

Greetings from Milwaukee! I hope this season and this letter find you well. This is a slightly different kind of letter than any I've ever written, as it pertains to the five weeks I just spent volunteering aboard the M/V Caribbean Mercy, one of three hospital ships operated by a Christian relief agency called Mercy Ships.

Mercy Ships, which began as a branch of Youth With A Mission (an evangelical agency working in over 130 countries), is a nondenominational and international organization that ministers to both the physical needs and the spiritual needs of the poorest of the world's poor. Ships are involved simply because the sea is the most cost-efficient way to deliver a mobile, highly diverse community of medical staff, evangelism teams, well drillers, agriculture instructors, and more to areas of desperate need.

I personally became involved at the end of October, after working in Chicago since my graduation two years ago from Wheaton College. The Caribbean Mercy had just finished an exhausting outreach in Honduras when I met it in Florida, and the crew was full of amazing stories of God's provision for the great need they saw around them. During the Caribbean Mercy's recent visit to Honduras, Mercy Ships surgeons were able to give sight to over four hundred people who were partially or totally blind from cataracts or other eye problems. Crew doctors matched thousands of pairs of used prescription eyeglasses (donated by the Lions Club) to people who had never been able to afford a pair. The M/V Anastasis, a larger ship, is able to do cleft palate surgeries and other major procedures for small children, as well as tumor removal and basic lifesaving care. In any port a Mercy Ship visits, thousands have to be turned away when the ship reaches the limits of its resources. You can always see some pretty amazing accounts from the last few weeks anytime on the Mercy Ships website (www.mercyships.org).

I met some truly wonderful people in my time aboard the Caribbean Mercy. No one on any of the ships gets a salary; in fact, from the captain and the CEO to the deckhands and cooks and accountants and welders and receptionists, each crew member raises financial support from family and friends back home (like most other missionaries) to cover his or her room and board. This means that other money raised by the mission can go directly to help those who need it most. It also means that the crew learns to trust pretty seriously in God to provide for their needs in many, many ways!

With Christians from fifteen to twenty different nations working on each ship, life on board is difficult, demanding, and deeply, richly fulfilling all at once. I'm eagerly expecting to find more of the same in my upcoming Discipleship Training School with the M/V Africa Mercy, a former cargo ship that was recently donated to Mercy Ships and is being refitted in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. After this five-month course, I will be able to serve with Mercy Ships as long-term crew (after which point donations will become tax-deductible for my supporters). I hope to line up enough support for that as I go along, but at the moment my more pressing concern is raising what I still need for the class. That, I pray, is where you can help.

And then, too, I will need prayer support even more—immeasurably more—than financial support, and that's the other reason I'm writing. I'd love to be able to mail or email regular updates and ongoing accounts of my work with Mercy Ships, as a way of staying in touch, so that we can both be encouraged. It would also be really great to chat on the phone in the next few days if you'd like to know more about this ministry and my small part in it. If you want to be involved—in any way, through prayer or giving or just keeping in touch—or if you might know someone who would, I'd love to hear from you.

God's peace to you in these uncertain times. And as Rich Mullins put it, may you personally experience the "reckless, raging fury" of God's amazing, unconditional love during this season of Christmas and beyond.

Jeremy Albers