

## **A Port Chaplain's Call: Comfort and Renewal at Sea**

*A special report by Mikki Baloy, LDRNY Coordinator*

Pastor Walter Wiklund put on his hardhat and took the newspapers and magazines from the back of his van. His friends, the crew of the Ecuadorian ship *M/V Duncan Island*, would be glad to catch up on the past month's news. Rev. Wiklund makes daily visits to commercial sailors who won't be leaving their ships, even for basic necessities like warm clothes, since new post-9/11 security restrictions make it difficult to disembark. They sometimes rely on the generosity of people like the Reverend and his congregation in Bayonne, who donated winter hats and scarves. One of very few port chaplains in the area, Wiklund sees his mission as threefold: to connect seafarers with their loved ones at home, with America by way of the local port, and with God. To this end, he has worked with seafarers since 1966. Originally from Sweden, his current dual call to the church in Bayonne and to terminals in New York and New Jersey follows years at ports in New Orleans, Houston, and Brazil.

We boarded the *Duncan Island* at Howland Hook Container Terminal in Staten Island. The ship was carrying bananas from Guayaquil, and would only be in New York for the day. Rarely will any ship remain at Howland Hook overnight; advances in technology have made unloading goods a swift process, and crews must prepare to resume their voyage even as longshoremen are still collecting the containers. The *Duncan Island*, whose longest leave is three days in Ecuador, was just four hours from setting sail once again when Rev. Wiklund began his usual morning ministry to the terminal. He is an ambassador of sorts, welcoming the seafarers each time they come to New York. "They see the city skyline in the distance," he says, "but they almost never get to spend time there."

In addition to the periodicals, which he collects at home, he brings another great gift to the men on these ships: phone cards. Communicating with loved ones at home is not as easy as it might seem, for seafarers don't carry cell phones and many cannot leave the ship long enough to use a pay phone. In years past, port chaplains would post stacks of letters. Today, they provide a lifeline in the form of prepaid cards. Time permitting, Rev. Wiklund may also drive a few men to the mall for clothes, books, movies, and toiletries. At Christmas, he made a special trip with Captain Jan Szotowicz to a Polish market for sausage for a holiday meal. He's always greeted warmly, like an old friend, and has in fact become very close to many of the men he's met over the years. This fellowship is perhaps the most integral part of a port chaplain's ministry. "One of my jobs is just to talk to them," he says. "Sometimes, their biggest problem is isolation. A new face is very important." Most ships have a maximum of 25 crew on board, and no one gets a day off while at sea. Seeing the same few people every day, many of these men are starved for conversation. And as ever, a pastor can also become counselor and confidant. When these seafarers spend nine months at sea and only two or three at home, they begin to wonder if they've chosen the right career. "They ask me, 'Father, I was

able to put my children through college, but I barely know them. Have I done the right thing?' All I can do is listen and pray with them. There is no right answer."

With a crew of 23, the *Duncan Island* is short-staffed. In the wake of 9/11, new security regulations mean more paperwork and more tasks for every ship. For instance, there is a new mandate that a man be stationed at the gangway while the ship is docked, to sign in guests and check identifications. Capt. Szotowicz doesn't see the need. "If the port has to be fenced in and ID's are checked before you can even drive into the area, why should I make a member of my crew stand outside? There is other work he could be doing." Each ship must also triple check for stowaways before every departure, and two divers search the underwater intakes for drugs. There are now monthly security drills, too, and the Captain has had to invent scenarios and procedures. "There is so much paperwork, so many reports every time we dock that I wonder, who reads all of this? I don't complain, because I have to do my job, but there are nights I don't sleep. 2000 pages of reports all have to be perfect. It wasn't like this before."

Further complicating the work of seafarers are new post-9/11 provisions to the International Maritime Organization Ship and Port Facility Code. Under these provisions, some seafarers are denied shore leave altogether, particularly if they don't carry a D1 visa. For decades, international law did not require seafarers to obtain visas in order to disembark. The International Labor Organization is currently advocating for the adoption of an internationally recognized identity document that would facilitate shore leave, simplifying the process for seafarers who would otherwise have to apply for a visa while in their home countries. While security regulations are certainly necessary in this era of terrorism and international conflict, seafarers have become a marginalized population. Many are Pacific Islanders or Hispanics, often treated with suspicion and caution rather than hospitality. They are responsible for the import and export of food, clothing, automobiles, furniture, and fuel, and they are facing the strictest security regulations in history. An already difficult and dangerous job has become even harder.

With 90% of trade in the world's raw materials and products transported by sea, merchant mariners make phenomenal contributions to our economy. We should remember these hardworking men the next time we buy a new car, or even some bananas at the market. There are human hands and faces behind our everyday purchases. Let us hope that those faces continue to be welcomed warmly by port chaplains like Walter Wiklund.

LDRNY is pleased to support the ministry of Pastor Wiklund through Seafarer's and International House. If you'd like to find out more or add your voice to the shore leave restrictions protest, please visit the Seafarer's and International House website: [www.sihnyc.org](http://www.sihnyc.org) , or visit [www.seamenschurch.org](http://www.seamenschurch.org) .

