of the reasons seafarers value our visits is the knowledge that someone from the 'outside world' takes the time to check on their wellbeing. It may seem like a small thing – but it means the world."

### **Gregory Hogan**

Stella Maris Regional Port Chaplain Southampton and the South Coast

## > A friend in dark times

During a brief shore visit, Turkish seafarer Ali\* was arrested. Our chaplain was with him every step of the long journey that followed.



**87** UK ports served by Stella Maris chaplains



**126k+** seafarers supported in the UK last year



**5,700+** ships visited in the UK every year

Stella Maris Regional Port Chaplain Peter Morgan was not expecting the phonecall when it came...

A seafarer had been arrested. Another seafarers' charity had heard about it but didn't have a representative nearby... Could Peter help?

The situation was complex. The seafarer, Ali\*, had gone ashore for the first time in months for a short stroll around the local town. A crowd of men had accused him of following a girl – and before he knew it, Ali had been arrested, charged, found guilty at the Magistrates' Court, and was on bail. As a foreign national, he didn't understand what was said in court or what he had been charged with, and he wasn't allowed to leave the town.

Everything happened at such a speed that the shipping company, with no local representatives, were not able to help. The appointed solicitor provided little support beyond his professional services.

So Ali had nobody to turn to – and the desperate situation was starting to take its toll on his mental health. But Peter was on hand to help.

*"I met Ali and I could see he was in a really, really bad way," said Peter. "So immediately I started to liaise with the police, lawyers, courts and the shipping company. I arranged accommodation to prevent Ali becoming homeless and went to see him every other day, to chat and drive him to appointments."*

Thanks to Peter's advocacy and support, Ali's case was appealed to the Crown Court, where he agreed to a much-reduced charge. Peter says, "He wasn't acquitted, but as good as. Without Stella Maris, I don't think it would have gone to appeal."

Throughout Ali's ordeal, Peter was deeply concerned for the seafarer's mental health. But Peter was there for Ali every day, a friend in the toughest moments.

*"Ali often phoned me late at night and just cried, his words full of emotional distress," said Peter. "He was in bits during those conversations. I don't want to think what might have happened if I hadn't been there."*

It was several weeks before Ali understood what he had been charged with, and he was desperately worried about his family. But Peter was in touch with the shipping company throughout and Ali was eventually able to return to work.

Ali's story shows just how resourceful a Stella Maris chaplain can be. With the authority and ability to liaise with different organisations, and without the pressure of needing to charge directly for his time, Peter was able to offer practical help with great compassion.

*"The shipping companies have a duty of care," says Peter, "but at Stella Maris our motivation is for the welfare of the seafarers – and that really makes a difference."*

\*name changed to protect his identity





## ➤ Partnering for the good of seafarers

When a seafarer was injured on one of their vessels, the shipping company knew to contact Stella Maris. The support provided, together, was vital.



When a Filipino seafarer was medevacked to Portsmouth hospital on Christmas Eve, the shipping company knew exactly who to call...

Charles Stuart, Stella Maris regional port chaplain in Portsmouth, was immediately on hand to visit the injured seafarer in hospital.

Ramon\*, an able seaman, had narrowly avoided being swept overboard in the English Channel by a huge wave. He and another seafarer were checking the forward deck when a freak wave suddenly broke over the vessel, and it was only the fact that Ramon's leg caught in some equipment that saved him.

Ramon had cracked vertebrae, broken ribs, concussion, and injuries to his side and hip. He was lucky to be alive. But he had also suffered the shock and trauma of the accident, was in intense pain and found himself in an unfamiliar environment in a foreign country. Despite all this, Charles arrived at Ramon's bedside to find 'an upbeat character', as he put it.

As well as visiting, Charles kept in touch with Ramon via WhatsApp and got to know him well during the seafarer's 10-day stay in hospital. It wasn't just the injuries that were affecting Ramon: he needed to talk about what had happened, and he was isolated in a country he had hardly set foot in before, with his career and ability to support his family in jeopardy.

Charles realised it would be vital to keep up Ramon's morale and reassure the seafarer he was in safe hands. "We talked about the sea and about the accident,"

said Charles. "As a Filipino, Ramon was keen to have rice with his meals so I spoke to the Filipino nurses and they started cooking for him at home. Eventually Ramon was moved to a ward where Tagalog seemed to be the main language!"

Charles added, "The priest went to see Ramon, and I was in regular contact with the shipping company. They asked me to make sure Ramon had everything he needed, as he'd been flown to hospital with virtually nothing and needed clothes and other things.

"One of my concerns was that the hospital would release Ramon too early, so I advocated for him and made sure he was fit to fly across the world. When the time came to go home, Ramon was still in great pain, so his employer provided a taxi, wheelchair and business class flight."

Charles has no doubt the partnership between the shipping company and Stella Maris meant Ramon received the best care possible.

"Management knew to get in touch with us," said Charles. "We can do a great deal and if we can't support directly, we will know people who can. I don't like to think of the cases that go without the support we can offer. Our ability to talk to people will reveal problems that a ship's agent might not pick up."

**Incident:** Accident at sea

**Support:** Hospital visiting and longer-term care

\*name changed to protect his identity



## Supporting faith, strengthening mental health

The link between faith and mental health is unmistakable. And with huge numbers of Catholics within the seafaring community, the work of Stella Maris chaplains is vital.



For years, research into the relationship between mental health and religion has proven one thing: having a strong faith and being able to practise our religion is good for our wellbeing<sup>1</sup>.

Engaging in prayer or attending religious services fosters a great sense of community and support. Having a network of like-minded individuals gives people emotional comfort and guidance during difficult times.

Faith offers seafarers a framework for understanding and processing their on-board experiences, helping them find meaning and strength in physical and mental challenges. It gives purpose, resilience, and hope.

And when many seafarers and fishers are Catholic, Stella Maris chaplains and volunteers play a critical role.

Our people frequently take seafarers from their vessels to religious services, of whatever faith they follow. (We support seafarers of all faiths and none). Blessings, services and Masses are often conducted on board and chaplains distribute faith materials such as Bibles, rosaries and prayer cards at the seafarers' request.

Meanwhile, for more than a decade, chaplains have been working onboard P&O Cruise ships during Christmas and Easter to provide vital spiritual and pastoral support for crews. For up to two weeks, our chaplains sail with the cruise ship, supporting a working population of many hundreds. Their round-the-clock support includes celebrating Mass and even hearing confession.



*"We are delighted to welcome Stella Maris chaplains on board our cruise ships at these important times of the year. Chaplains provide an invaluable resource for the hard-working crews to connect with their faith or simply have a friendly, trusted, listening ear to discuss any of their issues. The positive impact on morale is palpable."*

**Paul Ludlow,**

President, Carnival UK & P&O Cruises.

*"On board, there were 3,000 crew doing every job imaginable – croupiers, cleaners, laundry workers, engineers and everything else. Many were from the Philippines or India and they were all away from loved ones, some missing their children's first Christmas. There's a lot of emotion."*

**Fr David Burke,**

Stella Maris Trustee and Cruise Chaplain.

<sup>1</sup>Examples include Cambridge University Press: Religion and psychiatry, recent developments in research, and Think Global Health: Religion's role in mental health.



## ➤ Standing with seafarers, no matter what

Even in a war zone, our teams support seafarers. Find out what happened when a crew asked for Mass in a Ukrainian port...

It's early 2024. The war in Ukraine continues to rage. Most crews coming into Odesa port are banned from leaving their vessels.

But when a group of seafarers requested a priest ahead of an especially dangerous journey, our chaplains stepped up...

"Traffic into Odesa had been steadily increasing, but it remained very much in a war zone with daily air alerts due to incoming missiles and kamikaze drones," said Stella Maris chaplain Fr Alex Smerechynskyy.

"A Filipino crew asked for a priest to come on board to say Mass. Not only were they about to leave Odesa and transit through the Black Sea, they were due to continue through the Suez Canal, down the Red Sea, through the chokepoint of the Bab-al Mandab Strait and across the Gulf of Aden on the way to Pakistan."

It was a risky route, known for random attacks and piracy. "Few modern sea journeys are more fraught with danger," added Fr Alex.

So Fr Alex and assistant chaplain Rostik Inzhestoikov contacted the local parish priest, Fr Roman Krat, who came into the port and celebrated Mass with a grateful crew. It was the first Mass on board a ship since the war began.

But that wasn't quite the end of the story. The ship made it safely to Pakistan, and the same crew navigated the return journey and arrived back in Odesa weeks later. Fr Alex, Rostik and Fr Roman were welcomed back on board and Mass was celebrated again.

Stella Maris Chief Executive Tim Hill said, "This is a perfect example of the vital ship visiting and face-to-face outreach that our teams provide day-in, day-out, amid dangerous and traumatic circumstances. It was a truly uplifting experience for the seafarers, who were extremely grateful that Stella Maris Ukraine had been able to meet their spiritual and pastoral needs."



## ➤ Giving a voice

Our chaplains speak up on behalf of seafarers fearful to raise concerns themselves – and this simple act of advocacy is vital for crews' wellbeing.



Not being paid is hugely stressful for seafarers.

After all, many support an extended family back home with their regular salary. So when the crew of a bulk carrier told Stella Maris chaplain Peter Morgan they hadn't been paid in six weeks, he swung into action...

"We contacted the P&I Club, the vessel's insurers, which did the trick the first time," said Peter, who covers ports around the Bristol Channel. "But it happened again, and when 13 of the crew came to the end of their contract, they hadn't been paid for two months."

The seafarers were feeling the strain because families back home needed money, and the men had been on board longer than expected. So Peter stepped things up a notch, contacting the International Transport Workers' Federation to support the crew and ensure correct procedures were followed.

"A chaplain raising these concerns is perfectly valid," said Peter. "I can't be blacklisted and I can't lose my job for this, so I'm in a great position to advocate for seafarers. I don't have to reveal names and can just ask questions. I can be a buffer for the crew."

In this case, thanks to Peter's advocacy work, the seafarers finished their contracts and returned home with their wages paid in full. Peter describes his role as, "a middle-man that the crew trust ... through whom things can be communicated, from the company side and the crew side."



And it's not just the crew who benefits. Peter is clear that, although his job is to support seafarers, his work benefits the whole industry...

"There's a reason we have contracts for seafarers. Conventions are there not because they are a nice idea, they need to be adhered to," said Peter. "Making sure the shipping industry follows its own rules benefits everyone, because we ensure things will be done properly. If things go wrong, it could be a serious problem for the company."

By acting, in his own words, as 'a pin in the middle' between the crew, the shipping company and the authorities, Peter achieved the best possible outcome for the crew in a challenging situation – something that simply would not have been possible without his intervention.



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