

# Cherian, Maliakal Eapen (1926–1998)

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## CHERYL CHRISTO HOWSON

Cheryl Christo Howson earned a graduate diploma in computer aided interior designing at the Dr. Bhanuben Nanavati College of Architecture for Women in Pune, India. She co-founded an interior design company in Sri Lanka and worked as a copywriter. She contributed to the morning devotional published by Women's Ministries at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the *Shepherdess International Journal* magazine, and the *Adventist Review*. She has written several plays. Currently (2020), she lives in Hosur, India while preparing for a piano exam.

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Dr. Maliakal Eapen Cherian served the Seventh-day Adventist Church as the president of Spicer Memorial College (Spicer Adventist University) and as the president of the Southern Asia Division.

## Early Life, Education and Marriage

Maliakal Eapen Cherian was born in Ranni, Kerela, on July 6, 1926.<sup>1</sup> He joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church early in life by accepting the truth presented by a literature evangelist.<sup>2</sup> As a boy, he attended the SDA High School in Kottarakara, Kerela.<sup>3</sup>

M. E. Cherian left Kerela and earned a Bachelor of Religious Education degree from Spicer Memorial College in 1949.<sup>4</sup> On June 7, 1950, Cherian and Premila Ohal were married. They had three children, Franklin, Kenneth, and Meena.<sup>5</sup>

A great believer in advanced learning, Cherian obtained a Masters of Theology degree in 1956 at the Adventist Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. Then he received a Master of Arts in history in 1957 from the University of Maryland. After returning to India, he studied at the University of Pune, where he earned a Ph.D. in Political Science in 1965.<sup>6</sup>

Andrews University awarded Dr. Cherian with an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree in 1980. In presenting the degree, Dr. Joseph G. Smoot, president of Andrews, said, "Cherian's depth of insight in strengthening the academic curriculum at Spicer Memorial College has done much for meeting the needs of the church in Southern Asia. Under his direction, several innovative programs have been initiated, drawing the attention of leading educators in the country."<sup>7</sup>

## Early Ministry

After completing his studies at the SDA High School, Kottarakara, he worked as a preceptor in the same school from 1944-1945. After graduating from Spicer Memorial College, he was employed at the Spicer Memorial High School from 1949-1950. He then served as dean of men, teacher, and librarian from 1952-1955. Besides teaching, he worked as registrar from 1957-1963.<sup>8</sup>

M. E. Cherian was ordained to the gospel ministry on December 23, 1961, in the Salisbury Park Memorial Church. At the time, Cherian was already widely known because of his years of Bible teaching and other duties at Spicer Memorial College. W. P. Bradley, associate secretary of the General Conference, preached the ordination sermon.<sup>9</sup>

## As College President

The division yearend committee met in December 1962 and selected Cherian, at the age of 37, to serve as president of Spicer Memorial College in Poona (Pune), beginning in 1963 and lasting until 1990.<sup>10</sup> While serving as president, he was also the head of the department of philosophy, history, and political science from 1963 to 1990.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Cherian had a vision for the college and the students. He expanded the academic departments and introduced



Maliakal Eapen Cherian.  
Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

new ones with majors and minors.<sup>12</sup> His tenure as president saw an increase in enrollment and the erection of several new buildings.<sup>13</sup>

Due to Cherian's committed efforts, The University of Poona permitted graduates of Spicer to seek regular admission for postgraduate studies beginning with the school year 1966.<sup>14</sup>

Under his leadership, Spicer began to offer a four-year curriculum leading to bachelor's degrees in religious philosophy, religious history, industrial arts, graphic arts, home economics, business administration, secretarial science, occidental music, Hindi, English, elementary education, biology, botany, zoology, mathematics, physics, chemistry, economics, geography, and history. A fifth-year degree program was offered in secondary education and theology. In 1980 the college board approved introduction of graduate programs in business administration, education, and religious philosophy.<sup>15</sup>

After prolonged negotiations with Andrews University, the college was recognized in 1983 by Andrews University as an external examination center with AU being fully satisfied with the facilities available and standards maintained.<sup>16</sup> At the 69<sup>th</sup> graduation service at Spicer, Dr. Arthur Coetze, dean of the School of Graduate Studies at Andrews University handed to Dr. Cherian, President of Spicer College, the formal document of affiliation that Andrews University entered into with Spicer College.<sup>17</sup>

At the 1970 General Conference Session, Dr. Cherian was appointed the director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty for the Southern Asia Division, in addition to the presidency of the college.<sup>18</sup>

## Division Presidency

With Elder Gerald James Christo's retirement in 1990, Dr. Cherian was elected president of the Southern Asia Division at the General Conference Session held in Indianapolis, Indiana, USA.<sup>19</sup> He was reelected to the post in 1995 at the General Conference Session, Utrecht, Holland.<sup>20</sup> During his seven years of energetic and influential leadership, the church in Southern Asia saw four local missions attain conference status.<sup>21</sup>

## Later Life

In February 1997 Dr. Cherian underwent major surgery as a result of a brain aneurysm. Due to the severity of the illness, the General Conference voted to relieve M. E. Cherian of the office and obligations of his position at the General Conference and Southern Asia Division for health reasons.<sup>22</sup> They also voted to express appreciation for his extraordinary contribution to the church.<sup>23</sup>

Dr. and Mrs. Cherian moved back to Spicer Memorial College, Pune, where they lived with their son, Kenneth Cherian. Unfortunately, his health continued to deteriorate until he had a seizure and became critically ill. Dr. Cherian passed away in the ICU at King Edward Memorial Hospital, Pune, on August 7, 1998.<sup>24</sup>

## Awards and Honors

During his life, Dr. M. E. Cherian received many awards and honors. He was acknowledged as a great educational leader in several lists of people in India who are important on the international map in significant fields of activity.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most notable honors he received was at the Andrews University Homecoming held from April 30 to May 2, 1976. Dr. Cherian was selected as one of the four alumni of distinction for that year. Cherian and 37 other educators were also cited by the state of Michigan during the Michigan International Week, October 1975. They represented educators who graduated from Michigan centers of higher education, returned to their own countries, and made significant contributions to learning and society.<sup>26</sup>

After 25 years as the president of Spicer Memorial College (now Spicer Adventist University), a ceremony was held to honor Dr. Cherian for his years of untiring, faithful service. Elder Christo, on behalf of the Southern Asia Division, presented Dr. Cherian with a "Citation of Gratitude." Elder G Ralph Thompson, from the Education Department of the General Conference, gave the address. With the assistance of Dr. John Fowler, Elder Thompson then presented Dr. Cherian with a "Medallion of Honor" from the General Conference for his outstanding contribution in the field of education. Dr. Cherian is the first person from Southern Asia to be so honored.<sup>27</sup>

## Contribution and Legacy

Dr. Cherian is the second Indian national to hold the dual responsibilities of vice president of the General Conference and president of the Southern Asia Division. Prior to his election in 1990, Cherian had a distinguished career in educational administration, serving as president of Spicer Memorial College for a record of 28 continuous years. Although Cherian's untimely illness led to his being relieved of office for health reasons, his legacy as teacher, theologian, and administrator will have a lasting impact upon the church he faithfully served for more than 45 years.<sup>28</sup>

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## NOTES

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