

Love Comes in Boatloads

Since 1982, the floating Christian hospitals of Mercy Ships have delivered food, healing and salvation to countless people around the world.

Aminata Sessay once was known as the witch of Freetown, Sierra Leone. A grapefruit-sized tumor protruded from the left side of her face, pushing up the floor of her mouth and causing her tongue to touch her cheek. The growth was not only humiliating, it also caused Sessay to drool continuously and struggle to speak.

Then she met Dr. Gary Parker, a missionary surgeon volunteering with Mercy Ships, a Texas-based organization that operates floating hospitals. Parker removed the tumor and inserted a jaw implant. Ten years later, Sessay is still tumor-free.

Ana Ramona Tejada developed cataracts after a car accident that left her blind in her right eye. A mother of three living in the Dominican Republic, Tejada could not afford corrective surgery. After a brief operation performed by Mercy Ships doctors, Tejada's cataracts were removed and her vision restored.

Demba spent 42 years looking for someone who could correct his cleft lip. Then he learned about Mercy Ships. The surgery restored not only his smile but also his confidence.

Mercy Ships has been collecting testimonies like these since 1978 when the ministry began sailing the globe to offer medical care in developing nations. Since then volunteer doctors have treated more than 200,000 people through village

medical clinics and performed in excess of 26,000 surgeries to correct cataracts, cleft lips and disfiguring tumors, among other maladies.

Through its flagship vessel, the Anastasis, and the recently retired Island Mercy and Caribbean Mercy, the humanitarian organization has sought to preach the gospel in word and deed by literally helping the blind to see, the lame to walk and the mute to speak. "It's fascinating that we are using ships as hospitals, but our focus is following the model of Jesus in bringing hope and healing to the poor," says Mercy Ships founder Don Stephens, 61. "People are anointed—not ships."

The dream to establish a hospital ship dates back to 1964, when 19-year-old Stephens joined a group from Youth With A Mission (YWAM) in the Bahamas. That summer he personally experienced a hurricane and thought a ship offering medical care after such a disaster would be a practical ministry tool.

As he describes in his recent book, *Ships of Mercy*, the vision began to unfold in 1977 when his wife, Deyon, gave birth to their third child, John Paul, who was severely disabled physically and mentally. "Learning the practical aspects of providing for John Paul was a big part of our journey of God's leading us into what is now Mercy Ships," Stephens says.

Before John Paul was a year old, the late Assemblies of God missionary Mark Buntain invited Stephens to visit the hospital he had established in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) in eastern India. While there, Stephens met Mother Teresa. "Your son will help you on your journey to becoming the eyes, ears, mouth and hands for the poor," she told Stephens, inviting him to visit one of her homes for the handicapped.

“I can close my eyes today and bring back the images of that center, so profound was the impact on me,” Stephens says.

With fresh inspiration, Stephens returned to Switzerland, where he was serving as YWAM’s director for Europe, the Middle East and Africa. He met with shipping experts and had a feasibility study prepared, which proved that his idea to launch a hospital ship wasn’t far-fetched.

Stephens began to inspect ships on the market and finally discovered the Victoria, an elegant ship that had been built by the Italian government. After determining that the Victoria met his requirements, Stephens talked with the Italian minister of maritime affairs about his goal of providing free medical care for people in need. Miraculously, the government officer agreed to a \$1 million purchase price—the cost of the ship’s metal, or in shipping terms, its “scrap value.” The deal became final on October 5, 1978.

To ready the Victoria for sailing, Stephens moved the ship to the Bay of Eleusis in Greece for renovations. During the next four years, Stephens, his family and a team of volunteers faced one hurdle after another—including an oil embargo, earthquake and funding challenges—but they didn’t lose hope.

On July 7, 1982, the ship was christened the Anastasis, the Greek word for “resurrection.” Indeed, the crew was ready to become the “eyes, ears, mouth and hands for the poor.”

‘Doing’ the Gospel

For the next several years, Mercy Ships built its volunteer base and focused on relief efforts, beginning with an outreach

to the Ixil Indians in Guatemala. Contributions poured in to the ministry—in the form of money, cornmeal, seeds for crops, clothing, steel roofing for homes, hand tools and farm equipment, generators, medical supplies and a mobile dental facility.

A second smaller ship, rechristened the Good Samaritan, was donated to the ministry in 1985 and was designated for relief efforts in Caribbean ports. Within a couple of years, the Anastasis was equipped with a new eye-surgery clinic and medical equipment—and was finally ready to serve as a hospital. The Mexico City earthquake provided that opportunity.

Refugio Camacho, a 68-year-old woman with cataracts, was the crew's first patient. Her operation was the precursor to thousands of future surgeries onboard the ship. In 1989, Mercy Ships began to make plans to serve in Africa. It would be the Anastasis' first crossing of the Atlantic since its first 1982 voyage, and Stephens was ecstatic about the breakthrough.

As their plans unfolded, however, Stephens and his wife realized they wouldn't be able to join the crew. Life onboard the ship in the previous 10 years had become frustrating for their 13-year-old son, John Paul, and it was time to make a change.

"I realize now that had I remained on the ship, Mercy Ships would have had a short life span," Stephens says. "I needed to come off the ship to work on the foundation, legal structure, accountability and other areas such as public relations."

Mercy Ships purchased property in Garden Valley, Texas, from

Teen Challenge, a Christian substance-abuse treatment ministry, and Stephens and his wife learned to adjust to office life. Deyon serves as vice president of mission development and, Stephens says, she expresses "the spiritual heart of what we are doing at the ministry."

In May 1990, the Anastasis sailed to Africa without the Stephens family. Its medical outreach in Togo was a success, and word quickly spread about the ship's free services—not only within Togo, but also in neighboring nations.

Mercy Ships typically works in developing countries that are in the lowest third of the United Nations Human Development Index. Access to hospital care is often limited, leaving thousands to suffer from debilitating illnesses that could be cured through surgery. Mercy Ships specializes in four types of procedures: eye surgery, reconstructing facial and orthopedic disorders such as clubbed feet and cleft palates, and repairing vesicovaginal fistulas (VVF's), which are holes that tear between tissues near a woman's bladder, causing urine to leak constantly.

Turning people away is likely the most difficult part of a staff member's role—but it is often necessary. A disease may be too far advanced for treatment to make a difference, or sometimes the surgical schedule is full. Other times, a person has arrived too late in the five to eight months Mercy Ships spends in a particular port.

"A surgeon's decision is, 'Do I spend time with my family and children, or do I carve out another hour or two of my time to provide surgery for someone who has no hope and will probably never have another opportunity?'" Stephens says.

The solution, he believes, lies in finding balance. "If I am emotionally, spiritually or physically depleted, the effect of that is going to show in the surgery ... or the aftercare," he says. "Maintaining a sense of wholeness is the challenge for all of us, but I think that's the key."

Through the years, Stephens has become more convinced that the gospel should be "done" as well as spoken. "If we look at the example of Jesus, we see that He not only was the good news—He did the good news," Stephens says.

"Scripture is clear that proclamation is important for faith to be imbedded in people's lives, but I think the gospel has two heads: word and deed. If we historically look at the growth of the church in developing nations where there was little representation of the gospel, education and medicine go hand-in-hand with the gospel."

Mercy Ships partners with local churches and pastors wherever the ministry goes. These pastors not only know the language and customs of the area, Stephens says, but also are able to disciple and train those who profess faith in Jesus.

Stephens believes for poverty-stricken communities to be empowered, the church must first be empowered. "[Saddleback Church pastor] Rick Warren views the church as the only global force that can really change society on a global scale, and I agree with him," Stephens says. "I believe health care clinics should be associated with the local church."

"The fact that Bill Gates and Bono have trumpeted ending poverty and HIV is wonderful, but I regret that we in the church weren't leading this chorus. I think every believer

should be supporting not only his local church and local charities, but international ones as well.”

Refining the Vision

In 1994, Mercy Ships purchased a Norwegian coastal ferry, which it renamed the Caribbean Mercy. The new, larger ship was well-suited for performing eye surgeries in the Caribbean and Central America.

Meanwhile, the Good Samaritan was moved to the South Pacific and renamed the Island Mercy. Along with the Pacific Ruby, a donated yacht used during the early 1990s, Island Mercy helped treat more than 24,000 patients in six nations from Tonga to the Philippines.

The Caribbean Mercy has made stops in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize and Haiti in the last decade. As an example of Mercy Ships’ ministry, volunteer HealthCare Teams in El Salvador helped fit people with hearing aids, provided dental care and drilled water wells.

In 2001 Mercy Ships decided to say goodbye to the Island Mercy and this year, after it provided hurricane relief in the U.S., retired the Caribbean Mercy to put its resources into larger ships. Last spring, the ministry commissioned the Africa Mercy, a Danish rail ferry built in 1980 that has undergone a \$62 million refit. With a life expectancy of 30 years, the ship can accommodate 474 crew and 78 hospital beds.

With about 40 percent more capacity than the Anastasis, the Africa Mercy is a “purpose-designed ship,” Stephens says,

equipped with state-of-the-art surgery suites and a Starbucks café outfitted with Internet capability. Though its operating costs are projected to be \$2.5 million to \$3 million a year, Stephens says the ship can serve almost anywhere in the world.

“Ships are designed for economies of scale,” Stephens notes. “We’ve made a decision as an organization not to have any small ships in the future because they are not as cost-efficient.”

As part of its land-based operations, in April 2005 Mercy Ships dedicated a hospital in Sierra Leone that specializes in VVF surgeries. A growing problem among young women in Africa, an obstetric fistula typically results from trauma during childbirth or physical abuse, as well as lack of health care. In the last year, Mercy Ships doctors have performed more than 500 VVF surgeries.

Worldwide, the ministry has completed some 800 construction and agriculture projects, including building schools, clinics and orphanages, and digging water wells. Its medical team has taught modern health care techniques in developing nations. Mercy Ships also has designed programs to help Africans establish “cottage” industries and become more self-sufficient.

To help strengthen Mercy Ships’ accountability structure, Myron E. Ullman III, chairman and CEO of JCPenney Company Inc., was appointed chairman of the Board of Trustees for Mercy Ships International. “Mercy Ships is involved in two of the highest legal risks: medicine and ships,” Stephens explains. For further transparency and more effective governance, Mercy Ships established five board committees in 2003.

In the same year, Mercy Ships—which had been under the YWAM umbrella since its inception—decided to become a separate entity. Since then the ministries have collaborated on various projects and are joining forces to build a secondary school in Ghana.

Today, Mercy Ships is a \$53 million charity that has worked in more than 80 countries and gained corporate sponsors such as Starbucks, which donates coffee beans; Alcon, which supplies microscopes for the ships' ophthalmic operating units; and Johnson & Johnson, which provides orthopedic supplies.

The ships are in port 80 percent to 85 percent of the time, helping the ministry reduce its operating costs. Nearly 1,000 career staff and 2,000 short-term volunteers help reduce expenses by paying “for the privilege of serving.” The monthly cost for room and board is \$350.

In the future, Stephens envisions a ship for Asia and one for the Muslim world. In fact, he believes U.S. Department of Homeland Security could benefit from what Christian-based organizations do in impoverished villages in Muslim nations.

“If people see us really doing what Jesus did—not just talking, but doing it—I think we diminish the anger, the intensity and the misunderstandings of what it means to be a follower of Jesus,” he says. “Scripture says they will know us by our love, and I think ‘doing’ the gospel is an effective way to show the love of God.”

Carol Chapman Stertzner is a freelance journalist living in the Dallas area. For more information about Mercy Ships, visit [mercyshipsusa.org](#).

A Vessel of Compassion

Don Stephens founded Mercy Ships in 1982 to bring hope and healing to the world's poor.

Born: June 13, 1945

Wife: Deyon, who serves as vice president of mission development for Mercy Ships. The couple celebrated their 40th anniversary in June.

Children: Luke, Heidi, John Paul, Charles

Church involvement: Grew up in an Assemblies of God church in western Colorado; now attends a Methodist church in east Texas.

Education: Earned his bachelor's degree in religious studies from Bethany College in Santa Cruz, California.

On divine healing: "I don't question God's capability of healing some of the enormous tumors we see, but I have seen very few cases like that actually healed. That doesn't stop me from praying for full healing for my handicapped son, however. I believe in divine healing and pray for it regularly."

Favorite spot in the world: "I really feel comfortable and at home in Africa," Stephens says. In terms of sheer beauty: Switzerland, the Highlands of Scotland and Norway are tops.

Hobbies: Fly fishing and outdoor activities. "I recharge to a certain degree when I'm with others, but then I need my downtime and enjoy being out on the river or in the mountains of Colorado."

On experiencing God's favor: "I know that my Norwegian grandfather prayed every day that his family would be involved in the Lord's work. Prayer has made the difference."

On A Mission For God

Jon Fadely is using his live of marine sciencia as a Mercy Ships misssionary.

Fifteen years ago, Jon Fadely and his wife, Angie, left a life of comfort and joined Mercy Ships as volunteer missionary workers.

The couple was introduced to the ministry in 1989 when the Anastasis came to the port of Houston. "Angie and I were very impressed with the deep faith we sensed in [the staff]," says Jon Fadely, 43, who serves as director of marine operations for the ministry. "That was something we wanted to see grow in our own lives."

Fadely studied marine science and navigation at Texas A&M University and earned his merchant marine officer's license from the U.S. Coast Guard. But more than anything else, he believes growing up as a missionary kid on the beaches of Liberia helped prepare him for his new calling.

After spending two years raising support and attending discipleship training school, in 1991 the Fadelys were assigned to work aboard the Good Samaritan. Fadely served as a ship's officer and soon became a captain.

Beginning in 1994, the Fadelys spent nine years on the Caribbean Mercy, raising their three children aboard the ship and building friendships with Christians from around the world. Fadely says the experience taught him how to live out his faith practically.

"When you're dealing with matters of life and death, you don't

spend a lot of time debating esoteric theology, or form, or liturgy," he says. "It's all about God and what difference He makes in my life."

During his first voyage in West Africa, Fadely met a local man who had been hit in the head with a bottle. A nurse dressed his wound and prayed with the man. The next day, the man returned to the ship and told Fadely he had been healed of a pain in his neck.

Although he was a Muslim, the man began attending a Bible study onboard the Good Samaritan and eventually accepted Christ. He later attended a discipleship training school and is now an ardent evangelist.

In 2002 the Fadelys moved ashore to be near their oldest daughter. Today they work at Mercy Ships' international headquarters in Texas, but the couple doesn't expect to be aground forever. "We are thankful to be here," Fadely says, "but we are both willing to travel again if God opens those doors."

Giving Sight to the Blind

Ophthalmologist Glenn Strauss traded in his practice for a career in missions.

At the prime of his career in 2004, Dr. Glenn Strauss walked away from his ophthalmology practice in Tyler, Texas, and began serving full time with Mercy Ships.

"It was mainly about first fruits," says Strauss, who began

praying with his wife, Kim, about the decision five years ago. "A lot of people who do missions work wait until their late 60s—when they don't have quite as much energy and their risk for complications is much higher, but they still want to be useful.

"My conviction was that I had been able to get to this point in my life because it had been given to me by God. It was time for me to offer it back to the Lord."

Now 51, Strauss has performed numerous eye surgeries and trained surgeons around the world. He first got involved with Mercy Ships in 1998 on a short-term basis and was immediately impressed with the organization. "Don Stephens is a passionate man with a heart for the poor, a heart for the kingdom of God and a desire to use the tool of ships as a platform to provide world-class care," Strauss says.

Today, as vice president of health care services and programs for Mercy Ships International, Strauss works in the ministry's Garden Valley, Texas, office. But he still goes out on the field. In March, he and his wife left for a five-month journey that took them to Liberia, Sierra Leone, Pakistan and Ghana.

"As the ship comes into port, it is an incredible experience to be part of the team that is providing an opportunity for people to be restored," he says.

Strauss says one of his most memorable experiences was providing eye surgery for 2-year-old Liberian twin boys. Blinded by cataracts, the children lived at a nearby refugee camp and were brought to the ship by their mother.

The day after surgery, Strauss and his wife went to visit the boys. After Strauss took off their patches, a team member came into the room and threw balloons in the air. The boys both spontaneously looked up at the balloons, and big smiles came over their faces. "I was crying from the other side of the room as I watched this unfold," Strauss says.

The twins were released to go home the next day. "These boys have their life ahead of them because God gave us a chance to be there for them," he told Charisma. "This is just one example of how God has used Mercy Ships to change lives."