Everyone has the right to a seat at the “table of the human race”. If they are excluded because they don’t look the same or can’t speak, that is “catastrophic”.

The words are those of Dr Gary Parker, a surgeon who has given the past three decades to the global charity Mercy Ships, serving some of the most underprivileged people in the world; those who can suffer for years because they do not have access to safe, timely, affordable surgery.

The Californian was a senior registrar in the North Wales Oral and Maxillofacial Surgical Unit in the UK before joining Mercy Ships — which operates the world’s largest civilian hospital ship — in 1986.

“For me personally and us as a ship, I see it as planters of seeds of hope throughout some of the poorest regions of our world,” Parker says.

Onboard operations include repairing deformities caused by facial tumours, cleft lip and cleft palate, obstetric fistulas, paediatric orthopaedic surgery, plastic reconstructive surgery and ophthalmic surgery, such as correcting cataracts.

Since Mercy Ships was founded by American Don Stephens in 1978, millions of lives in some of the world’s poorest countries have been radically transformed by Mercy Ships’ free surgical and medical care. Geoff Garfield visited the hospital ship Africa Mercy in Madagascar to see the work of the volunteers who pay for the privilege of being on board.
Crew members from six nations now runs through his veins. Sambany can live a normal life with his family. (Photograph: Josh Callow)

01 For 36 years, Sambany has had a facial tumour that eventually weighed 7.6kg (16 lb 7 oz). He travelled hundreds of kilometres seeking help, visiting 10 hospitals and a witch doctor, with no success. ‘Every day I was just waiting to die,’ he said. Then he heard on the radio about Africa Mercy. (Photograph: Ruben Plomp)

02 After a 12-hour operation in which more than twice his body’s volume of blood was lost and replaced (the blood of 17 Africa Mercy crew members from six nations now runs through his veins) Sambany can live a normal life with his family. (Photograph: Josh Callow)

2.5 million people have benefited directly from its free medical care.

The charity’s 1980-built vessel, Africa Mercy, was converted from the 16,572-gt Danish ferry Dronning Ingrid.

The lifeline of hope that Mercy Ships provides will grow immeasurably stronger in 2018 when a newbuilding from China’s Tianjin Xingang shipyard is delivered, custom-built for the Texas-based organisation.

It is an expensive business: Africa Mercy costs tens of millions of dollars a year to operate, including surgical specialties, training, after-care and vessel maintenance. The challenge ahead is completing fundraising for the new ship and finding the 600 or so extra crew — surgeons, dentists, nurses, catering personnel, administrators and translators, as well as officers and deck hands.

Mercy Ships’ 16 national offices around the world play a key role in raising money and sourcing volunteers who often sacrifice personal careers and salaries, while paying towards their board and lodgings.

It is hoped a big financial contribution will flow from a fundraising venture, Cargo Day on 19 October (see page 15). Shipbrokers, charterers, owners, traders and port agents can participate in the event organised in conjunction with broking house Barry Roglano Sails, which assisted in placing the newbuilding order.

The new ship is set to be deployed in West Africa, while Africa Mercy will serve East Africa, including Mozambique, Madagascar and Tanzania. TW+ visited Africa Mercy in Madagascar, where it completed 18 months of field service recently before moving to Durban in South Africa for maintenance and on to Benin, West Africa, for its current tour of duty. Africa Mercy is immaculately maintained and equipped, with five operating theatres. It even has a Starbucks, with ingredients supplied free by the American coffeehouse. But volunteers do not get cruiseship luxury. A privileged few have family cabins (many volunteers live on board with their spouses and children) but for most it is shared occupancy, where the best start to the day is simply not having to queue for the shower.

Dr Gary, as he is referred to with great affection by his colleagues, says: “I think one of the greatest enemies to overcoming poverty and suffering is hopelessness, a feeling it will never change — ‘There is nothing we can do.’”

For hope to be believable, it needs to be “experienced in the present”, says Parker, referring to friends who have tried to encourage people that “tomorrow can be a better day, we can work and get schools for your children, clean water and maybe a health clinic”.

“But the response is, ‘What in my life experience gives me any reason to believe you are telling me the truth?’” says the 63-year-old chief medical officer of oral and maxillofacial surgical, who completed his surgical residency at the University of California, Los Angeles.

“Then someone goes back to their village after having their cleft lip repaired, and suddenly hope becomes tangible. That plants seeds of real hope in people. I am convinced that one of the keys to overcoming poverty is offering people true hope, that we can actually work together and see suffering decrease.”

“We don’t have to wait for the higher-ups and powers that be, we can do a lot ourselves. Just a little group of people who get together on a big steel boat and combine all of our efforts. It does work.”

Parker acknowledges that in private practice he could have surrounded himself with material wealth instead of living half his life on a ship and sacrificing the comforts other surgeons take for granted.

“You have to consciously decide you are not going to accumulate as much money, as big a house or as posh a car. It reminds me of the Tearfund motto all those years ago — ‘To live more simply that others can more easily share.’”

The huge gulf that exists between medical care in much of Africa and the developed economies of the West was demonstrated clearly when Wesley, the son of Parker and his wife Susan, cut his arm playing soccer. It became infected and led to a severe case of sepsis. Wesley was admitted to Africa Mercy’s hospital, but did not respond to antibiotics, causing concern because the condition could have led to the flesh-eating disease necrotising fasciitis.

If he had been living in Tamatave town,
where the ship was berthed in Madagascar, without access to medical facilities, it might have been necessary to amputate the arm to save his life, says Susan, who points to a patient in Liberia who cut herself and ended up losing her lips when sepsis and necrotising fasciitis set in (Gary Parker rebuilt her lips).

“When it happens to your own kid it really comes home — like, ‘Wow, we are so privileged,’” she says.

California-born, Seattle-raised Susan joined Mercy Ships in her twenties for six months’ service, but 29 years later is still there. She met Gary within a week of arriving, and five years later they married.

Wesley is 21 and off to college after studying up to senior level in the MS Academy, a fully fledged onboard school for the children of crew. Daughter Carys has been studying at Whitworth, a Christian liberal arts college in Washington state. Carys, whom Susan describes as very altruistic, plans to become a counsellor: “She says: ‘I am going to be a doctor of the heart and help people with their inward tumours’.” Wesley is thinking about becoming a physiotherapist.

Susan says of her husband: “He knows every day he goes down to that operating room he will see a life change. He is very aware that he has been given a gift.

“Maxillofacial surgeons are very well paid but he said, ‘If there are enough to cover the needs of the US, if the NHS [the UK’s National Health Service] have enough, why am I going to vie for business when I can come here and be the only one in the nation?’

“Sometimes maybe the results aren’t as good as a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon doing cosmetic surgery, because when you are a train wreck it is hard to make you beautiful.

“But with a woman who may never have hope of being married, when he makes a new nose, it may not be the best because he had to make it out of a flap from her neck, but it is enough to get her married. And that is what she cares about: to have children, have acceptance, to be able to survive.”

Having raised a family on board Mercy Ships vessels, Susan sometimes feels she has missed out. “When I had children and no nursery to decorate and my children slept in the bathroom, I thought, ‘Is this the deal for me?’ But when I feel ungrateful I go down to the [hospital] ward, stop at a few beds and then I feel happy with my life. I have water and when I flick a switch, the electricity comes on. I am blessed.”

The life-changing work is summed up by her husband: “For clefts [lip and/or palate] with the very young ones it is the difference between starving to death and living. You can’t breast-feed properly when your palate is missing. You can’t create the suction to get the milk. The mother tries her best, but we get these really malnourished children.

“Often these kids can’t go to school

Many surgeons return to Mercy Ships year after year to volunteer their services, but Gary Parker’s 30-year devotion to the cause acts as a beacon. “We love the guy,” says Africa Mercy’s managing director, Robin MacAlpine. “He’s humble, very, very real, a servant of nature. Humility is misunderstood in this world. It is a very positive thing, and that is what you see in Gary.”

Gary’s wife, Susan, did a masters degree in international studies and is part of the Africa Mercy team that teaches the crew how to learn about cultures. “What we know is medicine. What we don’t know is how people think, and it is important to realize we are guests in people’s houses. I am passionate about helping our crew to be culturally sensitive,” she says.
because it is too painful to be teased, be outcast or be criticised by well-meaning teachers who don’t understand that if you have a cleft palate, you can’t say the consonant sounds.”

The same day Parker allowed TW+ to witness a cleft lip operation, he also saw a man with a large facial tumour. “They die of slow suffocation, as the tumour pushes their tongue back into their throat, and because they can’t get a four-hour operation to get the tumour out — safe, timely, affordable surgery.”

If they don’t die of suffocation, it can be starvation. “It is slow and it is hideous,” says the surgeon. “I shouldn’t be saying these words, but it is better to have something that kills you quickly than kills you slowly — but that is the reality for a large number of people.”

Asians have the highest incidence of clefts and Africans the lowest, but Madagascar’s genetics are predominantly Asian despite its location, 1,700km off the coast of southeast Africa. “Some place on earth, every 10 minutes a child is born with a cleft lip and/or palate, so from a public health point of view it is one of the greatest needs,” says Parker.

In parts of West Africa, mothers of children with such conditions are expected to take their child to a traditional healer.

Leaving a legacy
Lasting benefit for host nation

Mercy Ships has developed since its foundation in 1978, from responding to disasters to capacity-building. It works with host nations to provide a legacy of desperately needed healthcare by training local surgeons, nurses, anaesthetists, sterilising technicians, community health workers and administrators to continue the work after the ship departs.

Its mentoring programmes, referred to as the “surgical ecosystem”, also embrace the renovation of onshore hospitals, working with other organisations such as Medical Aid International, which specialises in equipping operating theatres.

Onshore, the Hope (Hospital Out-Patient Extension) Centre is a convalescent facility established wherever the ship goes, to provide housing for patients and caregivers close to the vessel while freeing up bed space in the vessel’s hospital wards. Patients can convalesce, sometimes for two or three months if they need physical therapy or are waiting for wounds to heal.

A NOK10m ($1.2m) grant by the Norwegian government has been used for renovation projects at the hospital where the centre was located in Tamatave during Mercy Ships’ Madagascar stay. Africa Mercy was acquired through a £4m-£5m ($5.3m-$6.6m) donation from billionaire Ann Gloag, who with her brother, Brian Souter, built the UK and US bus and rail group Stagecoach. The ship underwent an expensive and lengthy conversion in northeast England.

Volunteers speak openly about how they feel called to serve on the Christian faith-based ship, but there is little evidence of the overt evangelical outreach or “missionary zeal” with which Mercy Ships was associated in former years.

“The Lord will provide. That is the principle,” says Africa Mercy managing director Robin MacAlpine about the extra 600 volunteers who will be needed when the charity’s new ship is delivered. “We are all paying our way for the privilege of working on board. So we are all in the same boat by living on faith.” But that is as far as the religious message went during TW+’s time on board.

MacAlpine, who spent around 33 years with the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other NGOs, also sees planting the seeds of hope as pivotal in Mercy Ships’ role. “Here we create hope,” he replies when asked why he joined the organisation around three years ago. MacAlpine began his career in the British Royal Navy, serving as a helicopter pilot with the Fleet Air Arm. He lives with his Swiss wife Laurette, a nurse now involved with human resources on Africa Mercy, and has no intention of retiring despite approaching 70. “I don’t know what I would do if I took it easy,” he says. “As long as I have breath in me and I can walk around, think and remember, I want to be active.”
and put them in a box, to be buried alive to destroy the evil spirits.

“Parents we have met have had to literally plead to keep their child from being buried,” says Parker. “With some traditional aspects of African culture the second-worst form of punishment is execution, but the worst is being evicted from your village. When you have to flee your village to keep your child alive, it is really dramatic.

“Some of these families are very courageous, coming to have their children repaired and going back to their villages to say: ‘We don’t have to destroy our children; look, here is our child’.

“It takes a lot of courage to do that because you are standing against very strong authority figures. The witch doctor and sometimes the queen mother and chief are all promoting these traditions which have been around for thousands of years.”

In Madagascar alone there are an estimated 30,000 women with obstetric fistulas, a medical condition in which a hole develops after difficult or failed childbirth. It leads to urine and faeces leaking through the vagina, and women are often rejected by their husbands.

Once healed and convalesced, the women are provided with colourful dresses and

Maritime costs for running Africa Mercy total about $5m a year, with a further $3m for support services such as vehicles and food. But that is only a fraction of the total: the various medical programmes cost around $22m a year, including roughly $20m of donated services and materials.

Volunteers contribute towards their own living costs, via baseline payments of $700 per month, often assisted by churches and families. Food is a big overhead. Three substantial meals a day are too good an opportunity for some of the locally employed workers to miss: It is understood they are paid only a few dollars a day, but that is in line with local pay.
Master's master plan
Recycling trash to help poor

Jan Tuinier, master of the Africa Mercy, has a vision of making money from recycling garbage in the Dominican Republic. He relinquished his position as captain this summer to help 150 people who live in extreme poverty on a rubbish dump in the Caribbean country.

The project stems from Tuinier’s decision to forgo a regular salary. He spent about 10 years in European inland shipping and later at sea, working his way up from deck hand, before he came to Mercy Ships in 2001 for “adventure” but saw “a way of practical Christianity I had not experienced back home” in the Netherlands.

Mercy Ships’ maritime training fund helped him acquire his deepsea qualifications and he returned as a long-term volunteer.

There he met his wife, Elizabeth, who has been with the organisation for 20 years and comes from the Dominican Republic. They married in 2004 and have been with Mercy Ships ever since, except for three years’ commercial sailing from 2008.

Elizabeth is a nursery teacher in the onboard academy that caters for volunteers’ children up to graduation. Their daughter Isabella is a pupil.

Being master still carries plenty of responsibility when the vessel is in port for months, not least ensuring that power is supplied to the hospital and its operating theatres.

The Africa Mercy has a complex maintenance programme. Tuinier describes it as “unique” because it has “so many overlapping departments”. Evacuation plans are very detailed and drills mandatory. “Between three and five people can be in surgery any minute of the day. If there is an alarm, what do you do? They are still cutting into people,” he says.

The risks became apparent when the ship was put on orange alert for a cyclone near Madagascar. “We had 12 hours in reserve to stop surgeries, stabilise patients, get them and 150 of the crew members off the ship and do final preparations to get out of port before the high winds arrived,” says Tuinier.

Fortunately, the cyclone veered away, but he became acutely aware of how people on the ship depended on him for their safety.

Finding qualified seafarers is not easy partly because of a lack of navigation time, but Africa Mercy has around 15 local day crew working on deck, some of whom stay for years. They also benefit from training, some leaving with their AB ( Able Bodied Seamen) tickets to get good jobs elsewhere. One is now working on a drillship and supporting many of his family back in Liberia.

When TW+ visited the engine room, Sarah Wegener, a 27-year-old fourth engineer from Canada, was taking apart a generator. She arrived last October and stays to the end of this year before doing her third engineer’s ticket. “I have never had so much responsibility and training in my life,” she said. “I have a background in biological physics and wanted a practical application. This is my dream job. It’s crazy!”

hats and take part in a moving ceremony of dancing and singing before returning to their villages and hopefully a better life.

“You live and work with incredible people. It is mind-blowing.” Words repeated time and again by volunteers on Africa Mercy, among them hospital director Kirstie Randall.

The former intensive care nurse from Exeter in southwest England has been working for Mercy Ships, first as a nurse and later ward supervisor, since 2003. She returned home at one stage, but realised her place was on the ship.

“When you have been part of helping people who can’t access healthcare, you want to keep doing it,” she says. “My job is all about planning.”

She oversees the hospital with its five operating rooms, wards and dental clinic.

During the service in Madagascar, 14 nurses were trained at the fistular clinic and “they are probably some of the best nurses in the country”, adds Randall. She says the orthopaedic programme focuses especially on children, partly because the results are better, including the Ponseti plaster cast method of treating club foot.

“Here [Madagascar] we have set up a clinic and trained people to do it locally.

An international organisation, Miraclefeet, will carry on supporting that in the future.”

All Mercy Ships patients are given a package with a bar of soap, toothbrush and small mirror so they can see the transformation in their appearance after their operation. After a couple of days children of two or three are “on their way, but for teenagers it takes a month of just looking, and then the light start to come on”, says Parker.

He remembers a 75-year-old woman who had lived all her life with a cleft lip. “She was so excited because ‘I can go to the market and I won’t be a witch or I won’t be the woman with the crooked lip — I am just myself’.”

Dr Gary wears colourful African fabric trousers in the hospital to put patients at ease. “I have a shirt that matches, but if I wear them together, people fall over,” he quips, before reflecting: “I know we can’t change the whole world, but we can change the whole world for one person, and then the next one, and then the next one. Part of being human is that we don’t give up.”
A 1990s newspaper article about Mercy Ships was to be the catalyst for shipbroker Gilbert Walter finding a yard in China to build the charity’s new vessel a decade later.

Walter filed the article away until he opened the Geneva office of Barry Rogliano Salles (BRS) as managing director and saw that Mercy Ships International was not far away in Lausanne. They told him about a project for a new purpose-built ship that would cost up to five times more than the charity could afford.

Korean shipyards were not interested in such a specialised vessel, while European builders quoted cruise ship prices.

“I said the only way to meet the budget was to do it in China, and we offered to guide them. We wanted to protect them because there are so many nasty people around trying to rip off this type of organisation,” says Walter.

He contacted Swedish passengership specialist Stena RoRo, where chief executive Per Westling immediately agreed to get involved. Along with Mercy Ships, the company handled the concept design, Deltamarin teaming up with builder Tianjin Xingang, part of the northern China CSIC Group, on the main design work.

Construction has started in the drydock, one hour east of Beijing, with delivery scheduled for early 2018, before installation of medical equipment and commissioning in the Philippines. Stena RoRo is organising the on-site supervision team and is providing the site manager.

It is understood that the vessel will be named Atlantic Mercy to reflect its future role serving West Africa and eventually South America.

Xingang, one of 20 yards that bid, has previous experience constructing passengerships for domestic clients.

The Chinese Navy already has a domestically built, albeit much smaller, hospital ship, which was involved in relief operations after Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines in 2013.

“The dream of founder Don Stephens is that there should be a ship in each ocean,” says Walter, but an option on the newbuilding has been allowed to lapse due to the challenge of finding sufficient volunteers.

Mercy Ships used to have three smaller vessels, but managing director Robin MacAlpine says Africa Mercy is more efficient.

However, much more can be achieved when the newbuilding, 1½ times the size of Africa Mercy, arrives. Its hospital will cover two decks instead of one, and there will be more training facilities and much-improved cabin accommodation for the volunteers.

Atlantic Mercy will have diesel-electric propulsion to minimise vibration and be more efficient, particularly as it will spend most of its time in port.

BRS is providing its services free by, it is understood, handing back its brokerage commission in a fundraising Cargo Day (www.mercyshipscargoday.org) on 19 October. The shipping and trading community will have the opportunity to contribute during the project, which is being promoted by Geneva-based BRS head of tankers Tim Webb.

The list of participants so far includes Trafigura, Wilhelmsen Ship Service, Augusta Energy, Socar, Gunvor, Sahara, Riverlake group and HR Maritime.

Charterers can give so-called Mercy Cargoes to shipbrokers or nominate participants (port agents and inspection companies) on a given day, or make a pledge and use their address commissions for the donation.

Shipowners can use income from transporting Mercy Cargoes for their donation pledges, and brokers can pledge commission from the cargoes, while agents and inspection companies can use commissions, after receiving nominations from charterers.

Webb has devoted a lot of time to making Cargo Day a success, visiting Africa Mercy twice this year, once with his wife, meeting up on board with son Oscar, who served as a volunteer for a period after completing his seafarer training in the US.

Westling has also visited Africa Mercy — where his daughter Amanda, a first-year medical student, served for three months.