

31 Jan 2002
Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.

Hello from the shipyards of Northumbria!

This is probably the first time you've heard from me since I left Chicago. Not coincidentally, today was the day my Discipleship Training School class finally got computer access here at South Tyneside College, the local school where our little group is boarding while renovations continue on the ship. Yes, today was a good day.

And it's been a good three weeks. It's exciting to be here with the *M/V Africa Mercy*. Although we can't live on board the ship while the work is underway—not many of the crew can, due to fire codes—the crew has given my class such an enthusiastic welcome, because our group is the Africa Mercy's first-ever DTS! It's a situation of mutual encouragement here as the conversion progresses, from an old train ferry into Mercy Ships' newest Christian hospital ship.

The crew has been working hard through some difficult circumstances—Mercy Ships, like its huge parent organization Youth With A Mission, has historically operated on a shoestring and a whole lot of prayer. (A McDonalds Happy Meal here is about £3, and every day all twenty-two of us students and DTS staff eat lunch on a total of £10.) But the ship's crew here, together with the rest of the organization, are deeply called by this vision of another Mercy Ship to provide vital physical and spiritual care for thousands of needy people.

The dream is a contagious one, too. This ship will carry four hundred crew and have more operating-room capacity than both of the other two current Mercy Ships combined! And as I walk the bare steel of the brand-new hospital deck, even in the chilly semi-darkness of winter construction, it's so easy to picture brilliant sunshine streaming in through those same portholes, people walking down the gangway with their lives changed forever... both in body and in heart.

To that end, our class helps with a bit of the work on board, but most of our time is spent learning under some very wise and humble speakers. This week it's been Reona Joly, who (among many other things) was once imprisoned and sentenced to death in Albania for doing Christian work. It's been an intense three weeks already, and I have a feeling the stretching has only just begun. My class will leave for The Gambia to join Mercy Ships' flagship, the *Anastasis*, in early April!

And you wouldn't believe some of the stories we've been hearing from our speakers, many of them older people who have been with Mercy Ships or YWAM for years. They are thoroughly documented accounts, yet I almost wouldn't believe them either if a couple of the people involved hadn't been standing right there in front of me. More than one staff member I've met here, for instance, has had the head-scratching experience of being absolutely broke but knowing God wants them to go to a certain place, and seeing the funds provided out of thin air. One was actually standing silently in line at the ticket counter, still penniless and praying hard, when some total stranger entered the room with

a handful of cash, looked around, walked awkwardly up, and said, “Uh, please don’t tell me I’m crazy or anything, but for some reason I can’t shake the feeling that God’s telling me to give this to you....”

The best part is, these aren’t just stories in some dusty book, although books have been written about this sort of thing. (Many of the people I’ve talked with here have been reluctant to do that, for fear of placing the focus on themselves and the organization rather than on the source). God is very much alive, close, and active out here! My group is eager to see what’s going to happen next, not just in Africa, but right here in Newcastle and South Shields. Several of the students we live among here have approached us already and expressed their hunger to feel God’s love, to have that mysterious “something” they said they saw in our group.

And that’s something huge I want to ask you to pray for: this area, South Tyneside. It’s unquestionably a post-Christian culture, as people here know plenty about God but just can’t believe he’s relevant, even as hopelessness and despair in this economically depressed region continue to grow. One of the students at the college where we’re living committed suicide the very week my group got here. He was twenty years old. Pray that God would use us somehow to spread his incredible love right here, right now, among the people we see every day. In addition to that, please pray for the sixteen of us in my group, that God would draw us closer to himself and one another while our experiences stretch and challenge us in ways we never expected.

That’s the news from here. And now that I’ve finally got email access, I really want to hear yours! Or, if you don’t have a computer, regular airmail only takes about six days. Hope to hear from you soon.

Jeremy