

Missions Group Spreads the Gospel Through Floating Bookstores

England-based Operation Mobilization recently purchased a new ship in an \$18 million venture that will allow for expansion. A fleet of the world's largest floating bookshops is about to get bigger.

Operation Mobilization (OM) recently bought a new ship in an \$18 million venture that will enable the England-based missionary organization to expand its ministry distributing Christian literature and helping with community projects in ports around the world.

OM founder George Verwer, a native of New Jersey, described the purchase as the group's "biggest single project." Scheduled to enter ministry service in May 2005, the new ship—a 10,000-ton ferry that has been renamed Logos Hope—is the fourth motor vessel to be used by OM since 1970.

All the crew and staff are Christian volunteers, who serve in a variety of roles, from captain to cook, and raise sponsorship to fund their time onboard. Living expenses are covered by the ships' funds.

OM and floating bookshops were Verwer's brainchild. He converted to Christianity as a teenager during the 1950s and soon sensed a call to missions. He said he saw many lost people in the United States, "but at least they had a chance. I felt my life must be for those who have never heard. That's one of the things God built into me, this vision for the more

unreached places.”

Verwer said the name Operation Mobilization was inspired in the early 1960s, and expressed the group’s mission, to “mobilize the people of God” to reach the nations. Eventually OM began transporting truckloads of books from Europe to India.

He explained why OM chose to use ships: “We had these 125 vehicles, driving all the way to India. I thought, We need a ship, because we were very geared to moving people, moving large quantities of literature.”

In 1970 OM bought the Umanak, which became the Logos, meaning “word” in Greek. She was joined in 1977 by Doulos, which means “servant.” The Doulos is the oldest active ocean-going passenger ship.

Logos was shipwrecked in 1988 and replaced by Logos II. The group Educational Book Exhibits owns Logos II, and Doulos is owned by the German charity Güte Bucher für Alle, meaning Good Books for All. Both are ministries of OM.

However, Logos II has become too small, and Logos Hope, which is three times its size, will succeed it. “We need more facilities,” Verwer said. “The ship sometimes is having 100,000 people come on the weekends, so a lot of people just have to go through the exhibit and they have to leave. With the new ship there will be many more departments, so you won’t have to leave.”

Logos II has a staff and crew of roughly 200, while Doulos has about 300. Each member who joins must be over 18, speak

English, be committed to the beliefs of the ship's community and be able to raise financial support for their time onboard; the cost varies depending on the stage of development their home country is in.

Jaylene Schlichting, from Iowa will soon leave Doulos, but plans to continue working with OM. "I've been interested in missions all of my life," Schlichting said. "I saw a brochure [about the Doulos] and thought, I could do that. Everyone's really behind me—I raised my support in one month."

Doulos visitor James Rowntree, of Southampton, England, was impressed by the ship and its staff. "The people onboard work as a big family, and must really enjoy what they do," he said. "It's good for religious people because it promotes the Word of God."

As well as money raised from volunteers' sponsorships, which accounts for about 60 percent of each ship's running costs, finance is raised through book sales and corporate support in their numerous destinations.

Though he recently stepped down as president of OM, Verwer remains active in ministry, speaking at churches and conferences and working on special projects such as the distribution of AIDS awareness literature.

OM is one of the world's largest missions organizations, with more than 3,000 members from 83 nations. It assists in planting churches, distributing Christian literature and offering humanitarian relief around the world. Verwer said OM has distributed the gospel to about 1 billion people, 100 million through its ships.

Sarah Louise Nicholls