

Early History of Nigerian Christian Hospital

By Bill Nicks

Wendell Broom and I built a house at Ukpom while teaching there. When it was finished in 1956, the James Finneys moved in with us that year. Gerry and I moved in early 1957 to Iboland and lived in the D.O. Rest House that the D.O. in Aba gave us. We started building our house on property we leased from Chief Ebere (Ntigha Onicha Ngwa), the present school property. James Finney and I taught together after selecting 40 students and brought three first year graduates from Ukpom who graduated with us after their second year.

James Finney decided to go to Lagos with Leslie Diestelkamp. Leslie withdrew from us on the basis that we believed in church cooperation. Rees Bryant came in 1958 and we were supported by the same congregation (Procter St. in Port Arthur, TX). Jim Massey came in early 1959. Gerry and I left in 1960.

As soon as I arrived in Nashville, home of my parents, I visited Henry Farrar at the hospital where he was doing intern for his MD. The best I can remember this was at Hazard, KY. I urged him to consider coming to Nigeria to begin a hospital. I told him how people died in the Asiatic flu epidemic, how we had to take people to the Catholic Hospital at Urua Akpan, a bush hospital run by the Sisters of Mary, I asked him why we could not have one like that in the bush at Onicha Ngwa. He said he would like to do that. We both went to Nashville to talk to his uncle, Dr. John Cayce, who had been his mentor. Dr. Cayce urged Henry not to go yet, though Henry and I wanted this to happen. His argument was that Henry needed to finish his surgical degree. To get his FACS, Henry would have to spend four more years. This would take until 1964. Henry kept his promise to me and came in 1964.

Gerry and I were at a period in our lives with three teenaged daughters. We felt it best to wait until they got their education at home and then go back later. I spent the first summer raising funds for Henry. I raised enough to buy him an automobile when he arrived in 1964. Procter St. continued to support me till time for me to begin work with the Cross Plains, TX church, where I worked on my Master's degree at Abilene while preaching for the church in Cross Plains. After that we moved to Michigan, and I taught with Lucien Palmer at Michigan Christian for three years.

After preaching in Fort Worth for two years and Savannah, TN for three years, we decided to return to Nigeria. The war was in progress. Howard Horton and I visited Nigeria during the war to try to get him in as supervisor of an orphanage to help children who were war orphans. There were many children dying of kwashiorkor, a disease from lack of protein. Sympathy was high for us to help our brethren. We were denied entrance by the War dept. though the Health and Welfare dept. wanted us. Howard went to Viet Nam. We went to Liberia for three years as first resident missionaries there. Then we returned to Nigeria to reopen the Hospital and Henry and I worked together. I got in as Consultant to the Administrator to the Hospital. He got in as Chief Surgeon.

I took care of finances and other odd jobs at the hospital. Gerry helped Henry in the Operating Room. I also taught with Stephen Okoronkwo at the school, and continued to evangelize as we had done in the 50's. We came back into Nigeria in 1970 for a lectureship, and then returned when obtaining our visas in 1971. Henry came a few months after we did in 1971 for he was finishing a project to work at the Port Harcourt Hospital under the Kaiser Foundation, an American charitable organization. Doug Lawyer and Jim Massey had worked at the school in the 1960's with Rees Bryant. While I was working at the Hospital in the 1970's, I encouraged Rees Bryant to organize a board to assist the hospital work. He served, as you know as its first president.

During the 70's Joe Cross came to take my place when we left, but he became ill and had to return home. Gene Peden worked for a time. The three houses were occupied when we went back in 1974, Stephen Okoronkwo in the house we originally built and who came as the first one after the war as director of the school. Dr. Farrar and Grace and 3 of their children occupied the middle house originally built by Doug Lawyer. Gerry and I occupied the house built originally by James Finney and later, after he left, by Rees and Patti Bryant. We had to refurbish all three houses after the war for there were many bullet and grenade holes in both of them and the hospital buildings.

While there in the 1970's it was my job to oversee the building of the Outpatient Clinic Building, the money having been sent by a war widow in honor of her husband whose life was lost in WWII. I hired Anthony Agali, present maintenance manager at the hospital, to fill that office and also to oversee the contracting of the hospital Outpatient building. Anthony had been hired by me before the war to be the builder of our houses. I was the contractor.

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