



### About the Author

Barbara C. Reynolds, PhD, married the late Right Reverend George Reynolds in 1962 when he was a priest in Warrendale, Ohio. Later, he was elected Bishop of the Diocese of Tennessee and served there until his death at age 64 in 1991. George and Barbara helped each other through their doctoral programs, hers in social and administrative pharmacy. She later became Dean of Whitson-Hester School of Nursing in Cookeville, Tennessee. The Reynolds had two children. Barbara remarried in 2004, to George Barnard, a retired industrial hygienist. Now retired, she is active in Tennessee politics, rural health care accessibility, and fundraising for Whitson-Hester. Readers may contact her at [barbarareynolds@charter.net](mailto:barbarareynolds@charter.net).

### About *Vintage Voice*

*Vintage Voice* is a monthly publication for retirees of the Episcopal Church who, in sharing their stories, help deepen the sense of community. We hope you enjoy these articles and find them helpful. Stories are published with the authors' permission. If you have a reflection about your life in retirement, consider writing for the *Vintage Voice*! Send your submissions to [vintagevoice@cpf.org](mailto:vintagevoice@cpf.org).

# VINTAGE VOICE



## Leprosy in Liberia: A Missionary Encounter

by **Barbara C. Reynolds, PhD**

Now that I am retired, I often look back on my nursing career and my years at the side of my late husband, the Right Reverend George Lazenby Reynolds. In 1964 a small group of Episcopal clergy from the United States, the Virgin Islands, and South Africa who specialized in organizational development received an invitation from the Right Reverend Dillard Brown, Bishop of Liberia. He was seeking clerics who would train Liberian church leaders and clergy in leadership development. George, who served on the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church, responded to the call, and I went with him.

I didn't realize that I was about to be exposed to leprosy for the first time, even though I was a registered nurse. To this day, I am touched by the hospitality of the outcasts afflicted with this dreaded disease—and the spirit that moves those who minister to them.

Many of the rural participants in the training program were unable to read. This is not unusual in a country whose literacy rate was still only about 42% as late as 2007. Clergy and church leaders from Monrovia, the capital, were more accomplished in literacy and leadership skills than those in the rural areas. The idea was to coach these participants in how to train others in leadership.

The needs were very diverse. A two-week training workshop was held at Cuttington College (now Cuttington University), a private co-ed institution in Suacoco that was founded by the Episcopal Church of the United States in the late 19th century.

Several Liberians arrived late because of poor transportation. At least two were stricken with recurring malaria. I made myself useful typing and running off copies that described communication skills, group process, and skill development on an old Xerox machine. But my real value was nursing those who were running fevers.

### A Necklace and a Pineapple

While at Cuttington College, I visited the inhabitants of the Suacoco Leper Colony with a kindly Episcopal American doctor-priest assigned to the college. These people had been abandoned—left to fend for themselves in an isolated community in the woods, accessible only

by a poorly maintained dirt road that we traveled by Jeep. Liberian then-President William Tubman had other ideas for the money that should have gone to the “lepers,” as we called them then, for subsistence. Instead, he built a very large mansion, a building that he would use to impress his visitors and show that he was a “big” man.

The doctor-priest took pity on the people with leprosy. He was able to get supplies of food and drugs from the Episcopal Church in the United States—staples that were badly needed by those living in the colony.

At that time, it was customary for me to wear a simple summer dress and costume jewelry. One of the women with leprosy smiled at me and indicated that she would like the pop-bead pearl necklace I was wearing. She was very scantily dressed. Her fingers and toes were nubs and she had lost part of her nose and many of her teeth. Nevertheless, she was thrilled when I put the strand of pearls around her neck—even though she would not be able to remove it herself.

As the doctor-priest and I were leaving the compound, four men brought me a pineapple. I hesitated about taking it—the colony suffered from extreme starvation—but my companion said the “lepers” would be hurt if I didn’t take their gift. I was very much touched by their generosity.

### **Lasting Impressions**

Afterwards, the clergy staff who had held the workshop were assigned to different parts of Liberia to work with the trainees. George and I flew to a village in southern Liberia that was so remote that it was accessible only by plane. There, we teamed with the people we had trained to plan a workshop of their own for their local church members. We helped them as they shared their newly learned skills. We believed that we and the other consultant teams left the churches in Liberia with more resources to use for developing their churches.

As I reflect on my nursing career and on my years at George’s side, I think about my life-changing encounter with the people in that “leper colony” in Liberia. I returned home with a much better understanding of the good that the Episcopal Church could do in the missionary field. And not only was I able to share what I had learned, but I ended up finding donors for a small fund to benefit the Suacoco Leper Colony. I thank the Church for allowing me to have these experiences.

