

Founder's Weekend | February 2024

Gert van de Weerdhof – CEO Report

Good evening, friends,

It's an honor to speak to you at this momentous Founder's event. Just in my few years with Mercy Ships I've seen amazing things ... we've had some incredible accomplishments ... and I'm proud to serve as CEO of this great organization.

As I stand here, I'm humbled by the path those before me in Mercy Ships have forged to get us to today ... and I'm electrified by the journey ahead. The theme for this Founder's Weekend—*Hope on the Horizon*—isn't just a catchphrase; it's the anthem guiding our work toward a brighter, more compassionate future where safe surgery is available to our brothers and sisters in the African nations we serve.

The ethos of our mission is inspired by the 2,000-year-old model of Jesus to bring hope and healing ... echoing the very spirit of Jesus' mission while on earth. We aren't merely following in His footsteps; we're mirroring His essence—bringing hope where despair once reigned, healing where pain once lingered.

But, if you're not aware, our focus isn't just on providing healing through free surgeries ... it's on nurturing futures. Mercy Ships operates on a two-pillar programmatic approach. In addition to the surgeries that we are known for, we also mentor ... we train ... we build partnerships with governments and universities to create long-term programs so that our work has a long-term impact. We don't just want to treat the problems of today, we want to create sustainable change. For the future.

We've found that the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu, the South African theologian and human rights activist, resonate deeply with our mission. "There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they are falling in." It's this ethos that propels us to transcend the norm, to look beyond band-aid solutions and address the roots of suffering.

I'd like to give you a few concrete examples.

In each country we serve, Mercy Ships focuses on core programs that fill a gap where specialized training and services are lacking. We create exploratory teams to examine the feasibility of internships and fellowships in plastic and reconstructive surgery, maxillofacial/head and neck surgery, anesthesia, difficult airway management, data informatics, and perioperative nursing. To deepen already established training programs in our host countries, we incorporate the hospital on board our ships into a rotation in programs for surgeons, anesthesiologists, and nurses.

We also work to establish long-term partnerships. The dental school at Gamal Abdel Nasser University in Conakry, Guinea is one prime example of our commitment to nurturing young professionals, sculpting them into providers of lasting change in their communities. Mercy Ships Guinea Country Director Dr. David Ugai and his team embody this spirit, paving the way for a future where healthcare becomes a sustainable beacon of hope. Since 2018, David has been dedicated to strengthening the state of dental care in Guinea and we're beginning to really see the fruits of his efforts. The school is now constructing a second dental clinical training building that will more than double the capacity for dental students to study and treat patients. Meanwhile, under David's leadership, a group of six dental residents are currently training abroad to become specialists, with the goal of returning to Guinea after their studies to bring their education home to many more.

In Sierra Leone, the Mercy Ships team works in collaboration with partners like Connaught Hospital in Freetown, the Pan-African Academy of Christian Surgeons, and the West African College of Surgeons.

His Excellency, Julius Maada Bio, president of Sierra Leone says, "The hospital ship will serve as a platform for training our healthcare professionals to build capacity. Programs will ensure that the positive impact of Mercy Ships will continue long after the ship leaves the shores of Sierra Leone. This partnership will support our vision to ensure a functional national health system delivering efficient, high-quality healthcare services that are accessible, equitable and affordable for all."

So, this is our programmatic approach—focusing on education, training, and advocacy for sustainable change just as much as we focus on immediate surgeries. Now, let me tell you a bit about the recent journey of each of our ships and our organization overall.

In 2023, our ships, the *Global Mercy* and the *Africa Mercy*, forged their own chapters of hope. The *Global Mercy* docked in places where, for many, healing was a distant dream. She was a vessel of compassion, the harbinger of miracles—providing more than XXX surgical procedures in 2023 serving three countries: Senegal, The Gambia, and Sierra Leone. Meanwhile, the *Africa Mercy* underwent an extensive refit in Durban, South Africa, receiving maintenance and renovations that will extend her life for the next few years.

We've increasingly come to understand the importance of a physical presence in Africa, and we made strides in 2023 toward establishing an Africa Service Center in Senegal. Bernard van den Bosch, a former ship managing director, is now living in Dakar, leading this effort. He, along with our Diplomatic Ambassador to Africa, Dr. Juliette Tuakli, has been establishing relationships with various African governments, laying the groundwork for a lasting support structure.

Through the remainder of 2024, we are focused on growing our resources and strengthening our operating efficiencies to meet the new pace enabled by our two-ship fleet. This is the first year we've had two ships in service simultaneously. We faced some growing pains initially with suddenly doubling our capacity (it was a wonderful problem to have), and it taught us to take the full five years we've allotted to each country and ramp up well ... plan well. Our volunteers need adequate time to plan for their service. We need time in our host countries to establish relationships. So ... our five-year country engagement model has become hugely important.

This is why, as I close my comments, the idea of 5 years is what I want to leave you with. Where will Mercy Ships be in 5 years? Mercy Ships looks forward to 2028—the momentous milestone of our 50th anniversary! It will be a celebration of resilience, perseverance, and a testament to the vision of hope that fuels our mission. There are some unknowns, of course. There are some "hopes" ... such as the promise of a new ship. But this is just the "hope on the horizon" that this very weekend is themed upon.

As we peer into the horizon, envisioning countless lives being touched, futures transformed, let's remember the words from Psalms 147:3: "He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." We are instruments in this divine healing. Thank you for being part of this incredible journey—a journey that defines our past, illuminates our present, and promises an even more radiant horizon ahead.

[applause]

[Stay on stage to bring Don back up]

If you're wondering, *How can we ensure this radiant future?* I would like to remind you of the story of Moses and Joshua. Moses was a transformational leader who pushed his people much further than they thought they were capable of going. He was a mentor, a visionary ... and God was with him (remember that it was for Moses that He parted the Red Sea). Moses implored Joshua to maintain composure, strength and courage. Deuteronomy 31:7 says, "Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of all Israel, 'Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their ancestors to give them, and you must divide it among them as their inheritance.'"

And so, I use the story of Moses and Joshua to remind you of the leadership of our founder, Don Stephens ... to say that he's prepared us well. He has passed the mentoring spirit to all of us and trusts that we understand and accept our commission.

Please join me in welcoming Don Stephens back up to walk us through the Founder's Vision.