

Seafarer chaplaincy confronts piracy fears: "An amazing ministry"

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 2, 2009](#) issue

The recent dramatic high seas rescue of a merchant ship captain held hostage by Somali pirates stirred a public debate on whether cargo vessels should be armed. It also drew attention to the more than 1 million mariners who are essential in transporting 90 percent of the world's traded goods, including humanitarian aid to needy countries. And it gave voice to the little-noticed chaplains who provide hospitality to mariners at ports in 126 countries.

The U.S.-flagged *Maersk Alabama* was headed April 8 to Kenya with relief shipments from USAID, the World Food Program and other relief agencies when the ship was boarded by four pirates some 300 miles off Somalia. The crisis ended days later when U.S. Navy sharpshooters killed three of the pirates.

At a U.S. Senate committee hearing April 30, the skipper, Captain Richard Phillips, said it is the U.S. government's responsibility to protect any ship flying an American flag. Phillips said an armed brigade of specially trained crew members might deter pirate attacks. But John Clancy, chair of the private shipping line, differed in his testimony, saying that arming and training crew officers would be too expensive and could escalate a deadly arms race with already well-armed pirates.

At the New York-based Seamen's Church Institute, the largest and most comprehensive of U.S. maritime ministries, the "consensus is that arming merchant ships is probably not the best solution," said Douglas Stevenson, director of the Center for Seafarers' Rights.

"There are no simple answers," he said, adding that both the Episcopal Church-related Seamen's Church Institute and the International Christian Maritime Association have studied the growing peril for years. Since 2003, more than 1,660 merchant mariners have been kidnapped or taken hostage, according to industry figures.

“Somalia-based pirates want to keep their captives alive [to demand ransom money], whereas in waters off Southeast Asia or Nigeria you are in an armed robbery situation,” said Stevenson. Deterrence would be limited: “Many ports prohibit merchant vessels that carry weapons.”

Due to an upswing of pirate attacks off East Africa, Lutheran World Relief is not planning at present to send shipments to either Kenya or Somalia, said a spokesperson May 6 at the LWR headquarters in Baltimore.

Observing that shipping lines are evaluating all options to protect their crews, Trevor Knoblich, LWR program associate for material resources, said in an e-mail that “piracy, terrorism and violence between tribes often stems from severe poverty” and that the people of Somalia and Kenya desperately need assistance.

“While we are working to avoid risks, we cannot eliminate them entirely,” Knoblich said. “We also do not want our work to be dictated by a fear of piracy— there are legitimate needs and many peaceful, deserving people in those areas.”

In the larger picture, threats of piracy are regionally limited—and not the only concerns for the 1.2 million merchant mariners operating 100,000 vessels that deliver the bulk of world trade, according to maritime leaders.

The Seamen’s Church Institute, celebrating its 175th anniversary this year, offers the world’s only free legal-aid service for merchant mariners. A multimillion-dollar renovation of its Newark center, expected to be completed this fall, will include computer simulators designed for port security and maritime training.

“In my opinion,” SCI’s Stevenson said in a telephone interview, “the biggest threat to maritime security is not coming from terrorists but from the inability of the maritime industry to recruit a sufficient number of skilled, responsible people.”

A shortage of qualified ship officers continues, he said, even though many vessels have been idled by the worldwide economic slump. “Very few Americans are international crew members because of the relatively low pay,” he said. Of the seafarers working out of New York-area harbors, about 60 percent are Filipino.

Recruitment and retention of good workers and officers is hampered not only by the piracy peril, Stevenson said, but also by the fear of some that they might be convicted of manslaughter in the U.S. if simple negligence—a legal term—leads to a

death. "Seafarers are held to a higher degree of fault than those working on planes, trains, buses and other conveyances," he said. SCI seeks to repeal or amend the Seamen's Manslaughter Act.

Post-9/11 security measures at U.S. ports were recently tightened to the point where foreigners are denied shore leave unless chaplains or hired drivers escort them to banking facilities, shopping malls and hospitality centers.

Marge Lindstrom, a third-generation Episcopal priest and one of several women chaplains with SCI at Newark and at its inland waterway posts, loves her vocation. For mariners, getting off a ship after nine months of monotonous, boring duty in tight confines, she said, "is of utmost importance for their psyche and spiritual well-being."

Usually half of a merchant ship crew (up to two dozen seafarers) have to stay on the ship when it is in port, said Lindstrom. Chaplains are allowed to board a docked vessel. "Sometimes it's just shaking someone's hand, looking them in the eye, and saying, 'Hello, how are you?'"

Frequently, crew members ask for a blessing or a healing prayer, she said. Two years ago, Lindstrom got a call during her night shift from a ship's cook, a Filipino, who wanted desperately to send money home to his wife, who was very ill with cancer.

"I could not leave my post, so I said, 'What time are you sailing?' He said, '9 a.m.,' so I said I'd be there at 7 a.m." She took forms to his ship at Staten Island so that he could send money home.

"You came," he said. "I've been praying and praying, and haven't been able to sleep for 20 nights. You are my angel. God must have sent you." Acceding to his wishes, "I laid my hands on him to bless him and his wife. . . . He was in tears."

Reflecting on her years as port chaplain, Lindstrom said she always thought she would be in parish work. "This is an amazing ministry," she said. "What a way to welcome the stranger in our midst."