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# Serving seafarers in the Boston Harbor: Local adaptation to global economic change, 1820–2015

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## Abstract

Religious people and organizations have provided services to seafarers in the port of Boston for nearly 200 years. While Boston's history and present circumstances are specific, the port's services to seafarers are broadly representative of the history of such provision in ports across the United States. We show how local and global economic changes shaped who worked in the port of Boston. Protestant individuals and organizations provided services to these workers, although the motivation behind the services and their content changed. The overt evangelism of the first generations diminished as mission societies transitioned into religiously-motivated social service organizations. Comprehensive social services and lodging were replaced by services provided on board vessels during increasingly quick turnarounds. While today's port chaplains describe their work in much different terms than those of generations past, they continue a tradition of Protestant-supported care that has been evident in the port for the past two centuries.

## Keywords

chaplain, religion, Boston, seafarer welfare

Wearing a bright yellow safety vest, sturdy shoes, and a white hardhat, I (Wendy Cadge) am following Harold, a port chaplain, up the ramp of a cargo ship docked in the port of Boston. I am thinking about Father Taylor, a surprisingly named Methodist preacher who

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cared for thousands of sailors in the port of Boston in the mid-nineteenth century. I am wondering what he would make of this enormous cargo ship with a European captain and twenty seafarers, most of whom hail from the Philippines. Harold calls to announce our arrival at the top of the gangway as we begin our ship visit, bringing phone cards and companionship to a crew that might benefit from both. Two seafarers in overalls meet us and ask us to sign in before leading us first to the ship's office and then to the mess. Harold spends the next hour selling phone cards to the crew before we join some of the men for lunch. English mixes with other languages as the seafarers smoke, eat and ask Harold about the best transport to buy and the local mall.

Harold is one of several chaplains and ship visitors with the New England Seafarers Mission (NESM). Founded as the Scandinavian Seamen's Mission in 1881, NESM today provides services for the staff of cruise vessels, container ships and tankers from a four-story building in the Cruise port terminal in South Boston. In collaboration with a second organization, Seafarer's Friend (founded as the Boston Seamen's Friend Society in the 1820s), they visit seafarers in the Port of Boston, sell phone cards, offer toiletries and hats, transport seafarers to local malls, and counsel and provide emergency assistance. While these groups started as mission societies operating inns where seafarers stayed between voyages, their work today is largely social service in nature and takes place on board or near vessels. It generally includes explicit talk of spirituality or religion only if a seafarer brings up the topic. The direct work with seafarers in the port of Boston is supported, in part, by a third organization, the Boston Port & Seafarers Society, which today operates The Mariner's House, a hotel for merchant seafarers in North Boston.

This article explores how local and global economic changes influenced which seafarers called at the port of Boston between 1820 and 2015 and how religiously-motivated efforts to care for them changed over time, in many ways reflecting broader shifts in the social activism of American Christianity. Initially, Protestant individuals and organizations mostly provided services to local fishermen. The balance of ocean-borne commerce then shifted largely to cargo and natural resource shipping, crewed by European-born workers and American merchant mariners on container ships, tankers and, later, cruise ships. Overt evangelism, moral improvement and social service efforts gave way to nearly-exclusive social service provision as organizations shifted from mission societies to religiously-motivated social service providers. This evolution is evident through our focus on three periods: the early and mid-nineteenth century, dominated by the Bethel Church movement; the growth of Scandinavian mission efforts in the early twentieth century; and organizational adaptation to the post-Second World War process of economic globalization. While today's port chaplains are not identical to their nineteenth-century counterparts, they continue a tradition of Protestant-led care present in the port for the past two centuries. The individuals and companies that employ mariners tend not to address seafarers' needs comprehensively, leaving social service groups (most of which are religiously motivated) to fill in the gaps, if they are filled in at all.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Helen Sampson, *International Seafarers and Transnationalism in the Twenty-First Century* (Manchester, 2013).

## The early years and the Bethel Movement, 1820–1880

Port chaplains have always occupied a unique role in American religious life. Most American religious believers have been on land and most ministers historically tended to shore-side flocks. Ministry to seafarers has, however, represented a longstanding component of Christian efforts in the United States through advocates going out to those ostensibly in need of faith if they will not come to the churches to get it. Dwight L. Moody, one of the most significant leaders in American Evangelical history, viewed this direction of activity as a necessary method of keeping the flame of religion alive: ‘Now if people won’t come to our churches, let us go for them in that way and keep the church awake ... If people will not come to the churches, why not send others out after them, and why not have meetings outside?’<sup>2</sup>

The port of Boston bustled in the early to mid-nineteenth century, with more than enough seafarers not attending churches to draw preachers like Moody to the port. Fishing provided a central support to the local economy and shipbuilding remained a key regional industry through the 1850s. After the Civil War, sea trade expanded and more foreign seamen began to arrive in the port, including many Catholic immigrants. Despite fluctuations over the course of the century, including the depression starting in 1873, fishing, shipbuilding and integrated transportation remained important economic engines for the city. By the end of the century growing numbers of foreign-born seamen passed through the port on steamships, as Boston remained the second largest port in the United States for foreign trade.<sup>3</sup>

Conditions for labourers in the port were difficult. While the city’s upper class lived in the West End, the working class who dominated the port as stevedores, line handlers and others crowded into North End boarding houses in living conditions characterized by a lack of running water and high infant death rates.<sup>4</sup> The port’s transient population – seafarers – enjoyed relatively high wages, but the work itself was taxing and, as conditions changed over the century, the treatment of seamen became what historian W. H. Bunting calls ‘a national disgrace’. In his words, ‘The maltreatment of seamen in major American ports was a national disgrace made possible by the wondrous gullibility of the sailor ashore ... Shipping masters, known as ‘crimps’, controlled the hiring of seamen. Boarding-house masters either doubled as crimps or worked in league with them.’<sup>3</sup>

This context shaped how Protestant groups in Boston began ministering to seafarers to evangelize and to offer social services, both intended to bestow what contemporaries thought of as moral improvement. Motivated as much by religious fervour as by concern for seafarers’ poor working conditions, Congregationalists founded a Mariner’s Church and boarding house in the 1820s as part of Boston Seamen’s Friend Society; members of the Methodist Episcopal Church started the Port Society of the City of Boston and Vicinity in 1828. Unitarians long supported Father Taylor, to the

2. Dwight L. Moody, ‘To All People’. In: W. G. McLoughlin, ed., *The American Evangelicals, 1800–1900: An Anthology* (New York, 1877).

3. W. H. Bunting, *Portrait of a Port: Boston, 1852–1914* (Cambridge, MA, 1971).

4. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts 1783–1860* (Boston, MA, 1921).

sometime-consternation of his Methodist *confrères*.<sup>5</sup> A pamphlet from Seafarer's Friend at the time described their work as 'furnish[ing] regular evangelical ministrations for Seamen' and 'employ[ing] such other means for their spiritual and temporal welfare'.<sup>6</sup> A 'Bethel flag', designed from a vision reportedly experienced by English shoemaker-turned-maritime minister Zebedee Rogers and used to indicate that a prayer service was underway on a ship, first flew over the harbour in 1822.<sup>6-8</sup>

In these developments Boston mirrored broader trends in American faith-based activism toward seafarers, which advanced a goal of 'moral improvement' predicated upon 'a stereotype of the seaman as dissolute, alcoholic, intemperate, sacrilegious, and licentious'.<sup>9</sup> A leader in such work was the New York-based American Seamen's Friend Society, founded in 1828 with the constitutional objective 'to improve the social and moral condition of Seamen, by uniting the efforts of the wise and good in their behalf'. The American Seamen's Friend Society projected that the breadth of that improvement's reach would include 'in every port, Boarding Houses of good character, Savings Banks, Register Offices, Libraries, Reading Rooms, and Schools; and also the ministrations of the Gospel, and other religious blessings'.<sup>10</sup> The American Seamen's Friend Society's comprehensive reform programme linked intrinsically an improvement in religious devotion and prudence elsewhere in life, including personal finances and education. Yet, as historian David Stam has noted, the Society understood that distinctly American notions of religious liberty put seafarers' improvement efforts on this side of the Atlantic at a disadvantage 'because Britain could effect reform by legislation, while anything done in the U.S. must be "free from the odium of compulsion"'.<sup>9</sup> More bluntly, without voluntary organizations like the American Seamen's Friend Society and the charitable inclinations of American religious believers, seamen would be lost.

In Boston, Edward T. Father Taylor, the country's best-known sailor preacher, met thousands of local sailors and visitors who passed through the port. He held daily services at a Sailors' Bethel built for his ministry in the North End, and for almost 40 years 'walk[ed] its pulpit like a quarterdeck'.<sup>4</sup> In addition to Father Taylor's preaching, the Port Society offered a reading room, taught classes in practical navigation, and hosted a union that fielded mariners' grievances against masters and vessel owners.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, the Port Society was typically comprehensive in its approach to seafarers' welfare of the day, providing both material relief and moral improvement.

Religiously-operated inns and boarding houses were central to contemporary work of seafarers' welfare. Such facilities were offered as alternatives to disreputable lodgings where prostitutes, crimps and loan sharks preyed upon seafarers. The first half of

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5. Wendy Knickerbocker, *Bard of the Bethel* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2014).
  6. Mervin M. Deems, *A Home Away from Home: The Boston Seaman's Friend Society, Inc. 1827-1975* (Bangor, 1978).
  7. Stuart M. Frank, 'The Seaman's Friend', *The Log of Mystic Seaport* 29 (1977), 52-58.
  8. Paul G. Mooney, 'History of the Maritime Faith Welfare Organizations', *Studi Emigrazione* 52, No. 198 (2015), 227-48.
  9. David H. Stam, 'The Lord's Librarians: The American Seamen's Friend Society and Their Loan Libraries, 1837-1967', *Coriolis* 3 (2012), 45-59.
  10. American Seamen's Friend Society, 'Constitution of the American Seamen's Friend Society', *The Sailor's Magazine, and Naval Journal*, 1 (1828), 1-2.
  11. Patrick Leehey, *A History of Mariner's House* (Boston, MA, 1995).

the nineteenth century saw the foundation of several of these institutions. Sailors Home opened in 1836 and Mariner's House in 1837, both intended to give sailors a place to stay when not at sea. In the process, they aimed to deny criminals easy access to sailors and provide mariners with structure and moral instruction through church services and religious education. These organizations, then, had a dual mandate to insulate seafarers from the immoral aspects of the port and to actively provide improvement. Yet the split of the nineteenth century proved to be a demographic watershed. By 1845, Sailor's Home averaged more than 2800 borders annually.<sup>6</sup> By the second half of the century, however, the composition of those seafarers was changing. Declining numbers of *American* seafarers led representatives of welfare organizations to go out to ships to bring *foreign* sailors ashore for morally approved lodging and recreation.

Religiously-motivated efforts in Boston reflected a national boom in maritime welfare provision. Bethel Unions, marine bible studies and seamen's churches expanded in New York, Baltimore, New Orleans and other port cities during the century, each often unique in some aspects, but generally providing some combination of religious education and practical assistance.<sup>12</sup> Another commonality was a shared practice of early ecumenism, even in a religious landscape marked by division even among American Protestantism (and never so sharply as when nationally-sized denominations split over the Civil War). In an era when little but opposition to Roman Catholicism and its adherents united American Protestants, seafarers' welfare brought Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and members of the Reformed and Anglican Churches together in establishing floating churches, educational programmes and libraries on board ships.<sup>8,9,13</sup> Combining evangelism with the provision of social services, these Protestants perceived the two as intrinsically related and sought to bring them to seafarers regardless of their denominational origin.

## Scandinavian Missions and Decline, 1880–1940

The general tendency for seafarers' welfare groups to overlook denominational differences is a longstanding trend in American religious efforts that continued into the twentieth century. Port chaplaincy has experienced periods of varying adherence to denominational lines, but most ministries up to the middle of the twentieth century delivered a broadly Christian message of personal repentance, the need to abandon immoral behaviour and internalize the Christian Bible. Exhortations like those of Father Taylor, who one listener said bemoaned the absence of 'An aged seaman ... Why is it, among the hundreds that are before me, that there is not a single old man, scarcely one who is past middle age?' Taylor 'spoke of intemperate and other vices for which they were themselves responsible, in words of severity and warning.' The preacher ended forcefully: 'God be merciful to those who are sunk in vices deeper and more dreadful than the sea!'<sup>5</sup>

Often aspects of port chaplaincy mirror broader trends in American religious life. In the early twentieth century, for example, port chaplaincy had strong connections to the Social

12. Leah Robinson Rousmaniere, *Anchored within the Veil* (New York, 1995).

13. David M. Hovde, 'Sea Colportage: The Loan Library System of the American Seamen's Friend Society, 1859–1967', *Libraries & Culture*, 29 (1994), 389–414.

Gospel movement. The term's historical meaning is contested, but generally refers to attempts by Christian leaders to apply Biblical principles of sin and redemption to macrosocial crises and institutions. One of the most renowned proponents of the Social Gospel, Baptist theologian and pastor Walter Rauschenbusch, argued on a national scale for the need for many of the same things port chaplains preached to their itinerant seafarer congregations: repentance, nurturing an active spirituality in a Christian community, and living in such a way as to guarantee salvation.<sup>14</sup> Further, as Bowman has characterized the Social Gospel as Protestantism's reckoning with consumerism, the movement's proponents often saw modern capitalism as fuelling pervasive social sin. By the turn of the twentieth century, few features of the global economic landscape typified modern capitalism as well as seaborne trade, a working environment that necessarily isolated its workforce from what Social Gospellers considered the civilizing effects of land-based society (and the religious oversight and encouragement that clergy could offer while ashore).<sup>15</sup>

Port chaplaincy shared also with the Social Gospel a general avoidance of advocating for thoroughgoing social reform, a positioning that divides both port chaplaincy and the social gospel from basic contemporary political progressivism or theological liberalism.<sup>15</sup> Like clergy who would have identified themselves explicitly with the Social Gospel, port chaplains in the early twentieth century urged seafarers to pursue personal salvation and repudiation of sinful behaviours, rather than addressing the systemic causes of ostensible seafarer deviance. In part, this was (consciously or otherwise) a tactically advantageous move in line with others proclaiming the Social Gospel, who struck a careful balance between helping the poor and not upsetting their own, wealthy supporters with protests against the reigning economic order.<sup>5,16</sup>

Yet in other ways, port chaplaincy has been unique: ministry among seafarers has long seen far closer cooperation between denominations than most other ministries. While both clergy and lay people with strong denominational ties of their own have often carried out this ministry, both preaching and provision of general humanitarian aid has been 'generically Christian' in nature. As in so many other ways, the Methodist Father Taylor was prototypical in his disregard for denominational lines in maritime ministry.<sup>5</sup> This was especially true among Protestants, who historically carried out the majority of maritime ministry; Catholicism's longstanding wariness of collaboration with Protestants, as well as its emphasis on land-based parishes as organizational units, presented higher barriers to port chaplaincy than those faced by other traditions.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the actual religious organizations in the port of Boston largely remained unchanged. Swedish immigrant and ex-sailor Olaus Olsson began the Scandinavian Seamen's Mission in 1881 to provide social and spiritual support for his countrymen's salary after experiencing a personal revival himself.<sup>17</sup> Scandinavians had long immigrated to and passed through Boston on board vessels and, while other

14. Cecelia Tichi, *Civic Passions: Seven Who Launched Progressive America (and What They Teach Us)* (Chapel Hill, 2009).

15. Matthew Bowman, 'Sin, Spirituality, and Primitivism: The Theologies of the American Social Gospel, 1885–1917', *Religion and American Culture* 17 (2007), 95–126.

16. Gary Scott Smith, *The Search for Social Salvation: Social Christianity and America, 1880–1925* (Lanham, 2000).

17. Paul Day, 'The Scandinavian Seamen's Mission: An Historical Approach toward a Covenant Theology of Missions' (Unpublished MA thesis, Eastern Nazarene College, 1975).

organizations and inns offered services, language barriers rendered these facilities unattractive to thousands of Scandinavian sailors and immigrants. Olsson thus addressed directly the rising number of foreign-born seafarers in the port after the middle of the nineteenth century.

The Scandinavian Seamen's Mission grew quickly. By 1884, the Scandinavian Society was paying Olsson a salary, and in 1900 called Reverend Oscar Lindegren, an ordained minister, to leadership.<sup>18</sup> Lindegren expanded the Mission's footprint, securing a building in East Boston to house the Mission and admitting fourteen Scandinavian seamen just after it opened in 1901.<sup>17</sup> The Mission later purchased an adjacent property and expanded to accommodate 75 people and included a chapel that could seat 100.

Visible from the Harbor, the group now called the Scandinavian Sailors' and Immigrants' Home found its material support in contemporary mission-oriented priorities of local and regional congregations. The Eastern Missionary Association, as well as Mission Covenant and Evangelical Free Church congregations, contributed to the Scandinavian Society's operations. While the number of seafarers paled in comparison to the number calling at Boston's port today, between 1900 and 1910 the mission served more than 12,000 people.<sup>17</sup>

At the turn of the twentieth century, Boston was the country's second largest port. Its fortunes faded in the years leading up to the First World War, with non-military exports falling as larger ports attracted newer and larger ships. Shifts in industrial fishing, agricultural shipping, labour disputes, and the rise to prominence of New York's port, all combined to reduce Boston's significance in American shipping. The port remained weak through the Second World War; this economic low tide greatly impacting employment opportunities which, in turn, partly determined the religious motivated organizations there.<sup>4,19</sup>

The First World War marked a watershed not only for American shipping, but also American immigration. Olaus Olsson's work continued through the early years of the war, when the Scandinavian Society cared for Germans interred in Boston at the start of the conflict.<sup>12</sup> After experiencing leadership changes and the difficult decisions to suspend services to mariners due to limited financial resources, it became evident to forward-looking leaders that the era of nationality-based ministry was coming to an end. Despite widespread contemporary approval of northern European presence in the United States as against that of eastern and southern Europeans, it was precisely these groups that were on the rise in the American immigration process; they sent few seafarers to

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18. While most organizations struggled simply to stay in operation, a select few actually started in the period. Sailors Haven was founded in 1891 with support from the Episcopal Church. It offered Protestant church services, books and other materials to sailors of the American navy and merchant marines. Paul Day (1975) 'The Scandinavian Seamen's Mission: An Historical Approach toward a Covenant Theology of Missions'. Master of Arts, Eastern Nazarene College. The Episcopal City Mission opened a new building in 1905 that also had space for offices, reading, recreation and sleeping. Harold H. Kelley, 'The Early History of the Church's Work for Seamen in the United States'. *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 9, No. 4 (1940), 349–67.

19. Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the States of 1941. *Boston Looks Seaward: The Story of the Port 1630–1940* (Boston, 1941).

American ports.<sup>20</sup> Reverend John Nelson received an appointment as harbour minister in 1924 and broadened the purview of the Scandinavian Society to serve a wider range of seafarers, probably in an effort to survive. English replaced Swedish in official reports and documents of the Mission at the time; the word ‘immigrant’ disappeared entirely from the Scandinavian Sailors’ Home in 1926 as immigration slowed to a trickle.<sup>17</sup>

Yet the Scandinavian Seamen’s Mission had outlasted other organizations, many of which had begun to wither at the turn of the century. The neighbourhood where Father Taylor preached became increasingly Portuguese, a group that included few seafarers or Protestants. In a turn of events that surely stung some, the Seamen’s Bethel closed, and its building sold to the *Società Cattolica Italiana di San Marco* in 1884. Boston Seamen’s Friend Society and Mariner’s House remained open but began to collaborate as demand for their services fell. The Seamen’s Friend Society struggled financially during these years and later integrated into the New England Congregational Conference in an effort to survive.<sup>6, 21</sup>

By the start of the Second World War, religiously-motivated organizations remained in the port – all still Protestant – but demand for their services declined with the number of seafarers. Some remaining mariners’ inns relaxed policies requiring seafarers’ credentials to increase traffic. The Scandinavian Seamen’s Mission continued to Americanize and increasingly diversified its services. It began renting space at Sailors’ Haven in 1936 and divided work in the port with Episcopal port chaplains; however, the Episcopal Mission closed its doors after 1945. In Boston and across the country, these organizations shifted from mission societies focused on evangelism to welfare organizations focused on social service provision. Lectures, musical programmes and other community activities became more common than revival meetings.<sup>11, 12</sup>

## Containers, cruise ships and organizational realignment, 1945–2015

The economy surged after the Second World War, bringing seafarers back to Boston. Shipping reached an all-time high in the port in the 1950s, with large numbers of merchant mariners helping transport goods in the Marshall Plan for rebuilding Europe and the Pacific territories destroyed in the war. As the century wore on, however, the port and the city again declined on account of suburbanization, racial tensions, pollution and overfishing.<sup>22</sup> Turnaround times in port for cargo vessels continued to decrease and

20. George Mason University History Matters, ‘Who Was Shut Out? Immigration Quotas, 1925–1927’, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5078>, n.d.

21. While most organizations struggled simply to stay in operation, a select few actually started in the period. Sailors Haven was founded in 1891 with support from the Episcopal Church. It offered Protestant church services, books and other materials to sailors of the American navy and merchant marines. Paul Day, ‘The Scandinavian Seamen’s Mission: An Historical Approach toward a Covenant Theology of Missions’, Master of Arts, Eastern Nazarene College, 1975. The Episcopal City Mission opened a new building in 1905 that also had space for offices, reading, recreation and sleeping. Harold H Kelley, ‘The Early History of the Church’s Work for Seamen in the United States’. *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 9, No. 4 (1940), 349–67.

22. Allison J. Robert, *A Short History of Boston* (Beverly, MA, 2004).



seafarers had fewer opportunities to leave their vessels, leading religious groups to increasingly work on board rather than in inns and other land-based locations.<sup>23,24</sup>

The Scandinavian Seamen's Mission and other Protestant groups continued their work after 1945, serving a more diverse population than in years past.<sup>25</sup> Much support for the group came in the form of volunteers from local congregations of the Evangelical Covenant Church. The Mission also helped hundreds of refugees from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia arriving in Boston in the late 1940s, fleeing Soviet control of the Baltic region. Between Scandinavian cargo ships and Baltic refugees, Boston's port chaplaincy was busy: more than 400 Scandinavian cargo vessels alone visited the port of Boston in 1950, and the Mission served many of them in one form or another. The group increasingly helped seafarers from a broader range of countries as shipping patterns changed and the number of countries from which foreign-born seafarers came expanded. By the 1960s, this universal approach to seafarers from all nations was common across all of the Protestant organizations serving mariners in the port.<sup>17</sup>

The Protestant groups worked collaboratively through the 1950s and 1960s, increasingly on board vessels as well as on land. This era generally established the pattern for today's maritime ministry. The Scandinavian Mission, the Seamen's Friend Society, and the Episcopal chaplains took turns, for example, offering Sunday evening services at the United States Public Health Services Hospital in Brighton in the mid-1950s<sup>26</sup> During the first six months of 1956, the director of the Scandinavian Mission visited 145 Norwegian vessels, 64 Swedish vessels, 60 Danish vessels, 14 Finnish vessels, three German vessels, four Panamanian vessels and five Liberian vessels. He first would meet with the captain and then offer to meet crew individually or as a group. He distributed scriptural tracts as well as bundles of magazines and other reading materials, sometimes visiting twice or more.<sup>17</sup> Similarly at Seafarer's Friend, port chaplains visited ships, distributed magazines and other reading materials, and provided lodging and meals at their inns. Holiday celebrations typified the era's service to seafarers, with leaders like Forest Cleveland Higgin of Boston Seamen's Friend Society and Reverend Wallace Cederleaf of NESM soliciting small Christmas gifts and delivering them to sailors.<sup>27</sup>

Evolutions in seafarers' service provision were not the only novelty at mid-century. Also new in the 1950s and 1960s was a Catholic presence in the port. Concerned about the experiences of Catholic workers, native son Richard Cushing, the cardinal archbishop of Boston, built workmen's chapels at the airport, train station and port.<sup>28</sup> Our Lady of Good Voyages, known colloquially as the Fish Pier chapel, opened in December 1952 for workers at the Fish and Commonwealth Piers as well as employees in the

23. Helen Sampson and Bin Wu, 'Compressing Time and Constraining Space: The Contradictory Effects of ICT and Containerization on International Shipping Labour', *International Review of Social History* 48 (2003), 123–152.

24. Lydio F. Tomasi, 'The Maritime Dimension of Migration Studies', *Maritime Mission Studies*, 1, No. 1 (1994), 47.

25. Jehovah's Witnesses have also occasionally been present in the port as individuals seeking to board and evangelize on board vessels.

26. Episcopal chaplains remained despite their mission's previous closing.

27. *Boston Globe*, 12 December 1969.

28. Wendy Cadge, 'The Evolution of American Airport Chapels: Local Negotiations in Religiously Pluralistic Contexts', *Religion & American Culture* 28 (2018): 135–165.

warehouse district. Father John T. Powers was assigned to the chapel at Our Lady and even arbitrated waterfront disputes in the mid-1950s.<sup>29–35</sup> Unlike Protestant groups that mostly served people working on board vessels, Catholics focused on Catholic longshoremen and other personnel operating the port itself. The Archdiocese of Boston was not unique in providing these services, as Catholic priests also advocated for dock workers in New York and other ports.<sup>36–38</sup>

Ecumenical port chaplaincy underwent a significant evolution in the second half of the twentieth century, due not least to a new-found willingness by Catholics to work alongside Protestants in joint endeavours. At mid-century, organizations like the World Council of Churches and National Council of Churches formalized inter-Protestant collaboration and ecumenical dialogue that had been underway for some time already; it was not until the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) that Roman Catholicism formally embraced, as a policy, cooperation with non-Catholics.<sup>39</sup> In the United States, ecumenical port chaplaincy grew notably from welfare work in the Port of Houston, where three ministers – Father Rivers Patout (Catholic), Reverend Sam Duree (United Methodist), and Rev. Taft Lyon (Presbyterian) – initiated a chaplaincy service that has survived into the present.<sup>40</sup>

The Houston example typifies one of port chaplaincy's most remarkable contributions to the provision of welfare services by religiously-motivated individuals and organizations. Collaborating on directly serving individuals in need sidesteps theological differences, which largely are irrelevant to what port chaplains typically do. Sociologist Paul Murray notes that, in recent years, religious institutions generally have seemed to agree

29. *Boston Globe*, 8 December 1952.

30. *Boston Globe*, 11 January 1953.

31. *Boston Globe*, 4 June 1955.

32. *Boston Globe*, 10 November 1952.

33. *Boston Globe*, 17 November 1952.

34. *Boston Globe*, 27 September 1954.

35. *Boston Globe*, 12 October 1952.

36. James T. Fisher, *On the Irish Waterfront: The Crusader, the Movie, and the Soul of the Port of New York* (Ithaca, 2009).

37. Eugene P. Heideman, *The Reluctant Worker-Priest* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1967).

38. Church advocacy for labour was much less controversial in the States, not least because the Church was not so intimately tied to the state as Anglicanism is in the UK and Catholicism was to France, even at mid-century.

39. The products of the Council, known as 'constitutions', 'decrees' and 'declarations', according to their various levels of authority, did not speak to concrete situations but rather developments in theology and ecclesiology. Thus Catholic openness to non-Catholics was typified by statements such as 'the separated Churches and Communities ... have been by no means deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Church'. Second Vatican Council, 'Unitatis Redintegratio (Decree on Ecumenism)'. *Second Vatican Council*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html).

40. Houston International Seafarers' Center, 'History', <http://houstonseafarers.com/about-us/>, n.d.

that ‘ecumenical engagement is made easier when it focuses on collaborating in practical activities of service and mission rather than on unravelling arcane matters of faith and order regarded as blocking the way to structural unity’.<sup>41</sup> In other words, service in common takes precedence over believing in common.

Beyond interdenominational collaboration, a sea change washed over Boston in 1968 much as it had elsewhere around the American coastline, when container facilities opened at Castle Island in South Boston and on the Mystic River in Charlestown. Containers revolutionized shipping, making the entire process vastly more efficient, from loading ships, transportation to the next port, unloading, and road transportation to distribution centres.<sup>42,43</sup> Such changes led to automation and declining numbers of workers. In the same generation, the legal innovation of ‘flagging out’ ships arose, allowing owners to register ships in countries besides the company’s domicile, often as a legal way to avoid labour and tax regulations.<sup>43,44</sup>

With containerization and mechanization, the ships calling at Boston’s port now required comparatively smaller crews; new technologies could load and unload ships in less than a day. The era of seafarers’ lengthy and leisurely stays in the port was over. The itinerant population in the port reflected the demographic impact of containerization, as well: of the 40,000 seamen who called at the port of Boston in 1969, 84 per cent were foreign-born, hailing from Norway, Sweden, Britain, Germany, Japan, Greece, Liberia and more.<sup>45</sup>

These vast shifts in seafarers’ demographics and working patterns exerted their own influence on the provision of port welfare services. As the twentieth century wore on, port ministries acknowledged declining demand for specifically religious services; no longer willing to impose what previous generations had seen as moralizing teaching on ostensibly degenerate seafarers, modern port chaplains sought instead to provide for the practical and more humanitarian needs of sailors. In so doing, denominational differences largely became irrelevant, with specific theological perspectives mattering little when handing out ditty bags (a type of care package, often containing hygiene products, candy treats and maybe a scarf or warm hat) or helping a seafarer Skype home. This is not to say that theological differences have evaporated into religious unity; however, still-extant differences in belief – even very significant ones – do not usually impact the daily work of port chaplains, barring infrequent requests for denomination-specific clergy by seafarers.

Religiously motivated work in the port evolved also because seafarers no longer had occasion to stay in port long enough to use physical facilities. While most U.S. seamen belonged to a union, most foreign seamen did not and their wages were lower than their American counterparts. Each group had distinct needs, ranging from local housing for Boston-based seamen without families, to counselling for Boston-based seamen with families, to a local map and transport for American and foreign-born visitors to the port.

41. Murraray, 2007.

42. Brian J. Cudahy, *Box Boats: How Container Ships Changed the World* (New York, 2006).

43. Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton, 2006).

44. Paul G. Mooney, ‘The Power of Symbols: The Bethel Flag at 200’, *The MARE Report* 3 (2017), 20–22.

45. Billings & Reece, Inc, *Proposal for Survey of Needs of Mariners in the Boston Area for Boston Port and Seamen’s Aid Society* (2017).

Despite the variety of their needs, these groups almost always shared something in common, as they continue to do today: none expressed substantive religious needs on anything approaching a regular basis.<sup>44</sup> Mariner's House still offered housing and community, often hosting American seamen without families. The size of this mariner community, however, has dwindled continuously as cargo ship and tanker crewing has streamed out of the United States and toward China and the developing world. Since 1980, religiously motivated groups and individuals in the port have primarily served the foreign-born crew of tanker and container ships.

Although less significant than containerization, a second major change in the port took place in 1986 when the port of Boston began facilitating cruise ships and make improvements to the harbour.<sup>22,46</sup> Thirteen ships called at port in the first season, mostly with foreign-born crew.<sup>12</sup> Today the cruise season runs from April through October, with most ships traveling between Boston and Bermuda, the Caribbean, or along the coast to Canada. The New England Seafarers Mission (the present name of what was the Scandinavian Mission) quickly learned that the staff of cruise ships have very needs different from those of industrial seafarers. NESM modelled its services on those provided at other cruise terminal ports, such as Port Everglades, by offering banks of telephones, ways to send money home to family, and Internet access.

Yet the watershed of cruising's arrival did not drive this further development of services provided, as seen in other Protestant organizations that remained focused on the foreign-born staff of industrial and container ships. Some groups have been able to continue their service more easily than others. Chaplains from Seafarer's Friend, for example, visited 500 ships each year in the late 1990s, including oil tankers and automobile carriers, and provided warm clothes, phone cards and transport to local malls. On the other hand, today a single chaplain carries on the work of Seafarers' Friend, as the organization proceeds with an amorphous vision of the future and ambiguous connections to local funding. Circumstances similarly challenged Mariner's House to adapt and rearticulate its mission. In the 1980s and 1990s, it gathered reading materials and placed several hundred libraries on ships; it also purchased a van in the early 1990s to visit ships in port.<sup>11</sup> Later in the decade, Mariner's House renovated its shoreside facility, creating private rooms with *en suite* bathrooms more akin to a modern hotel than a boarding house.<sup>47</sup> Rather than providing services directly to seafarers on ships or in the port, today Mariner's House makes financial contributions to Seafarer's Friend and the New England Seafarers Mission to support the work their chaplains do with seafarers and cruise ship staff.

Owing to increasingly short turnaround times and often-dwindling resources, now-diminished Protestant groups continued to collaborate even more than in years past, particularly in moments of crisis. When the bulk carrier *Marine Electric* sank en route to nearby Somerset, Massachusetts in 1983, Reverend Wallace Cedarleaf, then chaplain of the port of Boston, collaborated with the Massachusetts Council of Churches, the Catholic Archdiocese, and three marine unions to hold memorial services for the 31 crew

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46. Allison, 2013, Cruiseport Fact sheet.

47. Personal communication.

48. *Boston Globe*, 12 March 1983.

49. *Boston Globe*, 14 March 1983.

killed.<sup>48–49</sup> In the late 1980s, groups also responded jointly to safety violations aboard foreign vessels, bringing representatives from the International Transport Workers' Federation on board.<sup>50</sup>

In the last several decades, cooperation has transitioned from informal and task-specific to a more institutional status. The New England Seafarers Mission, Seafarer's Friend and Mariner's House started to informally call themselves New England Maritime Missions in the mid-1990s and hosted a conference of the North American Maritime Ministry Association, the professional association of port chaplains, in 2008. They began collaborating more formally with secular groups in the port when a Port Operators Group began in the late 1990s. This group remains active and chaplains regularly attend their meetings. In this, Boston, like most other ports, lagged behind truly cooperative seafarers' welfare provision, which had grown from the port of Houston in the late 1960s.<sup>51</sup> Yet by the close of the twentieth century, religious individuals and organizations in Boston and elsewhere understood that their efficacy and institutional survival would, in many cases, depend upon cooperation and collaboration.

Today these groups offer transportation to local malls, friendly visits, help during emergencies and the resources needed to connect with home. While port chaplains wear or carry crosses and other religious symbols, spiritual and religious topics rarely came up in the time the lead author of this article spent shadowing them in their work. While some seafarers do ask chaplains to pray with them, more are interested in phone cards, a friendly face and someone new to talk with, someone who has not been on board the ship with the seafarer for many weeks. Seafarers on industrial ships today include people from a range of national and religious backgrounds. Stratified by occupational position, they generally work nine months at a time on contracts with unpredictable start and end dates and limited legal protection. Shore leave opportunities are restricted and vessel berths often are far from shops or other services.<sup>43</sup> These conditions combine to render a very basic offering – a genuine welcome – one of the most powerful tools in the chaplain's kit.

## Stepping Back: Initial Conclusions

Much has changed in the port of Boston since Father Taylor preached to sailors for their salvation in the mid-nineteenth century. Foreign-born workers have replaced local workers and are in the port for short periods of time due to containerization and automation. Religiously-motivated organizations have transitioned from evangelical mission societies to social service organizations more focused on enacting than preaching about their values. Missions closed, inns were sold, and most of the work of these groups is today done on board vessels or in the port itself.

In Boston, the groups remain largely Protestant. There is almost no Catholic presence, with the 'Fish Pier Chapel' relocated and its function changed.<sup>52</sup> Preliminary evidence from a larger number of ports suggest that the religious ecology of the city, and its demographics, shape the kinds of services and how they are offered, at least in the United

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50. *Boston Globe*, 23 January 1988.

51. Jason Zuidema, *Shipping Contributions to Seafarers' Welfare: A Survey of North American Seafarers' Welfare Organizations*, North American Maritime Ministry Association, 2017.

52. *Boston Globe*, 12 June 2016.

States. The services available to seafarers vary from those provided by large organizations with significant endowments to those offered from the backs of station wagons by individuals who hand out scriptural tracts with the phone cards they sell. Nationally and internationally, despite the rise of Catholic organizations like the Apostleship of the Sea, the work remains largely Protestant and reflects changes in Protestantism both over time and geography.

While this paper focuses on Boston, the story is not unique to the city: other major American ports, including Houston and New York as mentioned here and others around the country's coastline, have witnessed histories not dissimilar to Boston's. Furthermore, in one sense the history of Boston's port chaplaincy organizations is a local iteration of an international narrative. The International Christian Maritime Association was founded in 1969 and currently includes nearly 30 organizations, which together employ close to a thousand chaplains around the world.<sup>53–57</sup> Yet the intersection of specifically American trends and events – the evolution of American Protestantism, the growth of the Social Gospel movement, ecumenical cooperation, and the fading of previously bold denominational boundaries – render the history of American port chaplaincy unique. Remarkably, it is a history that historians largely have overlooked, even those one might expect to be more likely to investigate religious activism in metropolitan cities. Social scientists likewise have devoted little attention to this work, and we hope this article begins a broader inquiry into the history and present nature of maritime ministry.

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53. Kahveci et al., 2003.

54. Paul K. Chapman, *Trouble on Board: The Plight of International Seafarers* (Ithaca, 1992)

55. Paul K. Chapman, 'What the Church Says to Seafarers', *Maritime Mission Studies* 1(1) (1994), 23–26.

56. Ray Eckhoff, 'Maritime Follow-up Ministry: With Special Reference to Inter-Port and Inter-Agency Cooperation', *Maritime Mission Studies* 1(1) (1994), 17–21.

57. Kaarlo Kalliala, *Strangership: A Theological Etude on Strangers Aboard and Abroad* (Helsinki, 1997).