

## **Missions of Mercy**

“I will soar, laugh, and smile, / Will breathe my life once more. / I will go back to a time / Before [sickness] came knocking at my door” (Hyder 69-72). At home in Liberia, Fatu was living with a large tumor on the side of her face that caused both physical and emotional pain. She said, “I may grow another head if nothing is done to save me.” But one day, her uncle heard of a hospital ship docked in Sierra Leone... Mercy Ships is a non-profit organization working to promote peace and well-being in our world by providing free health care to the poverty-stricken individuals in our society. (Mercy Ships website)

One of the most pressing needs in our world is to make healthcare more accessible and affordable to the lower income population. While many Americans are privileged to have access to cutting-edge medical care, this is not the case for everyone. According to the World Bank and the World Health Organization, “Half the world lacks access to essential health services, [and] 100 million [are] still pushed into extreme poverty because of health expenses.”

Everything began with Don Stephens’s dream. It was a dream to help the marginalized, heal the sick, and be the hands and feet of Jesus. He wanted to create a state-of-the-art hospital ship, staffed with volunteer medical experts, that would dock in ports around the world and serve the neediest of people by providing free medical care. It was a ship that would transcend all social, political, and racial boundaries, with the simple goal to love. He said, “The idea of mercy, the idea of a ship, the idea of launching a new way to bring modern medical care to all the world’s citizens - it was suddenly all I could think about, talk about, dream about” (Stephens 20).

Mercy Ships was officially founded in 1978 by Don Stephens. Stephens and his family served aboard the *Anastasis*, their first ship, for ten years. Their current ship is the *African Mercy*,

and a new ship, *Global Mercy*, is in production. Once completed, it will more than double their capacity. Planned to launch in 2022, *Global Mercy* will be in commission along with *African Mercy*, providing Mercy Ships with many more opportunities to fulfill their mission of “transcending borders [and] changing lives.” (Mercy Ships)

Mercy Ships offers a large range of medical services including everything from general surgeries to eye care. Once the ship docks in port, numerous people are screened in order to find patients that the ship’s doctors can treat. Then, for the remaining stay in port, the medical staff is busy performing surgeries. Once a person’s surgery is complete, they are housed on the ship or at the Hospital Out-Patient Extension (HOPE) Center, where they receive care until they are ready to return home. Mercy Ships has not limited their operations to physical healing only; part of their goal is to leave a lasting impact. When docked, they help to improve local healthcare systems through mentoring programs, medical courses, and hospital renovations. (Mercy Ships)

While this organization touches the lives of each patient, it also has impacted many of the people who volunteer on the ship. Each volunteer is essential to the organization, and it takes everyone from chefs to photographers to doctors. They are all people who have chosen to give up a normal life, if only for a short amount of time, and pay to go to work, instead of being paid to work. Kat Sontologo, a videographer, feels that after serving with Mercy Ships she has been “wrecked for the ordinary”. (Mercy Ships)

When COVID-19 devastated the world, Mercy Ships found unique ways to adapt and serve communities. In West Africa, mental health and well-being sessions were taught online. In Guinea, a dental school was able to continue educating and mentoring students. Lastly, Mercy Ships was able to provide eleven African countries with monetary donations and personal protective equipment. Laura Rebouché, US National Media Relations Director, wrote “Our

colleagues have a key role to play for a strong and effective response against COVID-19 on the continent [of Africa]. This initiative has been ongoing to illustrate Mercy Ship's support and encouragement in the face of the pandemic around the world." (Email)

Though there are many uncertainties, Mercy Ships does have tentative plans for moving forward. Currently, the *African Mercy* is planning to return to Senegal in April 2021, where they were docked pre-COVID, and perform surgeries that were not completed when they had to leave two months early. In mid-2022, the *Global Mercy* will begin to serve in Liberia; both ships will have safety protocols in place to prevent COVID-19. Laura Rebouché also wrote that "It's a moving target and the dates may get pushed out. It's all dependent [on if] a vaccine is approved and in-process as to when we return to Africa." (Email)

Every part of Mercy Ship's work is important. Whether a person comes away with corrected clubfoot or improved vision, they will have a completely new chance at life because of Mercy Ships. Not only is the staff healing people physically - they are also sharing the love of Jesus to all they meet. Mercy Ships is doing a phenomenal job of supporting the important ideals of peace and well-being. Healing helps create inner-peace, while medical care and online classes promote physical and mental well-being. Often the rejects of society are accepted after being blessed by Mercy Ships. (Mercy Ships)

Through changing times, Mercy Ships has found ways to adapt and meet the needs of people all over the world. Because of Mercy Ships, Fatu's tumor was completely removed. She said, "I have a life. People no longer laugh at me. They will be admiring me, and I'll be dancing." (Mercy Ships) By providing free healthcare for the under-privileged, Mercy Ships is helping to spread the ideals of peace and well-being throughout the world. **985 Words**

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