

The Right Rev Hassan Dehqani-Tafti

The first Persian Anglican bishop who left Iran during the 1979 Revolution after persecution and an attempt to kill him

The Right Rev Hassan Dehqani-Tafti was for 29 years the Anglican bishop in Iran.

His life and ministry were affected forever by the Iranian Revolution, as a consequence of which he lived from late 1979 as an exile from his homeland. For ten years, out of deep conviction and with the strong encouragement of the church in Iran, he remained its bishop. His devotion to his people and his strong views on the nature of ministry caused him to agonise over separation from his flock. Nevertheless, the advice of friends in and out of the diocese prevailed, and he was spared for a wider ministry that touched many lives.

Hassan Dehqani-Tafti was born in 1920, the second son of Muhammad and Sekineh. Theirs was a modest home, his father chiefly involved in the making of traditional cloth shoes. His mother had trained as a nurse with missionaries in Yazd. There she became a Christian. Back home in Taft, she ran the village dispensary, but died when her second son was barely 5 years old.

It had been his mother's wish that the young Hassan should have a Christian education, and so he went to school in Yazd. From there he moved to Isfahan and to the Stuart Memorial College where the principal was his William J. Thompson, later bishop in Iran – and father-in-law.

In the early days in Isfahan he was strongly influenced by a talented head of school, a convert from Sunni Islam, a linguist and writer of poetry. He helped Dehqani-Tafti to see “how a strong and intelligent Christianity could truly belong in and with an authentic Persian culture”.

While at the Stuart Memorial College Dehqani-Tafti became a Christian. Baptised when he was 18, he took the Christian name Barnabas. Moving to Tehran, he took his degree at the university in July 1943. He offered himself to the diocese for ministry, but he was advised to get some experience of the world first. Military service was obligatory and, as an army officer, he became secretary-interpreter to an American lieutenant-colonel. Once more offering himself to the diocese, he became a youth worker and secretary of the Christian literature committee.

There followed two years' training for the ministry at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, immediately before which he attended the Second World Christian Youth conference in Oslo. There he was gripped by a concern for Christian unity which remained a fundamental element for the rest of his ministry, exercised in both the Middle East and, more widely, through the World Council of Churches.

Returning from Cambridge, Dehqani-Tafti was made deacon in 1949 and ordained priest the next year. Based for ten years at St Luke's Church, Isfahan, he undertook work from time to time in several other places before moving to St Paul's Church, Tehran. His stay there was short since, on Bishop Thompson's resignation in 1960, he was elected bishop and was consecrated in St George's, Jerusalem, in April 1961. Returning to Isfahan, he was installed in St Luke's Church which remained his base for nearly 20 years.

As the first Persian Anglican bishop, he was proud of the Iranian identity of a church which gladly embraced all, but which also affirmed its Persian roots.

In June 1952 he had married Margaret Thompson, one of the daughters of his bishop. Theirs was to be a close partnership, enriching for many others as well as themselves.

Bishop Hassan's episcopal ministry was marked from the outset by a strong concern for education. He developed a programme which increased facilities from primary to high school level while also expanding the work among the blind. Sadly this was not to last as the Islamic revolution of 1979 swept them away.

Before that, however, changes took place in the Anglican Church in the Middle East. Plans developed to enable the dioceses of the Middle East to become a self-governing province of the Anglican Communion. Fully in favour of this, the Bishop was committed to the vision of a church that was truly indigenous while being a spiritual home for all, whatever nationality they might be. He was insistent that the indigenous Anglican element was both Persian and Arab.

When in January 1976 the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East was established, there was much joy – and not a little relief – when he was elected the first president bishop. He was the natural candidate, having been a diocesan bishop since 1961 and having already shown the wisdom and statesmanship which would continue to characterise his ministry.

With the Revolution in 1979 came not only the loss of the Church's institutions, against which the Bishop was valiant in his resistance, but also serious threats to his own life and that of other church members. In late October 1979 two men broke into the Bishop's house while he and his wife were asleep. Five shots were fired, four of them surrounding the Bishop's head and the other hitting Margaret's hand as she threw herself across her husband to protect him. A few days later he and his wife left for meetings in Cyprus.

While mostly in the Middle East fulfilling the role of president bishop, he was advised by friends and colleagues not to return to Iran. On May 1 his secretary, Jean Waddell, was shot and seriously wounded. A few days later, while he was in Cyprus for church meetings, news came that the Dehqani-Tafti's son, Bahram, had been ambushed and killed in Tehran.

While deeply grieving, Bishop Hassan was not bitter. The prayer he wrote for his son's funeral spoke of compassion and forgiveness. It was quoted around the world and was an inspiration to many.

Though now a bishop-in-exile, Dehqani-Tafti continued to serve both his diocese and the wider province. He was re-elected President Bishop for a further five-year term. Eventually, he and Margaret settled in Basingstoke where he exercised a valued ministry as assistant bishop in the Diocese of Winchester until his retirement in 1990.

He remained in touch with the church in Iran as well as being a support and inspiration to the Iranian Christian community in Britain. Latterly Margaret and he made their home in Oakham near their youngest daughter, Guli, and her family.

A lover of Persian poetry, Hassan Dehqani-Tafti was himself a poet and also an accomplished artist. He wrote a number of books in Persian and in English. Among them, his reflective and moving autobiography, *The Unfolding Design of My World*, was published in 2000.

He was a gentle and compassionate man, a caring pastor who was always interested in people. Straightforward and frank in his speech, though always positive, he was entirely without guile, a man at once loving and loveable.

He is survived by his wife, Margaret, and their three daughters.

The Right Rev Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, Anglican Bishop in Iran, was born on May 14, 1920. He died on April 29, 2008, aged 87.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/obituaries/article3918778.ece>
12th May 2008