Bishop Haik Hovsepian-Mehr now suggested to Rev. Soodmand that he should leave Iran because his case had become so serious. This was Rev. Soodmand’s response:

‘I am a follower of the great shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus Christ, and I am ready to sacrifice my soul for my sheep. For me to escape from this persecution, would cause the hearts of my flock to become cold and weak. And I never want to be a bad example for them. So I am ready to go to prison again and, if necessary, to give my life.’

Rev. Soodmand did not run away. He was not a bad example. He stayed at his post, looking after his flock. And so he was arrested again. After a few days the family were allowed to visit him. They were not allowed to see him again. They had no more news. Two weeks after his arrest Rev. Rubik Hovsepian, the brother of Bishop Haik Hovsepian Mehr, went to the offices of the religious police. He was given this chilling information: Rev. Soodmand, according to the sentence passed by the special religious judge, was executed in Mashad prison on December 3rd, 1990.

The authorities knew when the execution was going to happen, yet they did not allow Rev. Soodmand’s family, his fellow Christians, or his friends, to visit him or receive his will. Persecution continued to follow the family after the martyrdom of Rev. Soodmand. The authorities did not give them permission to bury the body. Instead he was buried by strangers in a part of the Mashad cemetery reserved for those the government call ‘the cursed’. The family were not allowed to put up a headstone, a cross, or even a simple sign with Rev. Soodmand’s name. For those who do not know, this is a dusty, unmarked grave. For those who know, though, it is most certainly marked.

It is marked by the sacrifice of a faithful and true witness to Christ. Rev. Soodmand was utterly committed, and His love for God always came first. In every circumstance of life, Rev. Soodmand never betrayed his Master. He took up his own cross, denied himself, and followed His beloved Lord. For his blind wife, he was a faithful and sensitive husband. He instinctively understood how she was feeling, and with kindness served her needs. He was a very loving father to his children and brought them up to love the Word of God and the Christian life. Such was the impact of his life that all his children, Ramtin, Rashin, and the twins Aria and Arian, are walking closely with the Lord, and serving His church. Rev. Soodmand had a deep knowledge of the Bible and his teaching built up and shaped his disciples in Mashad. After the martyrdom, Rev. Sepehr pastored the house groups of the church for a while. A good number of Rev. Soodmand’s disciples are now in full-time Christian service.

The memory of Rev. Soodmand and all the other martyrs of the church in Iran will never be forgotten on earth. Nor will he be forgotten in heaven, where no doubt one of the first saints to welcome him was that dear lady who washed his wound when he was a frightened little boy.
Reverend Hossein Soodmand
1940 - 1990

If you had been an Armenian Christian or Jew living on the outskirts of Mashad in the late 1940’s, one of the trials of life were the young boys who used to gather near the local well. As you went to draw water, they would throw stones and jeer at you, shouting ‘Unclean! Unclean!’

One of those boys was Hossein Soodmand. He was from a normal family, middle class and fairly religious. His father, though, had left him when he was three, and now he and his two siblings were being brought up by his mother. She poured her life into her children, who adored her, but she also worked as a nurse. So she could not control Hossein’s boyish antics all day every day. Little known to any involved in those scenes at the well, one incident there would mark the seven-year-old Hossein.

It was another afternoon of teasing the Christians, but then Hossein made a direct hit. His stone struck and broke a lady’s water bucket. Time to make an escape: the young lad turned and sped off expecting to soon be home. But he tripped over a large stone, crashed down, and blood began to ooze out of his knee. Worse, the Christian woman was steadily advancing towards him. Fear gripped the little boy. There was no escape. He had thrown the stones. He deserved the punishment. Now his shadow was looming over him: soon her hand would rise, and the blows would descend.

But they did not. Instead her hand reached down, helped the young Hossein to his feet and the ‘unclean’ Christian cleaned the wound. She then gave the boy some sweets. He had shown hate. She had shown love. And Hossein Soodmand never forgot this. In a few years that seed of forgiveness and kindness sown by that unknown lady would so grow that a Hossein from Mashad would become a Christian.

After finishing school, Hossein Soodmand went to Ahvaz for his military service, where he found a church. Why should a Muslim want to go to a Christian church? The answer is found in a letter the martyr Mehdi Dibaj wrote from prison to the family of a young Iranian Christian who had been imprisoned for being a Christian. “A friend of mine was put in solitary confinement and tortured. The Assemblies of God Churches campaigned intensely for his release and after one month Rev. Soodmand was freed.

Seeing the dedication of Hossein Soodmand, the church leaders in Tehran encouraged him to attend the Bible courses taught in the Garden of Witness (Bagh e Behsarat), a beautiful retreat centre outside the city. The courses were to be taught by the well-known and much-loved American Presbyterian missionary to Iran, Dr. William Miller. Hossein Soodmand soaked in the teaching, was always the top student, and developed a reputation there as an evangelist. After this he became a bookseller for the Bible Society, and travelled across Iran selling the Scriptures.

In 1970, Hossein Soodmand went to Isfahan and began work in the Christian Institute for the Blind run by the Anglican Church. He really cared for the blind, and enjoyed serving them. While serving he fell in love with a blind lady, Mahtab Noorvash. In 1972 they were married by Rev. Arastoo Sayyah in the Church of Saint Luke, Isfahan. Seven years later Rev. Sayyah, then serving in Shiraz, was murdered. He was the first Christian martyr after the Islamic Revolution.

Starting his married life in Isfahan Rev. Soodmand continued to be a fervent evangelist, sharing the Gospel at every opportunity. He kept up a good relationship with the Anglican Church, but decided to join the Assemblies of God (AOG) fellowship where Edward Hovsepian-Mehr was the pastor. After a while, he became the assistant pastor. In September 1977, when Edward was sent to the AOG church in Urumieh, Hossein Soodmand became the pastor of the church in Isfahan. With his growing family, (he now had two children), he served the church in Isfahan for three years. In 1980 he moved to Mashad, the city of his birth, to evangelize and plant a church. He went with a burden in his heart, and the blessing of the Council of the AOG Churches in Iran.

Hossein Soodmand was very active in Mashad. Though he suffered from varicose veins, he did not stop cycling everywhere to minister. Many believed, a fellowship was born, and the basement of the Soodmand family’s house became a small church. Seeing the fruit of his work, the church decided to ordain Hossein Soodmand in 1988. This was when the martyr Haik Hovsepian-Mehr was the bishop of the AOG.

Even as he was being ordained, the storm clouds of persecution were gathering against Rev. Soodmand, his family (he now had four children), and members of his fellowship. The church was forced to close and Rev. Soodmand and other believers were often arrested by the religious police. They suffered psychological and physical torture. Though the church was closed, Rev. Soodmand never stopped working, and would gather his flock privately to teach and encourage them.

When the religious police saw they were not able to silence Rev. Soodmand, the persecution increased. In early 1990 Rev. Soodmand was not just imprisoned, but put into solitary confinement and tortured. The Assemblies of God Churches campaigned intensely for his release and after one month Rev. Soodmand was freed.

Christian friends from his days in the army. His concern in these days was not money - it never would be. His absolute priority was God. He would make sure he got to every Bible Study meeting, and spent many hours being discipled by Mehdi Dibaj.