

The Apostleship of the Sea (AOS) in the Medway Ports



Figure 1 Chris Newman
AOS volunteer Ship
Visitor

In this article, Chris Newman tells how his life as a prison governor prepared him for service as a volunteer ship visitor with the Apostleship of the Sea (AOS) in the busy ports on the Medway in Kent.

Chris Newman was born and raised in Sheerness, but it was not until much later in his life that he would visit the docks as a volunteer ship visitor for AOS. After leaving school his first career was as a compositor in a printing works, setting written material into type. This led on to publishing management, and then retail management.

It was while working in retail that he became friendly with a number of colleagues who were married to prison officers, and their stories of life ‘behind bars’ interested him so much that, at the age of 30, he made a complete change of direction and joined the Prison Service. Working his way up through the Service, Chris was finally appointed as one of the governors of Pentonville, a local prison opened in 1842 which now holds up to 1,200 prisoners, mostly on remand. With 32,000 admissions a year, it has the unenviable record of being the busiest prison in Europe.

Chris spent two years as a governor, during which his concerns for the root causes of offending led him to run a pioneering drug unit offering courses in how to beat addiction. As a practising Catholic, he always tried to respect the human dignity of the prisoners under his charge. ‘You have to look at the individual person,’ he explains, ‘and in many of the drug addiction cases you also had to deal with the many underlying problems masked by drug taking.’

Life was often difficult in such a tough environment. ‘As a governor, you were dealing with many of the personnel problems manifest in normal society, but you had to try especially hard to bring the positives out. My staff were working under immense pressure and it was all too easy for some to lose sight of the humanity of the prisoners,’ says Chris, pensively.

When he retired from the Prison Service, and after a short time involved in a restorative justice project, Chris was keen to find a new challenge. However, his involvement with AOS started more through coercion than choice. ‘The parish contact at my church simply approached me after Mass one day and said, “I’m leaving and you’re retired, so you do it!” Well, what could I say?’

Once he had taken on the role of AOS parish contact, Chris came across Deacon Daniel Mulcahy, the local AOS chaplain and a former police officer. Recognising Chris’s talents and his ethos of service, Deacon Daniel persuaded Chris to volunteer as a trained ship visitor in Sheerness Docks and the other smaller jetties along the Medway, and he began his new role in November 2005.

Surveying his first 18 months in post, Chris believes that his past experiences in the Prison Service have helped him a lot in engaging with the conditions faced by seafarers. ‘A lot of the crews are imprisoned on their ships by long contracts,



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loneliness and separation from family,’ he says. ‘Many of their conditions are similar to those faced by those in prison – including long sentences and the solitude. This is why it is so rewarding to help them and to stand alongside them.’



Figure 2 Chris helps an Indian seafarer in the port of Sheerness

Chris’s greatest satisfaction has been in making such a big difference to seafarers’ lives through simple, small gestures of friendship and solidarity. ‘When I distribute woolly hats, for example, they all smile and like to pose for photos,’ he explains. ‘And the small wooden cribs I handed out during Advent were accepted like precious jewels. You’re fulfilling seafarers’ requirements, even just by being a friendly face.’

This was demonstrated recently on a visit Chris made to a small isolated jetty. ‘When I visited the ship there,’ he recalls, ‘the Russian Crew were amazed and clearly very touched that I had made such an effort to visit them as they were all on their own. They had been convinced I must be some kind of official or inspector, but were delighted to discover the real reason for my visit and to receive news from home in their own language.’

Chris has also benefited from getting to know others within AOS. ‘You feel great solidarity with your fellow AOS people through networking, training and religious events,’ he says. However, the most special experiences are always meeting seafarers ‘because they see the face of God in what I do and say. Everything I do is in those terms.’

Written by John Green, Apostleship of the Sea

*AOS are holding their Christmas Carols event on **Thursday December 20th** in Trafalgar Square, central London, from 4.30 pm to 5.30 pm. Why not go along to join in the singing and to raise awareness of the ministry of the AOS to seafarers?

For more information on AOS see www.apostleshipofthesea.org.uk or contact John Green on 020 7012 8606 johngreen@apostleshipofthesea.org.uk