

Ian McColl on the amazing story of Mercy Ships



Hope and healing AFLOAT

Crisis hit the crew of Mercy Ships a year after the launch of the charity's first ship MV Anastasis 26 years ago. The crew found themselves short of food. Then a miracle happened. Suddenly 8,301 herring leapt out of the sea on to the shore. It was enough to feed the ship's company for a year.

Mercy Ships is a Christian charity that runs a fleet of hospital ships that visit the poorest countries in the world and carry out operations not available to their people. It all began with the purchase of the Anastasis for \$1 million, all of which was borrowed.

The vessel was transformed into a hospital ship over a period of three years in a port near Athens. It was a prolonged and difficult time. Even so the spirits of the team remained high. When an earthquake occurred nearby the crew were able to go to the assistance of those stricken. But the miracle of the great draft of herring set the keynote for the work. Gradually smaller ships were added and they sailed to ports in the Caribbean, South America, the Philippines and South Korea.

Stories of lives changed are legion. A little girl called Edoh, aged seven, appeared at the back of a queue of five thousand people waiting for many hours to be seen. She had a huge tumour of her jaw that was occluding her airway. Naturally, all the patients wanted to be seen first but when they saw that this little girl they immediately transferred her overhead up to the front of the queue and over the closed gates. She required an immediate tracheostomy and then had her tumour removed successfully. Years later she came to the ship to announce that she was going to take up nursing. Perhaps one day she will join the crew.

Mercy Ships only visit countries that invite them. This can sometimes present difficulties. Once, just three weeks before they were due to arrive in Ghana, the country's President cancelled the trip. Being a resilient organisation Mercy Ships quickly arranged to go to nearby Togo.

The ship had not been there for more than a few weeks, operating on many patients and helping with various projects on land, when they noticed that secret police from Ghana were surveying their work. Eventually the President of Ghana came to the ship and apologised for the last minute cancellation. Informants in Europe had told him the ship was a Trojan horse full of armed soldiers dressed up as surgeons - their mission to stage a coup. After a three-month stay in Togo the ship went on to Ghana for a most worthwhile visit.

As well as requiring an invitation Mercy Ships insist on a written contract specifying what activities will be carried out and requiring close liaison with local doctors and hospitals.

A Mercy Ships anaesthetist went to visit a local hospital and found a young lady in a coma and dying. When he enquired he was told that she was in obstructed labour, needed a caesarean section, but could not afford it. When he enquired as to the cost of the operation, the answer was £70, which he quickly paid.

The lady had her caesarean section and both mother and daughter survived. Seven years later, when he again visited that country, the anaesthetist was greeted at the airport by a large sign 'Thank you for saving our lives.' Here was the mother and the seven-year-old girl.

The story of Mercy Ships is replete with tragedies and trauma. Equally there is a more than fair share of amusing incidents

The story of Mercy Ships is replete with tragedies and trauma. Equally there is a more than fair share of amusing incidents. Like when a Jewish eye surgeon was told that his first patient was a blind Muslim mullah who needed removal of cataracts so he could once again teach the Koran. The Jewish surgeon was none too certain about this. He said 'I have given up thousands of dollars in private practice, I have had to pay my own fare here, I have left my family behind, I have to pay for my food and keep on board and now they tell me my first patient is a Muslim mullah.'

Meanwhile, when the mullah was informed by the nurses about his Jewish surgeon: he was none too pleased either. When they met, however, all was well and the operation was a great success.

Here is an amazing story of the love of Christ in action in all those ports where Mercy Ships visit, bringing hope and healing to the outcasts of society.

Lord McColl is Emeritus Professor of Surgery at Guy's Hospital

The story of Mercy Ships is chronicled in Ships of Mercy by Don Stephens with Lynda R. Stephenson published by Hodder & Stoughton, 2005.