

Seafarers draw on vital support from port chaplains, research finds

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Credit: Professor Helen Sampson

Seafarers of different faiths and no faith rely on support from port chaplains in coping with what is often dangerous work in challenging institutionalized workplace settings, research from Cardiff University has found.

On board ship, [religious beliefs](#) and attitudes are kept private but

[seafarers](#) revealed to the team the ways in which many who do have a [faith](#) construct their own set of religious beliefs in order to cope better with living and working conditions.

The study, led by the Seafarers International Research Center (SIRC) and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), investigated the faiths and welfare of seafarers on board two cargo vessels carrying multinational crews.

The researchers also spent six months in two U.K. ports studying the work of port chaplains, paid staff and volunteers all of which provide [welfare services](#) to seafarers of all faiths in dedicated seafarers' centers. They heard about the extraordinary lengths people delivering these services go to in order to support seafarers despite shortfalls in funding. Many chaplains described how they spent half of their time fundraising in order to deliver services effectively.

Professor Helen Sampson, Director of the Seafarers International Research Center (SIRC) at Cardiff University, explained how:

"Seafaring is an extremely dangerous occupation and we found seafarers had experience of feeling very afraid on board a ship at some point in their career. When they'd felt particularly helpless, many had turned to their gods for assistance.

"At the same time, many felt released in some way of observing some of the practices that would indicate piety ashore. They allowed themselves some freedoms which they felt their god would understand and forgive because, after all, on board they are sacrificing an awful lot to make a financial living for their families."

She added: "Our research also shows the important role port chaplains and others at seafarers' centers play in offering welfare support. This is

vital and particularly so as seafarers continue to deal with the added anxieties and uncertainty brought about by the pandemic."

The research findings are vividly described in a new film which shines a light on how seafarers express and draw upon faith and the support of port chaplains in dealing with the stress of being away from home for months at a time isolated from their communities and networks.

Globally, the shipping industry employs an estimated 1.6m seafarers. Many are hired on precarious contracts which require them to be away for up to 12 months at a time.

The film brings together the reflections of the research team with those of key stakeholders.

Andrew Linington, a Senior Policy Advisor at Nautilus International UK, who was interviewed for the film, said: "This research is critically important because it comes at something like a watershed moment for seafarer welfare.

"Over the last few years, we've seen a much greater awareness of psychological needs as the industry has changed dramatically and the complexity of needs along with it.

"By tapping into those changes, highlighting the need for a restructuring of services and for a reappraisal of what seafarers need by asking the questions of the seafarers themselves, then we have the basis for what could deliver a quantum shift in seafarer welfare."

More information: Helen Sampson et al, Harmony of the Seas?: Work, faith, and religious difference among multinational migrant workers on board cargo ships, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2020.1776362](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1776362)

Provided by Cardiff University

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