

## Friends of West Africa: An Opportunity for Service

*Reed L. Clegg*

**T**he leadership of President Kimball was usually gentle but generated profound ripples for good. His enunciation in 1978 of the revelation granting the priesthood to the blacks may be characterized as a tidal wave. It has opened vistas for service heretofore impossible. This paper treats a specific program made possible by that revelation. It is embodied in a voluntary project to provide medical assistance through the Friends of West Africa — a non-profit charitable organization.

Our involvement in West Africa came in the conventional Church way, a call in December 1979 to my wife, Naomi, and me to serve as Special Representatives in West Africa. Special representatives are advance-guard, mature couples called to serve in a foreign country where the Church has not been officially recognized. Their assignment is to establish a foothold for legal recognition.

Comfortable in my profession as a healthcare executive, I murmured: “Why me?” Naomi reminded that I had long agonized over the status of the blacks in the Church and in our society. Here was an opportunity to put conviction into practice, she added.

The period of service for special representatives in West Africa was limited to one year due to hardship conditions. Naomi and I were asked to go alone to Ghana while the other two couples in our contingent were sent to Nigeria. We served eight months in Ghana, broken into two segments because of visa problems. We spent the interim in Nigeria where the Church was more established. Couples of the special-representative era from 1978–80 were Rendell and Rachel Mabey and Ted and Janath Cannon (the originals), Frank and

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Clara Martin, Victor and Eleanor Bartholomew, Lamar and Nyall Williams, Earl and Dixie Olsen, and us.

In the middle of our tenure a formal Africa West Mission was established which encompassed the two English-speaking countries of Ghana and Nigeria. These countries are geographically separated by two French-speaking countries, Benin and Togo, making life difficult for the new mission president and his wife, Bryan and LaNore Espenschied. We then became missionaries but were still instructed not to proselyte for new members. Our function was to consolidate the nascent organizational phase initiated by the Mabeys and Cannons. On their own volition, dozens of Ghanaians insisted on learning of "the true Church" and joining its ranks, however.

During this time three Mormon families stationed in Nigeria and Ghana served as havens of refuge. Dr. Bruce Knudsen, with his family, was employed by World Health Organization in a mosquito-abatement research project with headquarters in Enugu, Nigeria. The Knudsen family had a major influence on the location of the first special representatives in that city.

Phil and Sharon Hardy and family lived in Lagos, capitol of Nigeria, from whence he commuted to the oil fields in the Nigerian state of Cross River. The majority of the Church members in Nigeria lived in Cross River. Lowell and Shirley Diamond lived in the capital of Ghana, Accra, with their children. Lowell was employed by the Agency for International Development (AID) of the U.S. Government. Bud and Virginia DeMaster lived in Tema, Ghana, where he worked for Kaiser Aluminum. They were all bulwarks, especially to the special representatives who hungered for back-home companionship and an occasional American meal.

Earlier, during the 1960s and '70s, a few adventuresome scholars and commercial souls of Utah-Mormon background had ventured into West Africa for an academic year or so. Dr. Virginia Cutler was one of the early Utah educators to serve in Ghana and is still remembered fondly. Neff Smart, an educator and journalist, spent considerable time in Ghana. Victor and Eleanor Bartholomew, and Lorry and Gloria Rytting and family were in Nigeria at the same time on academic assignments. Brother Rytting, serving under the broad title of Branch President of Nigeria and Ghana for the International Mission of the Church performed what is believed to be the first baptism of a West African in his or her own country. Lon Merkley and family spent several years in Ghana as partner of a lumber business. And there were others, of course.

Anyone from a Western nation who spends more than a quick tourist safari in West Africa suffers from cultural shock. Economic deprivation was extreme when we were in Ghana. Food and other essentials were meager. In Ghana of 1980-81, meat was unobtainable except later on the rare visit of the mission president who would bring a canned ham or so. Scrawny chickens were going in the \$45 to \$50 bracket on the legitimate foreign exchange rate which, as emissaries of the Church, we were bound to support. Out in the bush you could purchase a "grasscutter," which resembled a very large rat. It may have provided a succulent meal but we never inquired the price. Milk was not available nor were other protein foods which accounts for the prevalence of