



ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

WINTER 2023



125  
Christmas at Sea

THE SEAMEN'S CHURCH INSTITUTE




## From the PRESIDENT'S DESK



Any “year in review” for 1898 focuses heavily on the Spanish-American War, that lasted from April through December. It was also the year that the City of Greater New York was created, geographically divided into five boroughs: Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, The

Bronx, and Staten Island. And, most relevant to the Seamen’s Church Institute, 1898 marked the beginning of our iconic and beloved Christmas at Sea (CAS) ministry to seafarers.

In 1898, volunteers from the greater New York City area knitted and, under the auspices of the then “Protestant Episcopal Church Missionary Society for Seamen in the City and Port of New York” (later, the Seamen’s Church Institute), began collecting and giving hand-knitted items of winter wear—hats, scarves, and mittens—to mariners during the war. Fast forward to 2022 and Christmas at Sea (and its partner, Christmas at Sea on the River) distributed more than 20,000 handmade items to international seafarers and U.S. mariners during the period from Thanksgiving through the feast of the Epiphany. 2023 marks the 125th Anniversary of SCI’s Christmas at Sea program, which we are delighted to celebrate with you.

Christmas at Sea would not exist without our loyal and prolific volunteers. Whether you knit, crochet, sew, ship, mail, pack, deliver, or make a financial gift, thank you for your support of Christmas at Sea and your dedication to mariners during the holiday season. You take your place in the history of this program with each and every item you make, bag you pack, or dollar you donate.

Mariners depend on SCI. And SCI depends on you!

Faithfully,

**The Reverend Mark S. Nestlehutt**  
President & Executive Director

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## THE KNIT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

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## KNIT NOTES

There are many moving pieces to Christmas at Sea. Perhaps most recognizable are the knitters and crocheters who spend hours making our specially-designed patterns. Ditty bag makers share the spotlight, combing fabric stores for bargains necessary to produce the enormous number of bags needed. This past season, there were enough to go around. Thank you, ditty bag makers! No ditty bag is complete without toiletries and a snack, and no river Christmas box is sealed without a Christmas card, many made by school children.

As donations continue to arrive, our focus expands to packing in the fall. Hundreds of volunteers residing along our inland rivers, and those living within proximity to Port Newark, devote hours to packing. Once packing is complete, the next step is delivery. On the Port Newark side, SCI Chaplains and Chaplain Associates distribute gifts during their daily ship visits. On the river side, SCI Chaplains, Chaplain Associates, and other volunteers drop off boxes at towboat companies, where they are then delivered during crew changes and supply runs.

Christmas at Sea is carefully planned, organized, and tracked to make sure everything and everyone is in the right place at the right time. Though it can get a little hectic leading up to Christmas, Christmas at Sea continues to grow and thrive as it commemorates its 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I attribute this accomplishment to teamwork. According to a blog post I once read, teamwork is not a group of people doing something; it is the ability to work with others to achieve a shared goal. This could not be truer for the hundreds of volunteers and volunteer groups who support SCI’s tradition of gifting knits and crochets to mariners at Christmastime.

## EDITORIAL

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One hundred and twenty-five years of Christmas at Sea is a tribute to you, for all you do as team members to keep this program vibrant and relevant. We all have an important part to play in making this happen year after year. International seafarers and river mariners alike express how much our gifts mean to them. That is something to celebrate.

With gratitude,  
*Joanne*  
**Joanne Bartosik**  
Senior Manager of Development  
& Christmas at Sea



## CHRISTMAS AT SEA: 125 Years and Counting

by Stefan Dreisbach-Williams



The history of SCI's knitting program is rooted in an 1898 Annual Report by Chaplain Walter A. A. Gardner of the North River Station (Houston St. at the Hudson River 1888 – 1914) who observed:

*"As a consequence of the recent war between this country and Spain, a great field for the distribution of God's Word, the sending of comfort bags,*

*the coming in close touch with our own Navy, has given us the opportunity we have long desired, and we have taken advantage of it to the best of our abilities."*

*"...the sending of comfort bags, the coming in close touch with our own Navy, has given us the opportunity we have long desired..."*

Gardner's mother, Mrs. E.A. Gardner, is credited with first suggesting that SCI send "comfort bags," containing medical supplies, prayer books, and sewing materials to seafarers on warships. The New York Herald and the Associated Press took note of SCI's efforts, and a troop of volunteers offered their service. Soon letters were streaming in from grateful seafarers who had received packages from SCI while at war.

Two years later, the Seamen's Benefit Society was formed. Headed by Augusta Morris de Peyster and composed entirely of women, the Society dedicated itself to assisting seafarers in any way it could. It would develop into what has become the Christmas at Sea program we celebrate today.

In 1914, as conflict spread, the Seamen's Benefit Society sprang into action, directing its volunteers' efforts to the seafarer at war. As Catharine S. Leverich wrote in the society's Annual Report, *"During this year, in which the European war has wrought so many disastrous changes, the work of the Seamen's Benefit Society has continued without serious interruption."*

One hundred years ago, in the wake of World War I, the shipping industry collapsed and SCI's services shifted to meet the increased need. The shipping office closed for lack of shipboard jobs, and the charitable work expanded, focusing SCI's resources on shelter and food. In this environment of tremendous need, the Seamen's Benefit Society gifts went to seafarers in hospitals.

Eighty years ago, with war raging once again, SCI's knitting program expanded. Thousands of volunteers donated their time, money, and material to assist SCI's Women's Council. In 1943 alone, 15,987 woolen garments were donated and distributed to seafarers, not only for Christmas but to clothe the many seafarers who lost everything but their lives when their ships were sunk in U-boat attacks.

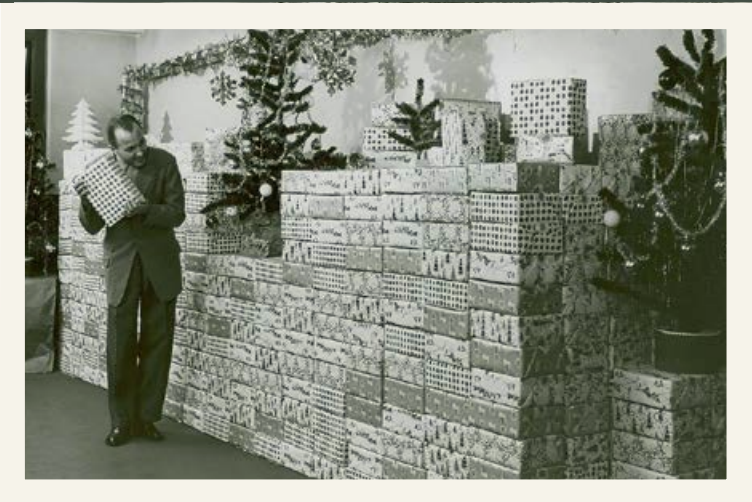
By 1945, the longstanding tradition of distributing Christmas boxes to seafarers at 25 South Street, in marine hospitals, and aboard vessels reached an all-time high at 8,108 boxes.

Following the war, Christmas 1948 found roughly 1,500 seafarers welcomed at 25 South Street where the Christmas boxes were arranged as a gigantic fireplace, each box wrapped in paper resembling bricks. Seafarers were invited to dismantle the hearth before dinner to collect their Christmas gifts.



**THE LUCKY ONE!** In this 150,000th coded box go the good wishes of thousands of Women's Council members who have labored and donated for many years making Christmas brighter for lonesome seamen. Mr. Mulligan's personal greeting, illuminated by a brilliant golden key, expresses his feelings on behalf of the Institute, extends invitation to this seaman to be guest of SCI for elaborate recognitions, entertainment planned for him at 25 South Street.

*An excerpt from  
The Lookout, December 1962.*



*A wealth of gifts from generous CAS volunteers!*



*Janet Lord-Roper helps a seafarer  
pick a garment.*

*A mariner tries on his new  
vest for size.*



In 1951, the first year of the Korean War, the Knitter's Guild was created, which would transform into the modern-day Christmas at Sea program. The following year, the number of seafarers lodging at 25 South Street plummeted as technology, policy, economics, and politics combined to drive shifts in the shipping industry, and SCI's knitting program increasingly focused on delivering knits to ships.

Just over sixty years ago in December 1962, SCI distributed its 150,000<sup>th</sup> box to seafarer Harold J. Murphy of MSTs Taurus.

Fifty years ago, The Lookout got to the heart of Christmas at Sea in describing the program. *"If you take 3 tons of wool, 1.5 tons of candy, 308,000 pieces of stationery, 40,000 variety items and put them all together, what have you got? Most likely dismay and confusion. But, if you add 2,427 volunteer knitters, 1,779 other volunteer participants, a little supervision and a lot of love you will end up with more than 10,000 of the most beautiful SCI Christmas Boxes."*

For 125 years, Christmas at Sea has provided SCI with the opportunity to care for maritime industry workers as a part of its commitment to serve the needs of mariners, present, and future.

## PORT PACKING WEEK at the International Seafarers' Center



Port Packing Week is an annual event occurring in November at the International Seafarers' Center. Christmas at Sea (CAS) invites Port Newark neighbors and local maritime-related industries, organizations, and academies to designate teams to pack ditty bags for international seafarers. It is a weeklong flurry of activity, which in 2022 resulted in 2,844 fully loaded ditty bags.

- This would not have happened without the support of:
- Council on Port Performance, Workforce Development Implementation Team
  - East Coast Warehouse
  - Maher Terminals
  - New York Shipping Association
  - Ocean Network Express (ONE)
  - Port Authority of New York & New Jersey
  - Port Newark Container Terminal (PNCT) & Ports America
  - Women's International Shipping & Trading Association (WISTA), NY NJ CT Chapters
  - SUNY Maritime College

A special shout out goes to The United States Maritime Alliance Ltd. (USMX) for a generous donation of nonperishable treats and toiletries.



### Male Knitters

While women have been the backbone of SCI's knitting programs, men have also contributed their talents. The Lookout of September 1953 featured Maurice Rapoport, a former men's clothing designer forced to retire when he lost his sight. In five years of knitting, he had donated 200 sweaters and 150 scarves. Maurice acknowledged that he wasn't the fastest knitter, but he took pride in the quality of his work.

Another male knitter known for the high quality of his work was Denton Hoffman, a retired cab driver from Norfolk, Nebraska who appears in several photos in our archives.

*2022 Christmas at Sea by the Numbers*

*Top 3 volunteers (no. of knits/crochets & ditty bags)*

*Helga K., NC 986*

*Judy H., NY 345*

*Carrie R., MD 323*

*Top 3 groups (no. of knits/crochets and ditty bags)*

*St. Ann's Episcopal Church, Old Lyme, CT 483*

*St. John's Episcopal Church, Little Silver, NJ 375*

*St. John's Episcopal Church, Huntingdon, PA 170*

*No. of CAS volunteers: 932*

*No. of new volunteers: 233*

*No. of CAS Groups: 127*

*No. of new groups: 22*

*No. of Knits/Crochets donated: 22,960*

*(4% increase from 2021)*

*No. of Ditty Bags donated: 5,179*

*(19% increase from 2021)*

*Total no. of donations (knits/crochets/ditty bags): 28,139*

*(6% increase from 2021)*

## LEAVE A LEGACY

The Seamen's Church Institute advocates for the personal, professional, and spiritual well-being of merchant mariners around the world. Through our Center for Maritime Education, Center for Mariner Advocacy, Port Newark International Seafarers' Center, and Ministry on the River, SCI promotes safety, dignity, and improved working and living conditions for the men and women serving in the maritime workplace. Founded in 1834 and affiliated with the Episcopal Church, though nondenominational in terms of its trustees, staff, and service to mariners, the Seamen's Church Institute is the largest, most comprehensive mariners' service agency in North America.

Legacy gifts support SCI in meeting the immediate and future needs of mariners through pastoral care, education, and advocacy. Planned gifts represent options that are designed to meet your personal philanthropic goals. One of the simplest ways to make

a planned gift is through a bequest in your will or trust. You may indicate SCI is to be the recipient of a specific amount or percentage of your estate. Other planned gifts make it possible to support the work of SCI and enjoy a tax deduction, if you itemize.

To acknowledge the generosity of individuals who have included SCI in their estate plans, SCI established the **Roper Legacy Society**, named in recognition of SCI's first house mother, Janet Lord Roper. If you have already included SCI in your estate plans, we are deeply grateful.

For more information about the Roper Legacy Society and planned giving, please contact Amy Mugavero, Director of Development at 212.349.9090 or email [amugavero@seamenschurch.org](mailto:amugavero@seamenschurch.org).



**Give Back Box (GBB)** is a nonprofit organization that provides an affordable alternative when shipping your donations to Christmas at Sea.

For \$20 you can purchase a UPS shipping label. Simply go online and from GBB's home page, click on the donate tab. Scroll down the page, click on all charities, and you will see the SCI logo on page 3. Add the label to a virtual shopping cart and check out and pay with any major credit card. Download and print the label from the convenience of your home.

The maximum weight of the package is 70 pounds. The combined length and girth of the box may not exceed 108 inches. You will need a separate label if you are sending more than one box. There is no need to send anything priority or express, as we accept donations year-round.

For additional information about GBB, please visit their website at [givebackbox.com](http://givebackbox.com) or email: [info@givebackbox.com](mailto:info@givebackbox.com).



## 2022 Reflections from SCI Chaplains



### Chaplain James Kollin

In his 23rd year with SCI, James Kollin is our longest-serving Chaplain.

When I first joined SCI in 1987, the Christmas at Sea program was, as always, an important part of our ministry. It differed from today's program because we used to pack the knits into

boxes in our New York office, and then transport them by truck to Port Newark! It was nothing like the streamlined operation it is today. Also, each gift in the box was packed into red plastic bags. The handmade ditty bags we use now are a lot more personal.



SCI Chaplains Michelle McWilliams, James Kollin, and Chaplain Associate Richard Sloan preparing to distribute CAS bags.

Over my many years as an SCI Chaplain, I've given countless gifts to seafarers. It means so much to them to learn that the gifts are not store-bought, but hand-made by caring people who appreciate the hard work that mariners do. Often, a ship will put up a Christmas tree on board as the holidays approach, but until we come aboard with the CAS delivery, there aren't any gifts underneath it!

*With the help of our volunteers, Christmas at Sea fills the space under the Christmas tree, adding beauty and meaning to the holiday.*

### Newark NJ

### Chaplain David Shirk

Before I accepted the chaplain position with SCI, I was told about Christmas at Sea. I was astounded to hear that it had been running for 124 years! It is clearly one of the bedrock programs of our organization. On many of my boat visits, it was not uncommon to hear someone say that they had received one of our gifts in the past.

Though the program has continued for more than a century, this was my first year as a participant, and I was curious to see how it would be received. When dropping off boxes of knits and crochets, I felt a little like Santa Claus. The mariners were eager to see what was inside. They were amazed by the quality of the hats, scarves, and vests, all handmade with care. Mariners were appreciative of the thoughtfulness behind each of the gifts.

A critical part of my work as Chaplain is ministering to mariners in need. However, my Christmas visits to boats to share handcrafted gifts with hardworking mariners expressed not only the love of SCI but that of the many caring volunteers.

### Chaplain Tom Rhoades

Christmas at Sea on the River is a joy to be a part of, whether you are making the knits and crochets, boxing them, packing ditty bags, or delivering them. And for 125 years, SCI's gesture of love through Christmas at Sea has brought joy to mariners too.



Left: SCI Chaplains David Shirk (L) and Tom Rhoades (R) prepare to deliver boxes of Christmas at Sea gifts to river mariners.

The knitted and crocheted items that mariners receive are thoughtful, well-made, beautiful gifts that reflect sincere gratitude for their lives, the hard work that they do, and the sacrifices they make being away from their families at Christmas.

*As River Chaplains, we are sincerely grateful to all of the volunteers who enable us to deliver these gifts of unconditional love—gifts that are neither requested, nor purchased, but given freely—to mariners at Christmastime.*

### Paducah KY

### Baton Rouge LA

## PACKING at HOUSTON

by Joanne Bartosik



### San Jacinto College students pack 4,156 knits and crochets for river mariners



I booked my flight to Houston with a day to spare out of an abundance of caution, as I was wary of airline cancellations and delays. Fortunately, I arrived on time, giving me the opportunity to take up Captain Amy Arrowood on her invitation to join maritime students on a tour of the Houston Shipping Channel, which was extremely interesting and a lot of fun.

I was in La Porte, Texas for a Christmas at Sea on the River packing event. In 2018, my first year with CAS, Captain Stephen Polk, SCI's Director, Center for Maritime Education,

introduced me to Captain Amy Arrowood, the Director of Maritime Credit Programs. Amy remembers receiving a CAS gift herself. Amy shared with me how nice it was to be given such a thoughtful present. From the minute Stephen discussed CAS with Amy, she was interested in involving San Jacinto College students and faculty in the effort. Five years later, this relationship has flourished and grown into a happy and successful partnership.

When the first efforts began, they seemed a little clunky. We had a general idea of how it was going to go — shipping knits and crochets, purchasing boxes and packing tape, recruiting students, ordering pizza; however, until we were all in a room together, it took a little finagling to organize the students and coordinate the flow of traffic. Amy stepped in and immediately took charge. She surveyed the room and instantly turned the process of packing into a team-building exercise. She set up work stations where students were assigned a specific task. To my amazement and admiration, everything was packed and delivered that very same day.

Five years later, packing at San Jac is a much-anticipated annual event. There is nothing “clunky” about it. This past season, 60 students and faculty packed 2,720 knits/crochets for towboat companies in the Houston area and another 1,436 knits/crochets for the Houma/NOLA area, which SCI Chaplain Associate, Laura Tabor Lewis, drove six hours to retrieve. Alumni returned to help, and second year students showed first year students the ropes.

This most recent trip was special. I had more time with the students and in addition to packing, was able to go on deliveries. It was extremely gratifying to personally distribute the gift boxes. I cannot help but think about how far these knits and crochets traveled. Volunteers from all 50 states, Washington D.C, Canada, and Europe sent their donations to me. I processed them in Port Newark before shipping them west for packing groups, and eventually, voila, they were delivered to towboat companies, who in turn gifted them to river mariners. I was delighted to be able to see this process through from beginning to end. It strengthens my deep appreciation for all the volunteers along the way who make this possible.



### Introducing Captain Amy Arrowood

Captain Amy Arrowood is as impressive as she is inspiring. Amy's education, background, and skills make her uniquely qualified in her role as Director of the Maritime Credit Program at San Jacinto College in La Porte, Texas. The program prepares students for careers on the water.

Amy, a native Chicagoan, has always been fascinated by boats and water. Upon arriving at Texas A&M University in Galveston, she became curious about a student training ship. She had never heard of the maritime as a career path but knew instantly that is what she wanted to do.

After graduating with a B.Sc. in Maritime Transportation, Amy worked on oil tankers before joining the Coast Guard. Inspecting foreign ships was rewarding, as she occasionally had the opportunity to do something lifesaving. However, as much as she enjoyed the Coast Guard, Amy was eager to sail, so she returned to sea once more before coming ashore as a port captain.

In this role, Amy had to send mariners away for approved Coast Guard training, as there was nothing available in Houston. It was at this time that she joined a group of



could do better than offer space. She instructed Stephen to send her everything and she would arrange to have students pack the gifts.

That first year, it took all day. Now, the operation has become a well-oiled machine with students packing more than 2,000 knits and crochets in just three hours. It helps having sophomores, who are packing for a second year, in a leadership role. Past graduates provide a wonderful interactive experience for the current students.

Students benefit in both the long and short terms by participating in the packing event. According to Amy, the short-term gain is that the students get a reprieve from a lecture! All joking aside, they are part of a team building exercise, get to enjoy pizza, and have fun. Long-term gains are not so immediately obvious. The gains are not realized until students

are on a boat on a holiday and receive a gift themselves. That is when the program comes full circle and if they have ever packed, they will appreciate it even more.

Over the years, Christmas at Sea has become personal for Amy. This past year, her son's third grade class made Christmas

cards to go inside the gift boxes.

Amy put it this way: "So many people don't know what maritime is. It's never dawned upon them where the stuff on the Walmart shelves comes from." She would like to spread the word about the maritime industry and make packing more personal and special for those who participate and for those who receive the boxes.

"I appreciate the partnership between San Jac and SCI. I enjoy seeing the pictures of mariners who receive the boxes—every single person has a giant smile, and I feel like the students, and I had a small piece in that!"

*I enjoy seeing the pictures of mariners who receive the boxes — every single person has a giant smile and I feel like [we] had a small piece in that!*

industry professionals advising San Jacinto College on what direction to take for the creation of a maritime training program.

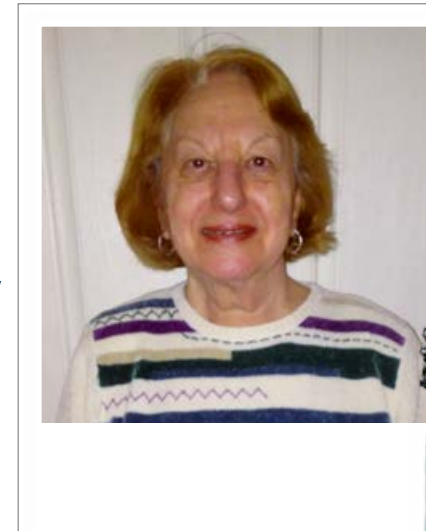
Just as the program was gaining traction, Amy became a mother, and on her first Mother's Day, there was an oil spill. She jumped into coveralls, grabbed steel-toed boots, and cleaned up a diesel fuel mess. That day influenced her decision to join the new maritime training faculty at San Jacinto. Enrollment started with 12 students, and at times has had as many as 75.

Five years ago, SCI's Director of Maritime Education, Captain Stephen Polk, approached Amy, looking for space to store and pack Christmas at Sea boxes. Amy told Stephen she

## WONDER WOMAN, Helga Krug

by Joanne Bartosik

Helga Krug has made more hats, scarves, cowls, and ditty bags than any other Christmas at Sea volunteer. Her combined donations going back to 2020 total 3,307. This energetic, enthusiastic, and seemingly never-sleeping volunteer, is as inspiring as she is interesting, and I thought friends and supporters of Christmas at Sea would enjoy learning more about her.



*Helga's combined donations, going back to 2020, total 3,307!*



Helga graciously agreed to chat with me over the phone from Florida. I have known Helga for almost five years, yet there was much about her I did not know. Helga was born in Germany, immigrating at the age of twelve to the United States with her parents and younger sister. Adjusting to life in Long Island, New York proved difficult as she spoke very little English. She spent most of her time with her mother doing needlework, tending to a rose garden, and going to the movies. As her English improved, she would accompany her mother to the supermarket to translate the family meat order for the butcher.

It was only after she raised a family and retired from the accounting department of an insurance company that she first read about Christmas at Sea in a newspaper ad. Helga wrote a note to former SCI staffer, Pat Jones, requesting Christmas at Sea patterns, and set about making vests.

Eventually, Helga moved from Long Island to North Carolina to be closer to family. In her designated craft room equipped with sewing machines, Helga decided to "mix it up" by making ditty bags. I was intrigued to discover that she learned to sew as a foreign exchange student living with a family in Switzerland years before she left Germany. The host mother was a talented seamstress, and Helga spent hours sitting next to her watching her work. She speaks fondly of a pleated skirt made just for her.

I imagine the one burning question everyone wants to know is how Helga finds the time to do all she does. "I can't sit and watch Judge Judy," Helga told me. She prefers to listen to television, radio, or music. The background sound keeps her company as she concentrates on her work. To support the large number of ditty bags she produces, Helga purchases her fabric at thrift shops and combs through garage sales. Last year, I introduced Helga to a cross stitch designer, Pamela, in Rochester, New York, and they forged a partnership. Pamela sent me her unique cross stitch work, which I then passed along to Helga. The duo of Pamela and Helga resulted in some stunning ditty bags. Somehow, in addition to all this, she finds time to bowl three times a week, and stays connected to her two sons, one daughter, and eight grandchildren.

I couldn't help but ask Helga for ditty bag tips. She responded "just follow the pattern. It's easy." For a sewing newbie, like me, it's not quite so easy, but Helga is really good at this, and I have no doubt she could make one in her sleep.





118 Export Street,  
Port Newark, NJ 07114

Follow us online: [seamenschurch.org](http://seamenschurch.org)



# Untangled

is Christmas at Sea's (CAS) members-only Facebook group. It was created to give

CAS volunteers and friends access to a safe space to share information, as well as being a quick, easy, and accessible way of asking questions and getting answers.

There are currently more than 1,000 CAS volunteers representing every state, Washington, D.C., Canada, and Europe. Untangled breaks down geographic barriers and serves as a forum to connect with other CAS supporters.

**It is easy to join!** Go to [facebook.com/groups/untangled.sci](https://facebook.com/groups/untangled.sci), answer three short membership questions, and agree to the group rules. If you are new to CAS, please let us know how you found us, and if you belong to a knitting/crocheting/sewing group, please indicate which group.

You will also find CAS on Ravelry ([Ravelry.com](http://Ravelry.com)), a free website for knitters, crocheters, and other fiber artists. Going strong since 2008, CAS's Ravelry group boasts 1,004 members.

Whether you follow us on Facebook, Ravelry, or both, you are connected to an online community of CAS followers, who through their skills, talent, and creativity, embrace SCI's tradition of expressing gratitude to mariners at Christmastime for all they do to make our modern way of life possible.

