

A celebration of the life of Elizabeth L. Johnson

October 24, 1916 - November 15, 2017



Elizabeth Luella (Betty Lue) Johnson, nee Kortum, 101, a Baptist missionary to the Chin people in the western mountains of Burma (Myanmar), died on November 15, 2017 at the Health Center of Plymouth Village, Redlands, California.

Mrs. Johnson was born in Decatur, Illinois, married Robert Johnson in 1941, and graduated from Millikin University in 1942. The couple were appointed as missionaries of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and designated for service in Burma. War intervened, and Reverend Johnson served as a Navy chaplain in the south Pacific during World War II. Reverend and Mrs. Johnson began their missionary service in 1946, passing through Assam, India to enter war-torn Burma. The Johnsons served in the Chin Hills for twenty years, raising three children there while running Bible schools, touring remote areas accessible only on foot or by pony, running a dispensary, translating the Bible, Sunday School materials, and hymns, training pastors and Bible women, and establishing theological schools so that Chin Christian churches and associations could be self-sustaining after departure of the missionaries.

Mrs. Johnson home-schooled her children through grade school, and then sent them off to boarding at Kodaikanal School in south India for their high school educations. She became a self-taught expert in nutrition and tropical diseases, running a dispensary from the family's home. An accomplished musician, she set many hymns in tonic sol-fa notation for sight reading by the Chins. She was a strong advocate for leadership roles in the church by women, forming women's groups and mentoring emerging female leaders.

Mrs. Johnson left her beloved Chin Hills in October, 1965 for health reasons, never to return. Rev. Johnson left the hills the next April, one of the last foreign missionaries to leave the country under expulsion orders from the new military government.

The Johnsons relocated to King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, near the mission headquarters in Valley Forge in 1966. Mrs. Johnson became a copy editor for Judson Press, kept up correspondence with Christians in the Chin Hills, and opened her home to visitors while Rev. Johnson served on the Board of International Missions, overseeing mission work in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Zaire while continuing work on Bible translation into the Hakha Chin language and conducting research for a massive two-volume History of the American Baptist Chin Mission.

Rev. and Mrs. Johnson moved to Moreno Valley, California in 1988 and then on to the Plymouth Village retirement community in Redlands in 2001. Robert Johnson died in June, 2009.

Mrs. Johnson is survived by three children (Richard Johnson of Churchton, Maryland, Kristin Knutson of Roswell, Georgia, and Martha Martens of Dallas, Texas), seven grandchildren, and eleven great-grandchildren.

There will be a memorial service at Plymouth Village at 3 PM on December 1st, 2017, followed by visitation from 10-11 AM and a funeral service at 11 AM at Emmerson/Bartlett Memorial Chapel at 703 Brookside Ave., Redlands, CA on December 2nd. Mrs. Johnson is affectionately known to many as "mother of the Chins," and memorial services for her are scheduled at hundreds of Chin Baptist churches around the world on December 3rd. Interment will be at Riverside National Cemetery beside her husband.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that memorial donations be made to the nonprofit Chin Venture Capital (chinventurecapital.org). This money will be used to provide capital to Chin entrepreneurs and humanitarian efforts.