

NAMMA Conference Keynote Address
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Holistic Thinking for Maritime Ministry
by Jason Zuidema

I. Introduction

Our theme is ‘Many Expressions, One Task’. Although this banner rings joyful, all of us who have been involved with ecumenical seafarers’ missions know that it is often more wishful than actual. Nonetheless it is a helpful motto in that it has brought us all here together away from our respective posts to consider more deeply the mission in which we are collectively involved. From my experience in Seafarer’s ministry and my visits to other seafarer’s centres around the World, I am fairly convinced that this mission is on a practical level one of the most ecumenical and catholic organizations in the world. If the seafarers actually realized the number of different denominational organizations with which they interacted on a regular basis I imagine they would be very puzzled. That they do not come to recognize this fact continues to be somewhat of a mystery. I imagine actually that the vast majority of the seafarers we serve don’t know that or why we are here today. It is a mystery how the differences between the representative denominations are often so little in the eyes of the seafarers, yet so great on an official level among us ‘land lubbers.’ Indeed, underneath our motto ‘Many Expressions, One Task’ is not only wishful thinking, but deep theological and methodological differences.

We are confronted then with the oneness of the task before us. Certainly we would admit the ‘many expressions’ of Seafarer ministry. In any individual mission there are certain who concentrate on driving, or cleaning, or manning the cash register; Others on administration, seafarers rights, making ready the centre for the daily activities; Or, as represented here, those who are called as chaplains, evangelists, or deacons. All these people show on a very practical level the ‘many expressions’ of ministry. But it is this last group in which the ‘Many Expressions’ of ministry becomes problematic for the ‘One Task’ of Seafarers ministry. It is problematic, as is indeed the theme of this conference as well, because we are often not agreed as to what the ‘One Task’ of Seafarers ministry is. It is good to have this motto before us, but we know that such is not often the reality of ecumenical ministry.

The lot has fallen to me, then, to encourage or to put a little ‘oneness’ back in the task of Ecumenical Seafarers ministry. Perhaps my little contribution this morning as a Reformed Minister, not one of the ‘big-four’ in NAMMA, might stimulate your thinking on this constant practical reality. I certainly do not have *the* response to our corporate problem, but I have found that this reflection has at least been helpful for my personal experience in maritime missions.

II. The Issues and the Whole

I often see in ecumenical endeavours in seafarers ministry what has been called by the contemporary Italian Reformed theologian, Leonardo deChirico, ‘Issues thinking’. ‘Issues thinking’, he writes, is the attempt to address ecumenical problems on the level of individual issues. For example, often Evangelicals and Catholics have tried to continue party lines or rebuild ecumenical relations on the basis of an understanding of justification, or mariology, or sacramental theology, or a whole host of individual issues. Unfortunately, writes deChirico, the dialogue between these groups (and especially the Protestant understanding of the Catholics) suffers because there is much more in play than any single issue. He argues that Protestants would do much better to discuss the larger issues of the relation of nature and grace and the Catholic understanding of the Sacramental nature of the Church. Indeed, the point of his work is to encourage ‘holistic’ or foundational thinking rather than continue ‘Issues thinking.’

The interesting point of deChirico’s book is that although it is historically individual issues that separate us, it might not be those issues that continue to keep us apart. Otherwise said—if there is a willingness to have ecumenical relations with another denomination, much more needs to be looked at

than simply the proverbial ‘straw that broke the camel’s back.’ So also in Seafarer’s missions. We can all certainly point to the issue or issues that are keeping us apart, but it might be necessary to look elsewhere if indeed we want to again work together. Using these ideas of deChirico as a springboard then, I would like also to encourage ‘Holistic’ thinking and method in Seafarers ministry. Although I will certainly speak theologically, my aim is to rectify what I consider to be methodological ‘Issues’ thinking. It is often on the level of method and practice that the ecumenical rubber hits or, unfortunately, skids off the road.

In seamen’s missions worldwide there is an important dichotomy between those who see the ‘one task’ of ministry as diaconal work and those who see it as verbal evangelism. From the beginning I must say that these two are certainly not antithetical and many try to do both, but nonetheless this is an important divide. This divide was impressed upon me again most recently while visiting three different clubs of the German Seafarer’s Mission in North-Western Germany. As you might know, the motto of the German Seafarer’s Mission is ‘support of seafarers’ dignity’—a motto which is perhaps shared by their cousins here in North America. Such motto is applied differently in the various clubs throughout Germany. Some understand the support as strictly diaconal support—indeed, the main animators of certain clubs are deacons themselves. In other clubs the main animators are ordained ministers of the Lutheran Church. Most of these ministers, however, act in the function of deacon and often of administrator, lamentably. Wonderful to see that these clubs and the corresponding Seafarer’s homes are some of the best in the world for diaconal services offered.

Yet, there are also differences on the level of understanding the ‘dignity’ in ‘support of seafarers’ dignity.’ Supporting dignity is understood generally as seeking to provide what a seafarer needs—but who defines what a seafarer ‘needs’? In most German clubs there is a focus on more social concerns. They certainly agree there are religious needs, but there is a great deal of divergence in how they actually provide for these religious needs. Indeed, although they all represent one denomination, often they provide in different ways. Compare, for example, the respective chapels in the three Seaman’s clubs I visited. In the first club there is a fairly small, but obviously Christian chapel with a large German Bible open on the communion table. The pastor here tries to have Christian services on occasion, but mostly drives the van and administrates the club. He has set an honest goal of visiting twice the number of ships next year, but with his present administrative responsibilities it will be a hard goal to reach.

At a second club the chapel is very different. A much larger room has a dozen or so prayer stations at which the individual seafarer can practice his religion. Going around the room, starting with the Muslim prayer space facing Mecca, are stations for Jews, Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Hindus, Buddhists. There is even a space for the odd Lutheran or Protestant (none specifically for the Christian Reformed Church, unfortunately). For all there is a prayer request book (to the Christian God, I presume) at the door. I am not sure officially how much the chapel is used, but it is presented as another diaconal service provided by the club. Undoubtedly, the folks running the club are passionate about their ministry among the seafarers, but certainly the focus is on diaconal and recreational concerns.

The final club having recently built their building took a third route. Wanting neither something too overtly Lutheran nor too overtly pluralist, they took the very interesting route of building a basically empty room as a ‘quiet room’ in which the individual seafarer would have the opportunity to decide what religious practice he would choose. There is the faint trace of a cross on the back wall, but the room is generally non-descript enough that any religious practice could be accommodated.

Despite these differences, it is fairly clear that a German Seaman’s Mission worker would weight the ‘One Task’ largely on the side of diaconal or social work. Such definition by our German counterparts is contrasted to, I imagine, an equally great number of chaplains who would push more for verbal evangelism as the ‘One Task’ of ministry. Many missions groups focus on distributing Christian literature on board ships. Although I can’t criticise the contents of much that is distributed seeing as a great deal is Bible selections, I don’t know how effective this literature is and how much is even read. There is certainly a place for literature ministry in Seaman’s ministry (indeed, I have participated in the distribution of this literature), but it can’t be the whole of the ministry or it might be viewed as fairly irrelevant to the life of the seafarer. Without being part of a more comprehensive strategy on our part to

address the needs of the whole person, much of this literature will be looked at on unappealing and on a practical level (simply because it won't be read) as useless.

The goal of my speech this morning, then, is to say that these two avenues are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I am sure many of you see my two examples as 'straw men' which I will now proceed to knock down. Indeed, many here will say that neither of the extremes represents them—as you will see, I, personally, hope this is the case. Yet, even though these two extremes don't represent our ministries exactly, our ecumenical problems arrive because we are all at various points along the spectrum.

Rather than look at the merits or demerits of each chaplain or seaman's club in the world, I wish to go to the much wider question of general human needs. Each of us has an understanding, whether stated or non-stated, of anthropology—that is, an understanding of the human person. All whether denominationally or individually have assumptions when it comes to the needs of human beings in this world. One of the big problems in Seafarer's ministry, indeed, in all ecumenical missions, is that different chaplains have very different understandings of what a seafarer *needs* as a human being. In what follows, then, I would like to promote what I see as a biblical and Reformed understanding of anthropology—one which I hope can be helpful for our discussions this morning.

As was made evident, I am the pastor of a French Reformed Church and, admittedly, I subscribe to an understanding of biblical revelation as reflected globally in the Reformed confessions. Now these confessions were written several centuries ago in the midst of heated polemic and in cultures much different than our own, yet there are several distinct thoughts in these confessions which I believe could be shared by and be useful for us all here this morning. Particularly, it is the holistic approach to the human being which interests me here.

Perhaps the most widely known and held confession of the Reformation Era among Reformed Churches is the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563. For those of you who might not have heard of it, a couple of facts are in order. The document is surprisingly ecumenical for its time. Although certain points of Catholic doctrine are not well viewed (and consider that the Council of Trent had just promulgated its anathema's against the Protestants), the document tried nonetheless to regroup the Protestants under a single positive banner. Indeed, the document sought to build on what was viewed as the positive tradition of the middle ages. Hence, the opening section on sin, for example, can be seen directly linked to the substitutionary atonement theory of the medieval Anselm. Reformed Churches have always understood the authority of the confessions not to be their own, but that of Scripture. If you look up this document on any one of the many internet sites on which it seems to be found, you will see the links to the Scripture texts from which this document was written. Certainly, we could debate about the validity of individual questions and answers, but that would bring us into another topic entirely. In any case, whatever the strengths or weaknesses of the document as a whole it is only the first question and answer that I want to focus on this morning.

Q & A 1. of the Heidelberg Catechism

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

At least three ideas are important in this small answer. First, the Lordship of Christ over soul and body. Second, the providence of God in the smallest things of life. And third, the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

i. This answer points to the importance of the Lordship of Christ over soul and body. The Christian religion is not just concerned about saving souls or helping people out economically, but is concerned with the whole person-body and soul. As chaplains, servants of this Lord, we do not have the option to concentrate on souls or on bodies, but should be concerned with both. It is people we are dealing with, not disembodied souls or needy corpses. As such, our work should never forget the whole

person and the needs of the whole person. Often we neglect the more comprehensive needs of the individual men. Consider this list of needs: physical, financial, recreational, emotional, spiritual. Overall, we are well-equipped to supply for the physical needs of the men. Everything is done to assist the ITF in assuring that there is physical well-being onboard the ships and that nothing is lacking in provisions or safety equipment. Financially, we also help the ITF in whatever way possible and are one of the major facilitators of sending money back home. On the level of recreation we are doing very well. Most of the clubs I have seen are well stocked with all sorts of recreational options for a well-deserved night out from the Ship. On these first three most seafarers clubs have similar visions. It is on the last two where there is a great deal of difference. We are not often great at meeting the emotional or spiritual needs of the seafarers. Sometimes this is a language problem (and if you do not know several languages, I would greatly encourage you to start learning), but even if it is our own language we are often generally at a loss as to what to do.

My point of view here might be controversial, but my point is backed by my reading of the Scripture witness and by the summarized idea above of the Lordship of Christ over soul and body. People in general have emotional and spiritual needs. Like the physical, financial and recreational, these need to be met or there will be negative consequences. Without regular positive emotional and spiritual support a person will develop problems much greater than any brought on by negative physical, financial, or recreational circumstances. Hence, as Chaplains, we need to consider the emotional and spiritual needs of the seafarers entering our harbours and address them as best as we can. I am convinced by the biblical witness that the seafarers, as everyone on this earth, have that negative void in their life without faith in Christ as Lord. Hence, as part of a holistic ministry I will attempt to address that void and put the seafarer into contact with the message of Christ and the importance of God for his life.

ii. In a second place, this answer also points to the providence of God in the smallest things of life. This truth is vitally important for seafarer's lives are often so focused on these small things. Although in port very large and stable, ships, so seafarers tell me, feel nonetheless like toothpicks when caught in a storm in the middle of the Atlantic. Also, within the ship seafarers have to deal with all sorts of important data and technical equipment which if not properly handled could cause serious problems or injury. More than most jobs, seafarers have a consistent array of trials and tribulations. As such, seafarers need to hear that God cares for and is present with 'toothpick like' things in this world.

More than that, however, many seafarers might feel the strain of being away from home for such a prolonged period of time. In a certain sense, the life of a seafarer is a very counter-cultural one: life on board ship is in many ways very different than which we who have stationary jobs experience. Perhaps the most noticeable difference is the family relationships which these men have. Some officers can bring their wives and children aboard, but the lesser-ranking seafarers have to go alone for many months at a time. I imagine that they develop ways of dealing emotionally with the parting of their families for 10 months at a time, but it certainly can't be easy. When I am parted from my wife for several days on work I already feel the strain when I return. Life easily becomes compartmentalized when we don't share it together. For example, last week I was gone for five days from home and there were many things my wife did that I would have never known about had she not told me. Some things weren't that important, but certainly to share emotional and spiritual ups and downs is critical in a marriage. I would imagine that what my wife and I experienced after only five days would be greatly compounded if I were gone for nine months to the other side of the world.

Hence, chaplains have a necessary and often privileged place in the life of the seafarer. Chaplains, although being only a poor substitute for a wife, can be a great emotional support for seafarers who really need to work through emotional problems. It seems to me that our role as listening ears is crucial for their emotional well-being and their general happiness on board a ship for weeks and months at a time. Some perhaps have great relationships with their co-workers and can work out emotional problems among themselves, others feel fairly alone and rejected and would love to talk with another human being who is not trying to make them do something. In the same vein, on a practical level more could be done to help link husbands and wives during these long months away. Telephones, letters, and email are all helping us

greatly in our work. If you have other innovative ideas you have been implementing in your club to overcome this barrier it could be a wonderful thing to contribute at a conference such as this.

iii. Thirdly, the question and answer above point to the role of the Holy Spirit. I have already alluded to the importance of the seafarers' knowledge of God. It is vitally necessary, I believe, that the seafarer knows that God is not just the God of the land, but also that of the sea. He is no farther away on ship than on land, or even in a Church. I am not arguing that we no longer need churches, but that the seafarer doesn't have to, indeed, shouldn't put his spiritual life on hold for nine months while on ship.

Whenever I held a prayer service here at the seafarers centre in Montreal, I always preached the same short homily based on the Lord's Prayer. The point of my message, and this from Matthew's Gospel, was that prayers do not need to be long and complicated, but from the heart. Differentiating the self-glorifying prayer of the Pharisee and the from-the-heart prayer of the publican is what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. Hence, whenever they had stress or temptation, the seafarer was to pray to God from the heart. I don't know if they listened to me, but encouragement to pray was one of the most important initial steps in meeting the spiritual needs of seafarers. Certainly many of the professed Christian seafarers needed encouragement in doing this. I had the feeling that some of them took breaks from being Christian for the nine or ten months during which they were on board their ship. Fortunately, the Spirit of God does not take a vacation for the same period. The Seafarers should know that spiritual life goes on despite their forgetting it for a time.

I would like to think that the three points brought out of this first question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism reflect the holistic thinking of Paul on being a 'living sacrifice' in Romans 12. There Paul writes in vv. 1-2 and 9-16:

1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. 2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

These verses 9-15 especially get to the heart of holistic ministry. Paul is certainly concerned not only with diaconal concerns (as important as they may be), but also with the emotional and spiritual concerns of the little people of this world. I imagine seafarers would often qualify as those of low position. Perhaps even more directly this text would encourage us to love the motorman as much as the captain. In any case, the truths evoked from the Reformed confession seem to have a root in this Scripture passage.

III. Practical Application

How then, practically, will we overcome the obstacles to holistic seafarers ministry? How can we address the needs of the seafarers on all the levels that were mentioned. In the question period I would encourage you to propose some more ideas, but here I suggest only one.

I have been stirring around and preparing this idea for the last several years and I set it out now for your judgment. I came about this line of thinking based on my own experience with Seafarers ministry. I was uneasy with the temptation to simply facilitate the meeting the physical or recreational needs of the seafarers or simply meeting the spiritual needs of the seafarer. For example, sometimes I would just give a seafarer a ride without comment or just give a Bible without comment.

Most of our Seaman's clubs have a privileged place in ports across the World. As you all know, for the last several years Ports have increased security at an exponential rate. When I first arrived here in Montreal I could drive virtually anywhere in the Port at virtually any speed and get onto virtually any ship without too much identification—most often a nametag that said I was 'Jason' from the Seaman's club. In the last 7 years things have changed quite a bit. Yet, even with the new security regulations it is very

seldom that we have no access to the crews of the ships that come into the port. Frequently seafarers have told me that in other ports it is much more difficult for them to get shore leave—often, in certain parts of North Africa and Asia, the port is so dangerous they don't even want leave! So much more their relief, then, when they come to Montreal and are greeted with a smiling face which can help them relax and also help them stock up on what they need for the next trip.

My question is, then, what to do with this privilege. Our ministry is not just to give rides or to be tour guides. These activities are important parts of the ministry and meet important needs, but there is more. To help get rid of the divide between just social or just spiritual work, a goal I set for myself is to engage in meaningful conversations. These are not just conversations about the weather (unless the weather is something important that day!), but *meaningful* conversations about things subjects that mean something to the individual seafarer. Ultimately, I hope that these conversations will lead to an opportunity to present by deed or word the presence and power of God. By this I learn more about who they are and what exact needs they might have. Rather than just throw solutions at them for needs they might not have, it is necessary to speak with them about things that are important to them and encourage them to find solutions.

It is surprising to realize how few meaningful conversations we might have as chaplains in a single week. I would encourage you to make a list of seafarers with whom you have had such conversations—maybe you will surprise yourself with the low number on the list. When I say meaningful conversations, I don't mean that they have to be about predestination or transubstantiation—again, unless this is really important. Rather I am suggesting topics that deeply affect the life of the seafarer. It is these in these deep topics such as family, marriage, one's career, conflicts at work or home, and certainly God, that one has the most emotional and spiritual action. As any wife will tell you, it is not good for men to keep all these emotions bottled up without talking about it. Who knows the amount of marriages chaplains have saved by simply talking about and reminding seafarers of their families.

Perhaps some examples of this would be helpful.

Edward. Edward was a Filipino electrician on a large cruise ship. He was in the centre playing pool by himself, so I offered to join. He gladly accepted and soon we were engaged in a lively and interesting conversation. Recently in his village in the Philippines a tragic accident had occurred in which a large barge carrying pilgrims had capsized and over 300 people had died. Edward told me about how the local priest tried to explain God's actions in this—the priest was not entirely convincing in Edward's eyes. Before he could really ask his priest for a better explanation, he had to get back on the ship. He had continued to think about this question so he posed the question to me. Why did God allow this? How could this have happened? For the next two hours Edward and I talked about this and other questions. I admitted the difficulty of answering such important and delicate questions, but we considered some of the facts of Scripture concerning God's action to begin to find an answer. I was happy to have been given the chance to encourage a seafarer in thinking about a question that was obviously so important to him.

John. John was a Greek seafarer working on the deck of an ocean-going bulk carrier. Before he joined his ship he had a fight with his wife and now she wouldn't come to speak with him on the phone. He would just talk to his children and communicate to his wife through them. When I talked with him he was ready to call his marriage quits—he had even recently stopped sending money home to his wife. One of his 'friends' had even given him easy advice on how most quickly and easily he could get a divorce. His English wasn't very clear, but I tried to show him that he ought to wait and discuss things with his wife before making such a drastic decision. He didn't quite understand what I was trying to tell him. I don't know modern Greek, but I thought my rusty biblical Greek might help. I found a Greek New Testament and turned to the passage in Galatians on the fruit of the Spirit. It was in this list that I found the word 'patience'. When seeing the word in his own language he then understood. He promised that he would try to be more patient with his wife, rather than forcing the 'easy, easy' (said with a thick Greek accent) solution of divorce. I thanked the Lord that I could be one little link in the process of keeping that marriage together—certainly at least his children deserved it for being stuck in the middle of their warring parents.

Himadri. Himadri was born near Calcutta, India and was a cadet when I first met him in the Summer of 1998. Seeing as I was, at that time, a cadet of sorts at the Seafarers Center (or a ‘baby priest’ as the old Anglican chaplain used to call me) Himadri and I had something in common and hit it off well. For the next four or five trips he and I would always meet up and spend a night talking about all sorts of different things. It was sad then at the end of his contract to say goodbye. Fortunately, we stayed in touch by email. Surprisingly he would send me periodic emails asking me all sorts of things about school and life. Particularly, he wanted my opinion on love marriages. Not only was he in email contact with me, but he met a very nice girl from south India on an on-line dating service. It became difficult because it was he and not his parents that set up the marriage and because she was from a much lower caste and a completely different part of India. Hence, he wanted to know everything there was to know about love marriages so as to make an informed decision in this difficult time. So, for the next several months we wrote back and forth about love and marriage. Actually, we have still stayed in touch periodically for all this time.

IV. Conclusion

These, then, are the kinds of conversations that I sought while doing ministry among the seafarers. These conversations were hoped to address deep needs in each of them as a person. What is important is that we take these conversations for what they are. Seeing that talking is one of our main occupations, we should be intentional in what we say. Rather than simply talk to fill up time, try to talk in order to meet the needs of the seafarer. This might mean a change in your working schedule to allow more time to spend with the men, but it will be ultimately worth it. Remember you are not there primarily to build a seafarers centre (and this said as a warning to those here who might be falling into the over-bearing trap of administrative responsibilities), but to minister to seafarers.

Not only might this be helpful for your ministries, but I suggest meaningful conversations as one small way to begin to overcome our ecumenical problems. This method of approaching the seafarers as whole people seems to be something in which all of us can participate. Further, it is a way to work together in our common task. The ‘One task’ of our variously expressed ministry needs to be directed at the whole person of the seafarers. I leave the question of exactly what physical, financial, recreational, emotional and spiritual needs the seafarers have, but simply encourage you to actively address each of them. Rather than trying to throw solutions at individual problems in the life of the seafarer, consider that person’s whole life and the comprehensive needs he might have. Although often forgotten or marginalized by the broader world, these needs must be met. This is indeed the ‘one task’ we are called to. I end with the words of Paul again from Romans 12, words which push us to holistic thinking for maritime missions:

9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.