

Our Ocean Church Experience in 1981: Tuna, Tuna, Tuna

Tom Cutts edited by Cabot Peterson
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Few things in life can heighten a person's sense of self-efficacy as much as landing a monster fish. During the summer of 1981 several dozen students from the [Unification Theological Seminary](#) (UTS) participated in [Ocean Church](#) in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Pairs of seminarians joined with a captain and first mate on a 28-foot [Good-Go](#) Boat. After the first day on the water, a "still, small voice" said to me, "You'll catch a tuna tomorrow." The next day we landed a 927-pound giant bluefin tuna. Catching this creature from the deep taught me an important life lesson about being in the Will of God.

Our Ocean Church experience began in the classroom with instruction from Captain Allan Hokanson, the captain of UTS co-founder, Rev. Sun Myung Moon's fishing boat, the New Hope, when Rev. Moon first started fishing [Stellwagen Bank](#). Rev. Moon told his first crew that if they were united with him they would catch fish within the first three days.

If they failed to unite, it would be forty days before they would catch a tuna. Their first three days passed without a single fish, then a total of forty long days passed with still no fish. On the forty-first day, just as Rev. Moon predicted, the crew caught a giant Bluefin tuna weighing over twelve hundred pounds. After I heard this account, I was determined to catch a fish within the first three days.

Unlike Ernest Hemingway, we wouldn't be fishing with a rod and reel. We would use 3/8-inch nylon rope as hand lines. In the stern of each boat there were four laundry baskets, each with a coil of rope. At the end of each line were a float, a weight, and a metal leader with a large hook. The hooks we used were a little smaller than the ones used by the local fishermen. Rev. Moon had them brought in from Japan. They had a distinct curvature near the eye which meant it was less likely to be spit out of the mouth of a hooked tuna. The weight would keep the baited hook from floating to the surface, and the distance between the float and the hook would determine the depth of the hook.

Our classroom training also included learning how to attract the tuna ([Thunnusthynnus](#)) and how to put out the fishing lines. We would use chum to draw tuna to our baited hooks. Chum is chopped up rotten fish, the smellier the better. It's thrown into the water every few minutes. As the chum sinks toward the ocean bottom, the speed of the current determines the depth of the chum as it drifts away from the stern of the boat.

Every night, we rode two hours back to the Boston Unification Church center and slept in sleeping bags on the floor. After about three hours of sleep we were up again and on our way back to Gloucester. With a supply of chum and a lunch bag, we launched our boat in the dark, carefully picking our way through the channel. There was always the temptation to sleep, read, or simply space out, but we understood that if we wanted to catch fish we needed to stay alert and attentive.

One boat of UTS seminarians had an all-female crew from the Junior Class (the Class of 1983). Nancy Breyfogle Yamamoto was the captain; Sue Fox, Lois Ramunni and Jane Berg were the crew members. These sisters stayed busy singing [Holy Songs](#), and caught more tuna than any other boat. Lee Shapiro [filmed our summer of 1981 fishing](#) and these young ladies were featured in the film. Dan Fefferman wrote an original sea shanty to accompany the video.

Michael Bradley and I were the two seminarians on our boat. Our captain was Alain Ardj, and the first mate was an Austrian, Brigitte Gross Mendes. We learned a lot on our first day; when we reached the Banks we fished off the bottom for dogfish, a very small shark about the size of a large bass. After catching a few dogfish, Captain Alain showed us how to cut the flesh into long steaks, and use it to bait the hooks.



When a tuna was on a line, the crew shouted, "Tuna, tuna, tuna," and a white pennant with a tuna on it would be raised. This let nearby boats know to pull up their lines. If other lines remained in the water, the hooked tuna might run through them, tangle the lines and break the one holding him. We didn't catch a fish on the first day out, but we learned a lot in preparation for the next day.

Before heading back to Boston, we had dinner in the restaurant at the operations center in Gloucester. The strangest thing happened to me after dinner. As I was sitting there, I heard that still small voice that said, "You'll catch a fish tomorrow." That surprised me, but I was also surprised by my own reaction. I didn't just accept that we would catch a fish. I asked what I had to do to make it happen.

The inspiration that came to me was, "You have to unite with the captain." I thought that would be easy, since I thought of myself as a person who can easily unite with a central figure. But the voice replied, "Yeah, you easily say, 'Yes,' but in your heart you say, 'Yes, but, thinking you have a better way.'" I realized that to catch a fish, I'd have to work on my "yes, but..." attitude. And I was tested three times the next day.

I thought our best place to catch fish would be in the first spot the captain selected to fish. This later became a lesson of being in the Will of God. The next morning, Captain Alain gave more responsibility to Michael and me. He gave me the task of steering us through the pitch dark channel. We used a search light to spot and avoid the crab pots. It was kind of eerie and exciting to be going out to sea with a fleet of other boats. We could see each other's running lights, and searchlights sweeping for crab pots. We could smell each other's diesel fumes drifting above the water.

When we got to the banks the captain took over. Feeling certain we were going to catch a fish, I really wanted the first place the captain anchored to be where we would hook a big one. The captain carefully watched the depth meter to find the perfect spot on the edge of the Banks; he then instructed me to go to the bow of the boat and drop the anchor.

I stood on the bow and threw the anchor into the water. As I got ready to come off the bow, the captain said, "Pull the anchor back up. You let it down too fast. I hauled up the anchor, hand over hand, which was no easy task standing on the bow and being bounced around by the waves and swells. The captain

said, "We'll find another spot." I wanted to say, "Yes, but... this is the spot where we'll catch fish." Fortunately, I caught myself again before saying, "Yes, but..."

Watching the depth gauge, the captain searched for another likely spot to catch fish. When he found the spot, he told me to drop the anchor again. This time I very carefully, hand over hand, let down the anchor. After the anchor reached the bottom, and I got ready to come off the bow, the captain said, "Pull the anchor back up. You let it down too slowly."

As you can imagine, I was about to say, "Yes, but you told me I let it down too fast last time." Fortunately, I caught myself once again. By letting the anchor down too slowly, the ocean current had pushed us off the spot where the captain wanted us to be. We searched for another spot, and again, I was tasked with lowering the anchor. This third time, I let it down not too fast and not too slow. As the anchor reached the bottom, I turned to see if the captain approved. He said, "Okay, you can come back into the boat."

After the boat was anchored we caught some dogfish for bait. The day before, when we cut up the dogfish, Michael had a bad experience with the sight of blood. I thought maybe the captain would give him a break. But no, he told Michael to cut the dogfish and bait the hooks. I was amazed as Michael steeled himself for the task. He must have also felt it was important to unite with the captain. But cutting the dogfish was more difficult the second day than on the first. This time the dogfish was pregnant. Not only was there blood, but live baby sharks came out of her opened belly. Some fell into the boat and wriggled around, while others fell into the ocean and swam away. I thought Michael would either throw up or quit altogether, but he kept going and made the shark steaks and baited the hooks.

It was then that I knew we would catch a tuna.

Within thirty minutes we hooked a monster. We were the first boat to hook on a fish that morning. We shouted "Tuna, tuna, tuna," and the other boats started pulling in their lines to make way for us. Then the life and death battle began. It wasn't quite the "Nantucket sleigh ride" experienced by whalers after harpooning a humpback, but the tuna did drag us for hours stern first away from the banks.

We worked the fish from the stern of the boat. Unlike the bow, which is designed to slip through the water, the stern puts up a flat wall of resistance. Amazingly, the fish pulled us for three and a half hours. We soon lost sight of all the other boats in our fleet. We took turns fighting the fish. It tried swimming in different directions to escape. Whenever the fish powerfully swam away from the boat, we were unable to hold the line, and the line slipped through our gloved hands. And whenever the fish swam toward the boat the line slackened, and rope had to be pulled in to keep the line taut and hook set in the fish's mouth.



Very slowly the fish tired, and we pulled him closer and closer to our boat. When he was in sight, we started working him from the bow. Several times he swam under the boat trying to get away, that's when the harpoon was thrown into his side. Now the fish had a line in its mouth, and a line through its body. But still the fish was not ours. Fishermen have caught tuna before, and if its tail isn't secured to the boat, the fish could escape or, if it's dead, it will drift down to the bottom and be lost. We put a line around the tail, and secured it to the side of the boat. The fish was ours. Another line run through the fish's gills and mouth, and the head was also secured to the side of the boat. The ten-foot fish, weighing nearly a thousand pounds, was much too heavy to haul into the boat.

Then Captain Alain told us to give thanks to God for the fish. Leaning over the gunnels and laying hands on the catch, we thanked God for the fish and thanked the fish for giving up its life for us. After praying over the fish and bleeding it, we set off for the Gloucester harbor.

In the far distance, two forty-ton humpback whales were leaping out of the water and splashing back into the sea. They were moving in the direction we were heading. As I watched them, I realized that based on our speed and their speed we would actually run into each other. I asked the captain if I should speed up to run ahead of the whales, or if I should slow down to let them pass in front of us. He said, "Maintain your speed." As you can imagine, again I wanted to say, "Yes, but..." However, I remained quiet and kept the same speed.

The whales continued their ballet of breaching and about forty minutes later we drew closer to them. Indeed, our courses would cross at the same time. Just before bumping into our boat, the first whale lifted its tail out of the water, and dove under the boat. Its tail flukes, dripping with water, towered only five feet away from our boat. The second whale performed the same "salute," raising its tail beside our boat, and then sliding into the sea, passing under our vessel.

Back in the harbor, our catch was winched onto the dock. We took a picture with our catch, and the fish was rushed to the warehouse where its head and tail were removed. It was flash chilled, and prepared for shipping to Japan. In the market there, merchants were paying over \$15 a pound in 1981. Some meat remained in the head, which we ate as sashimi. It was a grand feeling to have caught this fish. The next day we caught another tuna weighing 914 pounds.

Rev. Tom Cutts served for four years as the National Executive Director of the [American Clergy Leadership Conference](#) (AACL). He resides in Marietta, Georgia, and has three sons and a daughter. His wife, Angelika, passed on March 10, 2018. Tom is now coordinating AACL activities in the six Southeastern states.