

OBITUARY: Dr S.M.CHOWDHURY, 20 March 1934 – 31 October 2010

It was with great sadness and deep grief that CHC heard the news of the death of Dr SwehlaMong (S.M.) Chowdhury in the early hours of 31st October 2010 while he was undergoing treatment at Christian Medical College Hospital, Vellore, South India, after a month of illness at his home in Chandraghona. As all who are familiar with CHC will know, Dr S.M. Chowdhury was for many years Medical Superintendent of the Christian Hospital and Christian Leprosy Centre in Chandraghona. After his retirement in 2002, he took on the role of official Advisor to CHC, which he held up to the time of his death.

Dr S.M.Chowdhury was descended from the family of the King of Banderban. His father had converted to Christianity as a young man, and became Pastor of the Hill Tracts. His mother completed "Guru training" and joined a Baptist Mission Primary School as a teacher. Dr SM Chowdhury also completed his primary education in the Baptist Mission Primary School before going to India to complete High School and College. After his graduation from Dhaka Medical College Hospital in 1960, Dr Chowdhury joined the Christian Hospital, Chandraghona as a Medical Officer. His main interest was Ophthalmology and shortly after his marriage to his wife Proshun, he spent a year in Glasgow undertaking specialist training in this area. After his return to Chandraghona, he worked alongside many UK doctors and specialists who came via the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) for short or longterm missions. In 1965 he became the first national Medical Superintendent of CHC, a position he held until 2002 when he handed over his responsibilities to his son, Dr. M.Stephen Chowdhury, who is the present Medical Director of CHC and CLC.

Throughout his life, Dr S.M. Chowdhury was a committed Christian who believed firmly in helping the disadvantaged, regardless of race, colour, creed or ethnicity. He held many religious positions locally in Chandraghona and in the Hill Tracts, including being an authorised Pastor, Marriage Registrar, President of the Chandraghona Baptist Church Sangha, and Pastoral Superintendent for many years. His compassion, wisdom and quiet integrity was respected by all and many people of all castes, ethnic groups and religions, have benefited from his advice and assistance over the years. He never refused to help anyone if he believed their cause or request was made in good faith. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in "Community Service" from the World Round Table, USA in 1989.

Dr Chowdhury was a man of faith, who believed deeply that God had started the work at Chandraghona and would protect it during times of hardship. He led the Hospitals during times of transition from missionary leadership, through wars, civil commotions and natural disasters, including the cyclone of 1970 and the 1971 War of Liberation. He was responsible for saving thousands of lives through his actions during these two periods in particular. After the Liberation war he became the first President of the Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha and led the movement forward. He was a skilful diplomat and politician and served his country well. The effortless way he understood the mindset of foreigners who spent time in Chandraghona was always commented upon. During his lifetime, he became a prominent Christian leader in the wider national and international fields, serving office in many organisations including being President of the National Council of Churches in Bangladesh (NCCB), President of the Bangladesh Baptist Church Sangha (BBCS), Chairman of the Christian Medical Association of Bangladesh (CMAB) and Chairman of the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB). He played a key role in promoting ecumenical solidarity in South Asia and was Executive Director of the Asian Friendship Society of Bangladesh (SEVA-AFS Bangladesh) as well as being a Founder member and President of the South Asian Council of Churches (SACC) and member of the Presidium several other international church organizations.

All of these activities required him to spend a lot of time away from Chandraghona, but he was a man who loved to travel. He enjoyed visiting CHC partner organizations in Japan, Thailand, Nepal and many other countries and continents. Despite this, he still found time to participate in many local activities and organizations. He never forgot his mother's commitment to education, and it was his belief that a good education, especially in the early years, was a privilege that should be available to all. During his lifetime in Chandraghona, he supported and held official roles in the governing bodies of many schools and colleges.

Perhaps the letter below which was written by Dr Bryan Whitty of Glasgow, who served with Dr S.M.Chowdhury in CHC during the 1971 war, reflects the whole picture of this man better than any of the facts written above:

Farewell Dear Friend

I give thanks for our friendship over the years.

You have achieved so much in your life.

You released staff to help in the Great Cyclone of 1970.

You were King and Counsellor to all, both high and low, rich and poor, during the Liberation War of 1971.

You were friend and colleague to me when Dr. Michael Flowers left and we had to keep the hospital going.

You gave sight to the blind.

You served your Lord and Master including being President of The Baptist Union of Bangladesh.

You wanted that to go beyond to the South East Asian Conference of Churches and the World Council of Churches, and served in that capacity right up to the end.

You have had a remarkable life. So much more to tell.

May you now know the Presence and Peace of your Lord.

Dr. Bryan Whitty

(November 2010)

Dr S.M.Chowdhury was active right up to the month before his death. When he became ill in September 2010, he had just returned from a visit to Thailand, which he undertook without any hint that he was feeling unwell. For most of his last illness, he was at home with Proshun, his loving and supportive wife of almost 50 years, and his two sons Stephen and Victor. It was perhaps fitting that he was attended throughout this time by a group of student nurses from the Nursing Training Institute at CHC, who showed a quality of care, compassion, professionalism and dedication which exemplified all that Dr S.M. Chowdhury himself believed in. The quality of the intensive medical treatment and advice provided personally by his son Dr. Stephen at home, and the successful but arduous last journey arranged by Stephen for his father and mother to get better help in Vellore was described by the CMC Vellore doctors as nothing short of miraculous. But despite all these efforts, Dr S.M. Chowdhury passed away peacefully to the arms of his Lord after only a few days in Vellore.

Dr Chowdhury was buried in Chandraghona on 4th November 2010, at a service attended by thousands from all ranks and walks of life. He is deeply mourned by his wife Proshun, sons Dr Stephen and Victor, his daughter Dr Angela and family, as well as by his grandchildren, all his other relations, his extensive wider family of the Chittagong Hill Tracts - a people he served with dedication throughout his life - and his many international friends. He will remain in their hearts forever.

"He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Revelation 21:4



Dr SWEHLAMONG CHOWDHURY 1934-2010
of Chandraghona and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

"..And in God's house for evermore, my dwelling-place shall be." Psalm 23

Obituary by Dr Evelyn Dykes and Dr M. Stephen Chowdhury, December 2010