

Enduring bonds of companionships

By Janet Irwin
EKQ Writer

The recent tragedy in Haiti brought back memories of another time of trial there for long-time communicants of the Diocese of Kentucky. In the 1960's, the Anglican Communion was just beginning to develop the now familiar concept of a companion diocese, and Kentucky's companion was Haiti. Kentucky's bishop, the Rt. Rev. Gresham Marmion, was a man who loved the poor, the down-trodden and the exotic. No companion could have charmed him more, and few could have gotten him into more trouble.

During the six years of the dioceses' companion relationship, Haiti's dictator, "Papa Doc" Duvalier, expelled the Haitian diocese's bishop and Marmion went to the diocese to do confirmations for him for four consecutive years. In that time, Marmion said in a 1994 interview, he "confirmed and received over 4,000 persons in Haiti."

His widow, Doris Marmion, who at 99 lives in a Dudley Square townhouse at the Episcopal Church Home, questioned that number. "He wasn't there all that long," she said. Diocesan Secretary Kay Wilkinson, who with her friend Nina Racine, had visited Haiti in the 1960s, however, explained that the confirmations were done two at a time, the bishop reading the service from a phonetic French transcription written out by Mrs. Marmion and pinned to his stole as he used both hands to bless the confirmands.

While Marmion was kept busy with church business, riding a mule on "roads" that even today are barely more than tracks, other Kentucky Episcopalians who accompanied him to Haiti taught music, created agricultural programs, and helped the Haitian women in the diocese develop their painting and hand crafts to sell in the United States. Then as now, Haitians lived in bitter

poverty. Outside the cities, most were illiterate in both French and Creole, and school was only a dream for the children.

One of the Kentucky volunteers, Nina Racine, was a talented musician invited by Bishop Marmion to help at the elementary school founded by the Sisters of St. Margaret, an Episcopal convent in Port-au-Prince. The nuns wanted to expand the music program. Racine not only went, but she stayed, met and married her husband Julio, also on the school faculty. Nina's school friend Kay Wilkin-



Blessing two at a time, Bishop Gresham Marmion confirmed and received more than 4,000 Haitians. Photo made available by the Marmion family

son, visited often and also taught some of the summer students. The Racines worked in Haiti for many years before returning to Louisville.

Nina, working with Sister Anne Marie and others, built the music program so rapidly that they were able to bring a full orchestra to play at the General Convention held in Louisville in 1973.

The most enthusiastic support for Marmion's work in Haiti came from the people of St. Francis in the Fields. The Rev. Stephen Davenport III, a retired Episcopal priest and son of the second rector of St. Francis, was interviewed on the National Public Radio program *All Things Considered* during the intense days following the January earthquake. He explained that his 40-year connection with the Diocese of Haiti has kept him busily engaged working with and for people he loves.

Not only did Bishop Marmion confirm and receive members, he also was called upon to help vestries develop parish programs and expand their understanding of the Anglican disciplines they were adding to their fundamental beliefs based in Roman Catholicism and African nature religions.

His intimate knowledge of and rapport with the Haitians led diocesan leaders and Presiding Bishop John Hines to ask him to facilitate the election of Haiti's bishop. Given the mixture of politics and religion in the country, this was a most delicate task. "Papa Doc" had a hand-picked candidate to implement his plans for controlling the hearts as well as the minds of the Anglican community. The other candidate, Luc Garnier, Bishop Marmion understood, was a brave man who would uphold the Anglican teachings and do his best to help the poor.

Subtle and wise as always, Marmion insisted that the new bishop be chosen by secret ballot, according to canon law, and roped off the part of the cathedral for the electors. Needless to say, the Duvalier candidate did not win, and from that time on, Marmion was much on the minds of the Tonton Macoute (Duvalier's version of the Gestapo).

Mrs. Marmion reports that on the bishop's fourth trip to Haiti (the only one on which she accompanied him) the Kentuckians made every effort to keep a low profile. Even meetings with church dignitaries were held in out of the way

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