

Photo by Boyce Bowdon



Bishop Bennie Warner and Anna, his wife, befriended Bishop Robert Hayes Jr., center, in Texas in the 1980s.

A full circle life in Christ

By Boyce Bowdon



For the first time in 29 years, Bishop Bennie Warner is returning to the land of his birth.

He recently accepted an invitation to be conference preacher in February at the 2009 session of the Liberia Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church.

During his two-week visit in the West African nation, he will also preach at several churches, including First UMC in Monrovia, the mother church of United Methodism in Liberia. Now 73, the retired bishop is pastor at Leland Clegg UMC in Oklahoma City.

“Our conference meets in Gbarga City,” Bishop Warner said. “That’s where I learned to read and write. And it’s where I met this man Jesus.”

Warner was 45 the last time he was in Liberia. Back then, he was in his eighth year as bishop of Liberia Annual Conference—and in his third year as vice-president of Liberia. Serving with President William Tolbert, he presided over the country’s senate and headed a task force working to minimize government waste and corruption.

Warner and his wife, Anna, left Liberia on April 5, 1980, for what they expected to be a three-week visit to the United States. They were participating in the UM General Conference.

Five days after the couple left Liberia, President Tolbert and other government officials were executed during a coup. “President Tolbert’s death was a terrible loss,” said Warner. “He fought corruption and brought about needed reforms. He was a dear friend and a good man.”

Tolbert—a Baptist minister who presided over the Baptist World Alliance from 1965 until 1970—had picked Warner as his nominee for vice-president after seeing the 42-year-old bishop take strong stands on social justice and human rights issues.

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“If I had been in Liberia during the coup, I probably would have been killed, too,” reflected Warner.

Across more than 20 years after the coup, Liberia was devastated by conflict and violence. The United Nations estimated 200,000 people died during the country’s civil war, which began in 1989 and ended in 2003.

“My brother was killed, and several other relatives were beheaded during the war,” Warner said. In June, he testified for Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is documenting atrocities during the periods of war and unrest. “I told the commission we should not push what happened in Liberia under the rug and forget about it. We should look at the fact that these atrocities took place in our society and that we brought them on ourselves. We

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were not attacked by a foreign nation. This whole thing was fueled by selfishness and greed and a grasp for power,” Warner said. “I proposed that, after the commission completes its work, Liberia should have a national day of remembrance so future generations will know what happened.”

The bishop said he looks forward to his visit to Liberia, even though he knows many people and places dear to him will be gone, including the mission school he attended at Gbarga City.

He vividly remembers what drew him to the mission for the first time, in 1950, a few months after it was built. “I was 15, and I wanted to learn to read and write,” he said.

Born in a remote village on the west side of Liberia, where residents could not read, Warner’s interest in education began when visitors read news and other reports.

“When I watched them make sense out of mysterious marks on paper, I thought it was magic,” recalled Warner. “I told my father I would like to be able to do that some day. He said that if I wanted to read, I would have to go to school.”

Young Warner was with his uncle, going across Liberia searching for diamond mines, when he heard a mission school was being built in Gbarga City, on the east side of Liberia.

“I went to my father and told him I would like to go to the school. He said, ‘Go ahead.’ In my village, no one ever left without coming back the next day or at least the next week. My father was probably thinking I would come right back.”

He didn’t. “I took my little bundle of clothes, threw it over my shoulder, and I was on my way, walking to the school 200 miles away. Finally I got to this place called Gbarga. It was Saturday. I went to the missionary house, and knocked on the door. A tall lady came to the door and said, ‘Good morning. Can I help you?’ And I said, ‘Good morning. I want to go to school.’ The woman was Vivieni Gray, principal of the school and wife of the pastor of the Methodist mission church. They were Methodist missionaries.”

On Monday morning, Warner and about 150 other children close to his age gathered at the school. “Many of us had never been

to school. We came from different tribes, and not all of us spoke the same language. I knew a little English, but not much.” During registration, Gray asked Warner for his tuition.

“She could tell I didn’t know what tuition meant. So she said, ‘Where’s your money for school?’ I told her I didn’t know school would cost money and asked her how much I needed. She said \$3. I told her I didn’t have it.” Like other children who didn’t have money, Warner was assigned work to cover his tuition.

“My assignment was to be the janitor and help cut the grass,” he said. “Since we had about 200 inches of rain a year, the grass grew fast.”

The next year, Gray told Warner and others who didn’t have tuition money that they were receiving scholarships. The mission had received money from the Women’s Society of Christian Service (now United Methodist Women) in America. Gray told the students they had to maintain good grades to receive the help.

The scholarships were only part of the support the mission school received from Methodists in America. Every October a big crate arrived from U.S. churches in the South Central Jurisdiction, a geographic region that includes Oklahoma. It was packed with Sunday school literature, various supplies, and Christmas gifts.

“I had never seen a Christmas tree before I came to the mission,” Warner said. “Under our tree, there were shoeboxes from America, wrapped in nice-looking paper. After we finished our Christmas play, Rev. Gray would pick up a box and call out a name. The student he called would go get the gift, and the rest of us would clap.”

Warner remembers what was in his box: a bar of Lux soap, two spools of thread, a needle, some buttons, and the Gospel of John. “The Gospel of John thrilled me most,” said Warner. “It was my first Bible.” But the Gospel of John didn’t make sense to him until he got to its sixth verse and read: “There was a man sent from God whose name was John.”

As a child, Warner had listened to elders tell stories around campfires. And when the Gospel of John began telling the story of Jesus, he became interested.

He said, “It bothered me when I read that Jesus came to his own people and they rejected him. I grew up in a village where nobody was rejected. I wanted to embrace Jesus and be a friend to him. And then I read in verse 12 that Jesus gave everyone who received him the power



Plants thrive under Bishop Bennie Warner’s care at his home in Oklahoma City. Gardening is a favorite hobby for the retired clergyman.

to become children of God. I wanted to be a child of God. So I received Jesus in my heart. Ever since then, I've been learning more about him."

Warner went on to graduate from Cuttington University College in Liberia, and Syracuse University in New York.

He returned to Liberia to teach at the Methodist mission school. When his beloved teacher, Vivienne Gray, retired as principal, Warner was asked to fill her place. He accepted. Later, Rev. Gray retired as pastor of the mission church, and Warner was asked to fill his place, too. Again, he accepted.

"People called me Reverend, and I didn't feel qualified to be called that, so I went to Boston University School of Theology to learn to be a minister," said Warner.


After finishing seminary, he returned to Liberia, where he was pastor of churches and president of the College of West Africa until he was elected bishop. Warner thanks God for opening opportunities for him to minister in America when he could no longer serve in Liberia.

"Bishop Hardt brought me to Oklahoma in 1981 to be a mission interpreter for the Board of Global Ministries." From 1981 to 1987, Warner taught at OCU's Wimberley School of Religion and was pastor of OKC- Quayle church. He also served in other states.

Warner retired in 2004, and since then he and his wife have lived in Oklahoma City. During retirement, he has been interim pastor at OKC-Quayle, OKC-Wesley, and Mustang UMC. In June, he began serving at Leland Clegg UMC.

Has meeting this man Jesus really made a difference in Bennie Warner?

"Absolutely," he declared. "I have been through trials and tribulations, just like everyone else. But Jesus opened my eyes so I can look beyond my trials and tribulations and see the bigger picture. I see God working in all things, slowly but surely bringing good out of evil. So I have hope, and I'm happy."

Bishop Warner said his life is filled with joy because "when we meet Jesus and believe God is like Jesus assured us God is—that he loves us and is with us and for us—there's no reason for us to whine and be bitter and angry." 

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