

## WHAT THEY ARE SAYING

From the village to the city and the world. That is the fascinating story of Emelia told in her lucid and inimitable style with no holds barred. A must-read for all ages. Engaging from start to finish.

*Albert Fiadjoe, Professor*

*Perseverance* is Dr. Timpo's compelling life story. It is not just a narrative of how Maa's little girl grew up to play with the big boys on the world stage. It gives us an insight into the social history of Ghana, the terrors of "working while black" in America and the challenges of a minority operator within the international civil service. Written in excellent easy prose, Emelia's candor and sincerity makes this book a page-turner.

*Victor Essien, Rector & Professor of Law, Nyansapo College, Ghana & Principal, Law Office of Victor Essien, New York*

This book is a rich collection of well documented memoirs, all beautifully woven together like a tapestry. The author takes pains to bring out the essence of perseverance in that journey. A great enchanting memoir worth reading!

*Vicky Wireko-Andoh, Journalist/Columnist  
Daily Graphic, Ghana's leading newspaper*

This book is a catechism for how to transform adversity to triumph. Emelia writes with aplomb. There is no life blemish that is smeared over, no subject that is taboo. This biography is a must-read for people of every background.

*Louis Kofi Essandoh, MD, FACC,  
MedStar Heart and Vascular Institute*

Story after compelling story unfolds as the author reveals, with endearing detail, her growing-up years in a small town in Ghana. Until she was 30, married with two children and a Ph.D., her horizons were limited only by her ambition and persistence. Then, because she was black and in the United States, many doors were slammed shut. How she succeeded, by reinventing herself at every turn, is a tale told with warmth, humor, and honesty.

*Barbara Figge Fox, Journalist*

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A vivid picture of a rich life, with a rare window onto growing up in Ghana before Independence, through many peripatetic years in New York, Geneva, Rome, Namibia, Ethiopia, and other locales. Emelia has a sharp eye for detail and a loving view of her home country and its tapestry of cultures. This memoir memorializes one life, with its ups and downs, hard work, luck, and perseverance. I enjoyed seeing details of when our lives crossed paths and learning more about her earlier life.

*Jessica Vapnek*  
*Faculty Director, UC Law San Francisco*

Dr. Emelia Timpo's book provides a front row seat to experience the life of one of Ghana's most accomplished international civil servants. From Kumasi, through Wesley Girls High School, Cornell and Rutgers, to a glittering UN career in Windhoek, Addis Ababa, Geneva and New York, Auntie Emelia has served the world with distinction. She and her beautiful family have every right to be proud of her achievements.

*Dr. Victor Asare Bampoe,*  
*Head, Global Programme Partnerships, UNAIDS*

What a jewel and a masterpiece. It guides the inquisitive reader through a life journey with a humble beginning and passed through hills and valleys, crossed rivers, lakes, and mighty oceans and on this side of the Atlantic. It is certainly a must-read.

*Prof. Kwaku Armah, retired educator*

A riveting story that reflects the value inherent in the then Ghanaian educational system and the equally effective socialisation processes that have produced a selfless and hardworking international civil servant. A must read for all who are desirous of rekindling excellence and the can-do spirit among the youth, notably the girl child. *Ayekoo.*

*Alexander Archine,*  
*Managing Director, OAK Financial Services Limited and Dean,*  
*Nyansapo College, Ghana.*

# **PERSEVERANCE**

## **A MEMOIR**

**ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY FROM GHANA  
TO THE UNITED NATIONS & BEYOND**

**EMELIA TIMPO**



**ADINKRA**

Publications

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to the United Nations & Beyond  
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The events told in this book are the author's memories of events.

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*To Maa, a constant source of strength and love,  
and to  
Awoye, Emefa, Edem, and Albert who have enriched my life beyond  
measure*

## A NOTE ON SPELLING

*British English and American English are not always the same language. Spelling, in particular, changes from one country to another. I have, for the most part, used international or British spellings. I have tried for consistency throughout the book, but at times the spelling may switch from one style to another.*

# FOREWORD

When my wife, Kadija, delivered our first child in August 1992 in Brooklyn, New York, I had planned to be there but, due to the exigencies of my work, I was unable to travel at the time.

At very short notice, with a single phone call to Emelia, she and her husband, Albert Timpo, stood in for me, and brought my wife and the new baby home. A week later, in conformity with Ghanaian custom and tradition, they hosted, in their New Jersey home, a Moslem naming ceremony for our daughter, Shakira, with my family and friends in the United States in attendance.

One of our mutual friends, Daniel Aidoo Mensah, never ceases to repeat how he met the Timpos. He had lost all his travel documents at Geneva Airport and could not board his flight back to Accra after a business trip to Switzerland. Feeling disoriented and helpless, he contacted a gentleman he had met with earlier in the week. Knowing Daniel was a Ghanaian, he linked him up with Albert Timpo. He was sympathetic to Daniel's plight and went to the airport to bring him home. At home, Emelia and her daughter Emefa warmly received him, made him very comfortable and assured him every effort would be made to get new travel documents and flight bookings to return home. Indeed, she then contacted the Embassy of Ghana in Bern. He stayed with them for the week until Daniel's new passport was processed to enable his return to Accra.

I recount these two anecdotes as a teaser to the remarkable story of an incredibly generous and selfless lady whose autobiography you are about to read. It is a fascinating account of perseverance, humility, grit, "a can-do spirit," academic excellence, mother and child bonding and service to humanity through empathy for the underprivileged and marginalised. The book is also a testimony of faith, discipline, integrity and tolerance of diversity.

Emelia was not born with a silver spoon in her mouth. On the other hand, she was not born into poverty. After all, her mother was a certified midwife with her own practice in addition to owning a bakery, which supplied the leading Department stores in Kumasi. Her father held a Ph.D. and subsequently became the first Ghanaian Vice-Chancellor of one of the three universities in the country, the

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University of Cape Coast.

The outstanding aspect of her childhood and upbringing, though, was through the towering role of her mother and many relatives, particularly the female role models and motivators who embedded her in a community of love, care and guidance. Emelia's mother placed a high premium on her education. She invested in sending her to boarding schools even at a very tender age. This laid a solid and sound foundation to assure Emelia's academic progression through highly competitive schools in later years. She attended Wesley Girls High School, Ghana's premier Girls Secondary School, the prestigious Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, the elite Ivy-league Cornell University and the renowned Rutgers University where she obtained a Ph.D. in Plant Physiology.

Another impressive feature running through the book is Emelia's humility. She has been a brilliant student throughout, either the best or always with the best in her class. And during her professional career, she has also been a high performer who goes beyond the call of duty to deliver on whatever she takes up. Yet she is far from boastful or engaging in self-praise. Rather, she constantly acknowledges and appreciates the support of her teachers, kind relatives, mentors, friends and colleagues who have contributed to her impressive success, in one way or the other, along the pathway of her life.

When reading these pages, one cannot but conclude that Emelia has led a truly fulfilling life. She seized every opportunity that came before her and made good use of it in a methodical and forward-thinking way. She planned carefully, applied herself diligently, did not look for short-cuts and earned the confidence, admiration and trust of all. In the process, she built a stable home, raised three beautiful children and made her mother, who had sacrificed so much for her, proud of her achievements in her personal and professional life.

In her life journey, it emerges clearly that for Emelia, it was never meant to be smooth sailing. She learnt that from a very young age from her family elders, the African way. In her case, it was from her mother, grandmother and countless aunts who helped to ground her in the values and ethics of hard work, honesty, resilience and

facing every adversity with hope and confidence.

It was this spirit that lifted her up and kept her going on Jubilee Hill with an indifferent father; after Wesley Girls High School when she failed to get into medical school; facing racism in America when with a Ph.D. she could not find a job commensurate with her rich credentials or even back home in Ghana, failing to be integrated into “the system” after returning from the diaspora very highly qualified, with rich and diversified experiences and determined to contribute one’s quota to nation building. Not to mention the challenges of living the “nomadic life” of an international public servant, especially a mother raising children at the same time.

In the end, it is a truly inspiring book. A story of a humble Ghanaian-American, which contains many lessons for each and every one of us.

I wish you a pleasant reading.

*Mohamed Ibn Chambas,  
Former President of ECOWAS Commission and Former  
United Nations Undersecretary-General. African Union  
Representative for Silencing the Guns in Africa  
Accra, Ghana*



# CHAPTER 1

Everyone has a story to tell. These stories are filled with love, hope, challenges, opportunities, and regrets. My story starts when I'm a little girl, maybe two or three or four years old, growing up in a suburb of Kumasi in the Ashanti region of Ghana. With a population of 108,000, Kumasi in 1951 was a relatively small city although it was the second largest city in the country besides Accra, the capital. Almost everyone knew everyone else, and communities were formed based on churches attended. Being a vibrant commercial center in the center of the country, it was inhabited by different groups of people from other regions, cities, and villages who were looking for new opportunities and growth. A number of suburbs were named after the predominant groups living there. We had an Ashanti New Town with a predominantly Ashanti population and Fanti New Town where migrating Fantis from the coastal regions congregated. Zongo had the Hausas, Dagombas, and Fulanis from the northern regions.

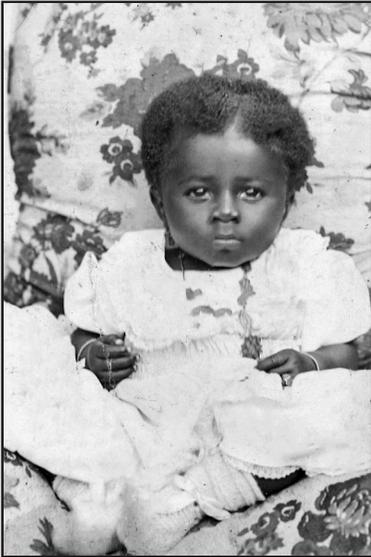
I do not remember all the details, but I know while growing up in Suame, then a small suburb of Kumasi, I was happy and had a good childhood surrounded by numerous family and family friends. Our home was constantly full of people and activities. My mom, Agnes Turkson, was a certified midwife with her own private practice on the ground floor of Papa Kofi Ntia's house.

When I was two or three years old, we lived in a two-bedroom apartment on the top floor of the house. At the time, it was the only building with more than one story in Old Suame, on the main road from Kumasi to Tamale. This was a major North-South road, a busy thoroughfare filled with timber trucks carrying three heavy logs each from the interior of the forests in the Ashanti region on their way to the only national harbor at the time, in Takoradi, for export.

There were always numerous small passenger trucks plying the Tamale route, laden with loads of personal goods and merchandise purchased by traders and travelers from Kumasi to the shops in the northern part of the country. With the narrow thoroughfare, a single lane in each direction, one had to be careful crossing the road. The noise was overpowering, with cars swerving

and horns blowing constantly to alert other drivers and pedestrians to move out of the way. The air was constantly filled with the rich brown dust from vehicles that sometimes drove on the untarred sections of the road to avoid the potholes. In the midst of all this were pedestrians moving briskly to work, running errands, and the endless stream of sellers balancing their goods on the trays they carried on their heads, running to and from car to car, selling as much as quickly as they could. Thus, everyone appreciated the calm of the evening when the traffic slowed to a normal pace.

Papa Kofi Ntia's house was home. This building housed at least fifteen different families. On the top floor next to our apartment was Maame Ekuia with her husband and son, Brobbey, originally from Offinso, thirty miles from Kumasi. Also upstairs was Papa



*Emelia at about  
one year old*

Tuffour and his wife, Maame Adwoa Ago. Papa Tuffour was a driver plying passengers from Kumasi to Offinso. He would often come home totally drunk, and we would hear the screams coming from his room as he fought with his wife. We wondered what was happening and often sneaked by the adults to hear their conversations about the constant quarrels emanating from Papa Tuffour's drinking. Apau from Kyekyewere lived alone so his drinking did not cause any havoc for the people in the house.

Right at the entrance to the house on the lower floor was Papa Ensunyameye (his name means "there is nothing God cannot do")

and his family. His wife, Maame Serwah, was one of the favorites in the house. She owned a chop bar (a local restaurant) just outside of the house. It was always teeming with customers coming to buy her delicious peanut butter soup and *abitee*, a carbohydrate dish made from dried cassava and molded into large round balls surrounded with soup. We could not escape the awesome aroma of the hot

pepper and ginger seasoned peanuts emanating from the small unfinished shed of a chop bar filling the entire house. She would often send some of us children to the nearby market for one type of produce or the other and would always ensure she left some soup for us to enjoy as a treat.

The story goes that originally the Suame house belonged to Papa Ensunyameye. Due to financial problems with the family's cocoa farm in Offinso, he had to sell the house and rent a unit for himself and his family. The financial responsibilities fell on his wife who worked day and night to support the family.

Also living in the house were Maame Akosua and her family. Maame Akosua's two daughters, Nana Yaa and Afia Sarpong, were my playmates. Nana Yaa was my age. We both attended Practice School together and would always walk together in the morning to New Suame to fetch buckets of water for our baths before leaving for school. Nana Yaa and I would fetch our water from the nearby township public tap, about three hundred yards from the house. We would stop and play with our neighborhood friends along the way. With all the playing and splashing, we would always come back with our buckets only half full. For us children, getting a bucket of water and gathering together outside at dawn or dusk to bathe was the norm, and it was a lot of fun. We would share jokes and gossip both from school and at home and entertain ourselves. For those with small buckets of water, the challenge was to ensure it was enough to wash away all the soap suds we loved to create.

Maame French, a tenant, got her name due to her trading between Kumasi and francophone Abidjan on Ivory Coast, now Cote



*Emelia's mother,  
Agnes Turkson, in Suame*

d'Ivoire. She would spend weeks buying materials and other supplies from the main Kejetia market, packing and organizing them into bales and carting them off in the middle of the night to Abidjan to sell. On her return she would bring perfumes, jewelry, and ready-made clothes to sell to her numerous local customers in Kumasi. There were never enough for her customers so she ensured she made the trip at least once a month. For us children in the house, the packages of foreign biscuits she would bring back were something we looked forward to. We would make sure we were close by her door when she came home from her errands in town so she could not possibly forget about us when she traveled.

Another tenant Maa had a particular fondness for was Maame Kyekye from Komenda in the Central region, along the main road between Cape Coast and Takoradi. She lived in one of the downstairs rooms with her two daughters, Olofro and Odofroko. The two made an interesting pair. Olofro, the older one, was quiet and submissive to a fault and always stayed close to home. The younger, Odofroko, was extremely hardworking and a different tale from her sister. She used to get up at dawn to be one of the first traders to arrive at the Ayigya market on the other end of town, on the Accra Road, to sell pigs' feet at her popular stand.

One evening I was awakened suddenly by a lot of noise coming from downstairs. I woke up groggily but soon jumped up when I heard a lot of commotion. What could be happening so late in the evening? In the midst of the commotion, Maame Kyekye was wailing inconsolably in the open courtyard of the house. What could be going on?

"Odofroko is gone with that murderer—what will become of her?" Maame Kyekye cried. Doors were pulled open, and sleeping couples rushed out with their clothes tied just above their chests. Everyone ran from their rooms to find out what had happened. Of course, children were not allowed to hear the details, but looking through the throng of women around Maame Kyekye, we overheard her telling the adults of the sudden disappearance of Odofroko.

"My daughter is gone, why is this happening to me after all my struggles?" Maame Kyekye kept asking. She had heard from her fellow market sellers that the girl had run away with a man whose girlfriend had been killed by armed robbers under mysterious

circumstances. Clearly, there was some intrigue going on which we did not fully comprehend but we knew something major had happened to her daughter. We all surmised that having made a bit of money from her market sales, she had decided to move out of her mother's reach and discipline.

The Suame house was never a dull place. Papa Akowia from the Brong Ahafo region was a driver plying a passenger transport bus to several destinations in the country. His two wives stayed in separate homes not far from our house. He never failed, though, to bring home one concubine after another from each of his distant travels. One of these concubines, a Krobo woman Maame Akosua from Somanya in the Eastern region, eventually became his third and favorite wife. She was a beautiful woman, always with her hair impeccably styled and fashionably dressed, and we overheard grownups talking about the beauty of the women from the Krobo area. She was always impeccably dressed, and we would stare at her in awe of how pretty she looked. She settled in and set up a provisions shop outside the house. Her shop was always full, some just coming through to admire her beauty. The room under the stairs was for Maame Adwoa Gyaama and her mother who had a stall at the Kejetia market selling saucepans.

There were others who lived in this house, too, with only one bathroom and a toilet upstairs and another set downstairs. I never heard of any quarrels or saw any queues behind the toilet or bathroom. There was a public toilet not far from the house, and we would always run in that direction when we had to.

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The Shell gas station across the street from our house was the center of evening activities. It was the main station for the Suame



*Emelia at about  
age three*

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bread sellers grouped together and gossiping about the neighborhood's affairs, their loaves of bread sitting in pans supported on their heads. To see them stop mid-sentence and quickly jump up to run to any vehicle that pulled into the gas station to sell their loaves without ever disturbing the bundles on their heads was a sight to behold.

At the time not many homes had electricity so the lights at the gas station were a magnet in the evenings. Neighborhood youth would congregate around the *kelewele* (fried plantain spiced with ginger, hot pepper, and onions) sellers, and old men would sit under the nearby trees smoking their pipes, sipping their Club or Star branded beers, and enjoying the evening cooler weather.



*Maame Yaa in Suame  
about 2000*

By night it was the Shell station for the community, and by day it was Mr. Forduor's shop. It was the main shop in Suame for fabrics, electrical wares, and most household needs. Being right on the main road, everyone passing would stop by to greet Mr. Forduor. He was one of the most affluent people in the town, besides the three Gyamfi brothers, and was highly respected. His shop therefore was a center of social life and gathering.

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Growing up I knew I had two moms. The house next to our building was owned by Papa Kwesi Darkwa, then the secretary of the Asantehene, the eminent ruler of the Ashanti Kingdom, Otumfuor Nana Osei Tutu Agyeman Prempeh II. With his position in the Manhyia palace, Papa Darkwa was a renowned member of society and was held in very high esteem. His first wife, Maame Yaa Mabre, had no children, and she was Maa's best friend. He had eight children by his second wife, and most of them lived in the house. The older ones, sister Baby and Joe, were

married and lived with their families. The younger ones still in school stayed with Maame Yaa and their dad. Unlike our house, all the people in Mr. Darkwa's house were relatives—children or cousins.

Maame Yaa's stepchildren were not always pleasant to her. She would often come crying to Maa to tell her one story or another about the stepchildren and to complain about her husband not standing by her when the children misbehaved. She would spend a lot of time with Maa and, in the process, took a particular interest in me. She had her own stall at the Kejetia market and would go each day to sell her wares. Her stall was filled wall to wall with traditional Dutch wax print fabrics and scarves imported from Holland for sale.

While Maa was busy with her maternity home, Maame Yaa took me under her wing as if I was her own. Off I went to the market with her and would stay all day until we returned in the evening. I loved being in the market, playing with other children who had come with their parents. The Kejetia market has traditionally been the largest outdoor market in Ghana, and we used to claim, "even West Africa!" The market bustled with people pushing and shoving through the crowds. From the carpark to the stalls, the numerous pushcarts conveying all types of merchandise fanned out in all directions and took up a lot of space. It took forever to move through them to where you needed to go. Everywhere you turned, people were screaming at the owners and their pushcarts to get out of the way. The noise was always deafening.

Maame Yaa's stall was past the stench of the section with the butchers and the fowl sellers. You would have to hold your breath and move as fast as you could to get through that section. As is true in markets throughout that part of the world, stalls were arranged in sections selling the same items or in the same category. Thus, whether you were in the market to buy vegetables, meat, cleaning supplies, or building supplies, you knew where to go and could plan your day and would readily find the particular section of the market, thus shopping with utmost efficiency.

Each group of traders organized themselves into associations to support each other. They knew each other's families and issues of concern. The fellow traders realized how special I had made life for

Maame Yaa, and I was completely accepted by all of them and pampered with all I needed. I remember my daily lunch of roasted ripe plantain and peanuts, sometimes *ofam* (baked pounded plantain seasoned with hot pepper and ginger). Lunch was always followed by my nap. Maame Yaa's friends would shower me with presents, put me on their laps, and sing for me. They would braid and re-braid my hair and ensure I had plenty of toys to occupy me while I was in the market. If anyone was going shopping or running an errand in other parts of the market, they would take me along. I had a wonderful time with all the women making me feel very special, and also important. We would generally leave the market early by 3:30 p.m. to get home, have a bath, and then eat the evening meal of *fufu* (pounded green plantain and cassava) and soup. On weekdays it would be light vegetable soup, with the palm nut soup and peanut butter soup reserved for Saturdays and Sundays.

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A day came when my mom said I would no longer go to the market with Maame Yaa. I had to start kindergarten at the Practice School down the road, by the main Suame roundabout. The school was a fifteen-minute walk from the house at the intersection with the Suame Police Station and the Water and Sewerage Company. I dreaded parting with Maame Yaa and insisted I did not need to go to any school. I cried for days, and my mom kept assuring me that I would enjoy it once I started. I did not believe her. How was I going to spend the day without my Maame Yaa? For the first time my fussing was not enough for my mom to relent and give up.

The eventful first day of school arrived, and Maa dressed me, cheering me up each step of the way. I was not happy with my new yellow and green uniform. I was not happy with my brand-new brown Bata Clarks walking shoes and dainty white socks. Maa thought I would be happy since I had seen other schoolchildren wearing those same leather shoes with sturdy soles and straps across the front of the feet. I had yearned for them. The fact that they had come from overseas made them so special. Now I had them and was still fussing. I cried all the way to school. The first week of school was both fun and miserable. I had a lot of fun with my newfound friends outside of the Kejetia market yet missed the play time at the market. Maame Yaa did not go to the market for the first two weeks I

was in school, worried I might get hurt outside her watchful eyes.

Thus, the first two weeks I would get home from school and go straight to Maame Yaa's house where she was waiting for me. I would jump into her warm embrace and fill her in on how my day had been. I would generally spend the rest of the afternoon with her, joining her in having her regular evening meal of *fufu* and whatever version of light soup had been prepared before going home to my mom's house. In an Ashanti home, you would not have eaten dinner unless you had *fufu* so I was guaranteed my own big bowl of *fufu* with her every evening. The light soup can sometimes be made with *prekese* (a flowering plant said to have excellent medicinal properties) or with green vegetables to make *ebunebunu* (*green leaf soup*) and a whole range of other variations to give some variety. The *fufu* normally is made with green plantain and cassava, cooked and pounded into a pulp. When in season, it can be made from yams or from cocoyam. This ensured there was variety in both the type of *fufu* as well as the soup. Even then I marveled at the fact that we would eat *fufu* each and every day. I yearned for variety so I would eat the *fufu* in Maame Yaa's house and then go home to eat rice or whatever else Maa had cooked. We did not eat *fufu* in my mother's house; you would only see it prepared when we had guests who wanted it. As a Fanti, *kenkey* (fermented corn, partially cooked, and then wrapped with plantain leaves and boiled till fully cooked) was our staple with stew, fish, or meat and was more a regular dish as well as several variations of rice and *ampesi* (boiled tubers, plantain, cocoyam).

Kumasi is in the center of the forest region of Ghana, with heavy annual rainfall during the long rainy seasons. It is known as the Garden City due to the lushness of the plant life and the numerous gardens and parks in most communities. Most houses, gardens, and compounds are planted with evergreen trees such as the green-leaved neem trees and the Flamboyant trees with their broad spreading, umbrella-like canopies and their beautiful orange flowers. In the afternoon the men would sit under the Flamboyant's shade playing board games. Others had fruit trees including mango, almond, and papaya. In the more affluent areas of the city where the compounds were much larger, beautiful flower beds burst with the

color of lovely bougainvillea and hibiscus hedges along the walls surrounding the massive homes.

As children we loved to take the short walk to the Odeon Cinema on weekends to watch Indian and Zorro films, or just idly walk around the nearby racecourse with friends to while away time. On Sundays we would dress up in our frilly outfits and get in a taxi for services at the Central Methodist Church, in Adum, in the center of Kumasi, next to the prison. We always wondered why there would be a prison next to the church, but it was not for us to discern, only to note and marvel. We knew the church well since it was also the same church that all *Mmofraturu* students attended the Sunday after each annual Speech Day celebrations. The enormous pipe organ with its deep resounding tone provided an entirely different sound to the hymns we all knew and memorized regularly at school. We grew up as happy children, feeling extremely secure, loved, and admired by family, friends, and the community at large. We were blessed with an inner sense of peace and contentment.