

Sylvia McLean

Sylvia McLean is a retired nurse who was awarded the Queen's Medal for Nursing in 2013 for her contribution to nursing.

Retired nurse and mother to three children, Sylvia McLean came to the UK from Barbados in December 1966.



She said, "At nineteen, I arrived in England on 23 December, on a cold, damp, miserable day and went straight to East Birmingham Hospital to start my training to be a nurse. My dad had a friend whose daughter had come to England to train as a nurse and so it was that I took the exams in June 1966 in Barbados to see if I was academically capable of becoming a nurse. I didn't know anything about what I was coming to."

A church-goer at home in Barbados, Sylvia befriended Yvonne Carmichael, a young

woman who was to become a life-long friend. Sylvia said, "I went to church with Yvonne and we came straight out again. No-one noticed us. I think if you are a strong person, you know what you want from life. If I were a different kind of person, I might be angry or bitter. I have been to churches where people have ignored me and I think that can still happen today. You want to be part of the church community like Deanery Synod, but some people won't speak to you. They will not embrace you; it's like you are not part of the team."

Having worked in Hackney and at Barts Hospital in London, Sylvia moved to Bexleyheath seventeen years ago. She said, "Barts was very English! Most people were Monday to Friday people with upper middle class, white, English parents. I was a State Registered Nurse (SRN) in Hackney, then a Registered General Nurse (RGN) and midwife in Sidcup, which was also very middle class and white English. Hackney was very multi-cultural and the staff were lovely. I didn't like working as a midwife and being responsible for mothers and babies – I was better with broken bones and cardiac arrests."

Nursing today has an emphasis on academia that it hasn't always enjoyed. Sylvia said, "The academic bit doesn't make you a good nurse. As a senior sister I can say that's more about writing reports. To nurse well, you need to love people and care about them. All the nurses with poor standards used to be sent to me because I had very high standards in my nursing. I would visit each patient every night. Common sense is very important. My standards are very high."

In 2013 Sylvia was awarded the Queen's Medal for Nursing. Her high standards did not go unnoticed!

Sylvia's faith has always been important to her, even when she was not attending church in the UK regularly. She explained, "When I was training for nursing and right up until I had my daughter Sabrina, I did not go to church because it was not welcoming but that did not stop me from knowing our Heavenly



Father. We were taught how to pray from a very young age. I was confirmed around the age of ten. I came here to continue this greatness, but it wasn't here. I wanted Sabrina to be christened. In Barbados, this would happen at around three months of age, and there would be no choice about it. Here, when Sabrina was about three months old, I went to one vicar and he said he wouldn't christen her and said I had to go to church. I did that for about three months and had her christened and after that, I went every now and again. Then, in 1980, my son Graham was born and we were still not regular church-goers. My mum came over for a year in 1979 and she was horrified that we didn't go to church because we had been brought up in the Anglican tradition."

Sylvia's mum said that the children needed to know God and that the Lord's Prayer was not enough for them. By now, Sabrina was at school and involved with the Girl Guides and became more involved with the church that way. Sylvia said, "From about 1980 I was involved with church again, although I had been worshipping at a Pentecostal church because in nursing, most of the others

were Nigerian and this is where they worshipped. We gathered sometimes at lunchtime too, and talked about God and read from the Bible. We engaged with a lady called Vicky – now a pastor and she said, 'if God is with you, who can be against you? Walk in this place (the hospital) with authority.' Those strong words kept me going."

Soon in the habit of praying anytime she needed to, Sylvia said, "Tell God what you want. Ask Him. Do that before you do anything. That helped me build up a confidence in my nursing. You have a choice. You can be angry or not be angry – talk to God about it."

Part of a team chosen to open a new hospital, Sylvia was responsible for training others. She said, "I wondered, 'why me?' but also recognised that this was an opportunity and I should thank God for it. I never questioned my faith during my career. Once my son Jamie started school, he was friendly with lots of the children, and I started to go to a Methodist Church once a month. Then one Saturday morning, the phone rang and

a friend from years before was visiting. I told her I had struggled to find a church, and she suggested that we go to the Church of England church in Erith. She suggested we went together and we did – I felt very welcomed by the church wardens and others."

Sylvia feels that some people are not open to others from a different background, but she is sanguine about it. She said, "Dealing with it wasn't easy but the priest said that we are all children of God, he really got the message out there. I got involved with the Parochial Church Council (PCC) and reading at church – I told him there are the things I want to do – this is what God wants me to do. I need to welcome people to church and get them involved. If you are a child of God, you want to do the right thing. Race is there. Most of my friends are white and there were no black role models for me. I became the role model."

Made redundant in 1996, Sylvia worked in a care home for a while, using her nursing skills to the full. She eventually returned to nursing, working as an agency nurse. She also gave her free time willingly to be a school governor, and supported the school mentoring programme, working with young people who were able but under-achieving. She said, "I took on the monitoring position at a school for boys, and retired from that in 2008."

Always busy, Sylvia said, I am now retired and I love it! I have kept my voluntary activities and am part of the Bexley Afro-Caribbean Association. I was a school governor for two schools in the end, and part of the youth reoffending team as well. I read at church as one of those on the rota, and I am still part of the PCC and I am on the social committee – I like being with other people. It's a big part of my life."