



Tonight I am at sea, underway on the United States Navy Hospital Ship “Mercy,” crossing the wide Pacific bound for Guam. Days ago we passed the International Date Line while we were rolling in our bunks. Now I know that whatever day it is here on the Mercy ship, it is the day before back home in Wisconsin.

I’m aboard “Mercy” as a Chaplain called to minister to those who serve aboard this ship, and to the patients who will fill her beds and visit her clinics ashore. **This floating leviathan in which I now sleep, work, shower, eat, and pray is one of the largest hospitals on the earth:** 1,200 staff, a thousand beds, 12 Surgical Operating Rooms, an Intensive Care Unit, a full dental clinic, a team of plastic surgeons at the ready to repair cleft palates, ophthalmologists set to remove cataracts and restore sight, optometrists packing 70,000 pairs of glasses. All this—9

decks, 15 elevators, pre-op, post-op, recovery rooms, galleys, mess decks, more than a thousand crew bunks, a ship’s Chapel—being pushed through the waves by the blades of an enormous propeller churning 32 feet beneath the ocean’s surface.

I had heard the wide Pacific was vast, but I realize it a whole new way at this point! As I write these words from five decks down, “Mercy” has not arrived at her first host nation yet. Moving at 17 knots, she seems to crawl like a caterpillar trying to get from one end of a football field to the other.

But the ship is alive and abuzz with energy! I eat breakfast up on the mess decks with uniformed Navy doctors and nurses, civilian health care volunteers from eight nations, sailors who monitor radio traffic from their perch up near the bridge, pilots who will fly the helos that will transport needy patients to the flight deck above. One of my bunkmates is a Navy Commander who helps oversee the mission; another is the liaison officer to “Mercy” from the U. S. State Department; another is an Officer of the U.S. Public Health Service. In the “head” I brush my teeth next to a family practice physician from the Armed Forces of Canada.

“Mercy” will be stopping in Guam first to pick up more crew and supplies, then on to her first mission site of acute need in a rural coastal area of Vietnam, a country we were bombing not long ago. The doctors and nurses of “Mercy” will be partnering with locals to provide much needed medical care to sick people who never see a doctor. Navy “Seabees” (Construction Battalion sailors) will be building health clinics and schools and making repairs to a facility called “The Hope Center,” a center for mentally and physically disabled children.

The Pastoral Care Department I oversee is working overtime to organize numerous community service projects for all hands to help with once we go ashore. Meanwhile, ministry shipboard thus far has involved building our team of three Chaplains and three full-time assistants, and coordinating Sunday worship with Catholic Mass at 0800, Protestant service at 0900, and services for other faith groups represented shipboard. A Catholic Priest from San Diego will be joining our ministry team in Guam.

We have had the tough work already of informing sailors when “news” has come in from home via The Red Cross for service members deployed aboard “Mercy.” Sadly, even at this early stage of the mission we have had to inform four different young sailors of the deaths of immediate family members back home. One sailor was a young female from Texas for whom the Red Cross sent word that her new husband, who serves in the Army, had just been wounded in Afghanistan. Yesterday, we had the sad duty of informing another young sailor of the untimely death of his mom. “Mercy” is too far out in open ocean to transport him off the ship in

time to make it home for her funeral service, so he will miss it. We are trying to minister to him and provide all the support, counsel, and love that we can.

One does not need to have an especially acute faith to sense something Divine coming together here: 1,200 people of different faiths, from different nations, most in uniform, bringing different skills and different gifts, gearing up not to fight, but to heal, to help, and to serve.

I could not be here without your support and encouragement—and that of my family, Faith and Walker. In that sense, you are EACH part of this mission. I would not be able to be where I am right now, aboard a large white hospital ship, crossing the expansive Pacific en route to places of suffering and need, on a mission of humanitarian outreach, if not for what YOU are doing back home. **And so I thank you, and I invite you to pray** for “Mercy,” for her sailors and crew, for her doctors and nurses, for her pilots and navigators, for her med-techs and engine room team, for her Chaplains and religious program assistants. For those who gather aboard “Mercy” to worship their God on Sunday mornings. And for those who await her arrival with hope.

Keep coming to Church and keep BEING the Church!

Still grateful to be your pastor,

Pastor Kirk