

AP ARTICLE

American evangelical group arrives in Ashdod on solidarity mission

By The Associated Press

After a stormy 35-day journey at sea, a group of American evangelicals traveling on an old World War II-era cargo ship landed in Ashdod on a solidarity mission only to run aground in red tape, with long delays in unloading their cargo of clothes, toys and medical supplies.

Still, the 42-member crew was unfazed Thursday, keeping a positive, enthusiastic attitude in a colorful demonstration of the growing alliance between fundamentalist Christians and the Jewish state.

"The Bible says, 'Who blesses Israel will be blessed,'" said Don Tipton, the group's leader. "We believe that."

The "Spirit of Grace" steamed into the Israeli port of Ashdod in early October from Louisiana, flying an American flag and a huge banner reading "Jehovah" in Hebrew letters. Three weeks later, the low, gray-painted ship is still docked, its 900-ton load of goods bound for local charities stuck on board as the gears of Israeli bureaucracy slowly turn.

The band of evangelical Christians on the "Spirit of Grace" are bearing the delay the same way they sailed their weather-beaten cargo ship through three fierce storms in the Atlantic Ocean on the voyage over: with a cheerful faith that their mission is God's will.

"It's taken a bit longer than we expected, but it's given us more time to tour the country, and we're having a great time," said Sandra Tipton, Don's wife.

Julio Lieberman, the group's Israeli shipping agent, said the delay was due to paperwork that the government requires for charitable donations from abroad. "It's taken far too long, but it should be sorted out in a few days," he said.

Yigal Ben-Zikry, a spokesman for the Ashdod port, said workers could unload the ship "in half a day" as soon as government approval comes through.

The "Spirit of Grace" - formerly the U.S.S. Pembina, a 62-year-old Navy ship that saw action in World War II - is operated by Friend Ships, a foundation run by the Tiptons, born-again Christians originally from Beverly Hills. The group owns four other ships, as well as landing craft and a helicopter, all based in Lake Charles, Louisiana, at a facility that the group has dubbed Port Mercy.

Like the "Spirit of Grace," the vessels are staffed entirely by volunteers and used to deliver supplies donated by Christians to disaster-struck countries around the world.

But the mission to Israel is different.

"This is not aid, it's an expression of friendship and love," Don Tipton said. The members of his crew, he said, like many other evangelical Christians, see supporting Israel as a divine commandment. They were further spurred on by the recent war in Lebanon, he said.

"After the war, we saw that Lebanon was getting lots of aid and friendship, and I thought, hey, they're not the ones who just got mugged," Tipton said. He had preparations for this journey, which had been planned before fighting broke out, sped up.

The voyage of the "Spirit of Grace" reflects the growing alliance between American evangelicals and Israel, a relationship which has seen evangelical Christians become more vocal politically and more generous financially in their support of the Jewish state.

"We love and admire Israel - we tell our congressmen and senators this, and we stand behind Bush," said Tipton, 62. "We won't let anything happen to Israel."

Tipton's crew is a diverse group. Its oldest member is the chief engineer, Wally Barber of Seattle, 83. Its youngest is Ruth Larson, four months old, who came along with her parents.

Serving on the ship is "a calling," Lloyd Williams, a white-bearded veteran sailor from Durban, South Africa, said over the noise of the engine room. Williams wore a Star of David on a pendant around his neck.

Merri Uddin, originally from Detroit, was working in a Louisiana casino until a hurricane destroyed it last year. "It was a blessing," Uddin says, because the loss of her job led her to sign up with the "Spirit of Grace." Kristin Boettcher of Des Moines was in college when, she said, "The Lord got ahold of my life," and she found her way to the ship. Jim Fotia, a Californian with long hair and a beard, said he joined the trip because he "felt the call" to come to Israel. "I'm amazed at how much it's like southern California," Fotia said.

Despite the bureaucratic foul-ups that have kept their charitable cargo stuck on board, the Christian sailors said they've been warmly received at this busy port, where their vintage vessel, its earnest crew and its blue-and-white "Jehovah" banner stand out among huge international cargo ships, grimy tankers and Israeli naval craft. Workers have invited them for dinner in the port's cafeteria, and the port has waived some of its usual tariffs, Donald Tipton said.

"We had to be nice to these people," port spokesman Yigal Ben-Zikry said, "they're more Zionist than any Israelis I know."