

A tale of three Tims

God's glory triumphs over tragedy as a new church rises from a murdered missionary's dream

By David L. Miller

Ginger flowers, not poinsettias, will be on Gordon and Betty Olson's dining room table this Christmas. The tightly wrapped, deep red blossoms remind the Minneapolis couple of their son, Tim. Bandits in the Central African Republic murdered Tim two years ago. He was 24.

His family and friends still mourn him and his once-promising future. Yet this season they may smile even as they weep. For at church they again will hear the promise that "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed." And then they will think not only of the infant Jesus but also of Tim. For they have seen God's glory in their son's life.

Tim's story is really about three Tims—Tim Olson, Tim Dray and St. Timothy Lutheran Church, Bangui, Central African Republic. It's also about ginger flowers that bloom in the dust where nothing else can.

It isn't surprising that Tim Olson traveled to a remote African nation to build a church. The mark of a servant was on him from an early age. "He had a fascination with the human Jesus," Gordon Olson said. "He related to Christ as a man, a servant."

Even more telling—almost prophetic of his death—is the ser-

mon he preached his senior year at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minn. The 1989 honors graduate reflected on a line from a hymn: "Take my will and make it thine. It shall be no longer mine."

"When God calls us to give up ourselves, he means it," he said.

Olson, a member of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, had wanted to work on a service project during the summer of 1991. "Who knows when I'll have time to do this again," he told his father. He had planned to study architecture at the Harvard School of Design that fall.

With no other leads, Olson contacted Poul Bertelsen, who heads a Minneapolis firm that designs hospitals, clinics, churches and schools in Third World nations.

Earlier that week, Bertelsen had received a call from the Rev. Olin Sletto of the ELCA Division for Global Mission. Bertelsen's firm was designing a building for a

growing Lutheran congregation in Bangui. Sletto needed a supervisor for that project, and Bertelsen recommended Olson.

Deferring his entrance into graduate school for a year, Olson traveled to Bangui in June 1991. He went as a servant, a volunteer, under contract with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America global mission unit. Yet he believed his call came unmistakably from God.

"It seemed God had a plan for him just in the way things pieced together," his mother said. "And we had confidence in Tim and knew he had enough confidence to finish what he started."

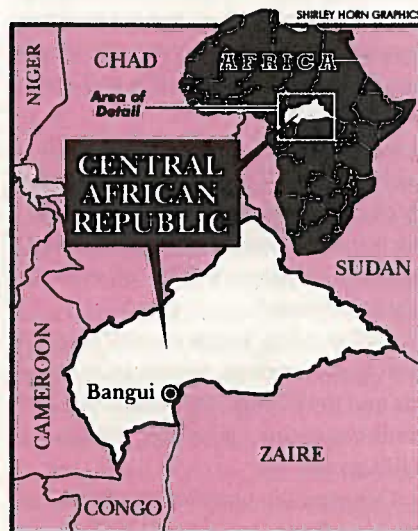
An unexpected phone call from a stranger, Tim Dray, put to rest Olson's remaining doubts about working in Africa. Dray had learned of Olson's opportunity from a mutual friend and encouraged him to go. In the late 1970s Dray had worked on building projects in Cameroon for the former American Lutheran Church.

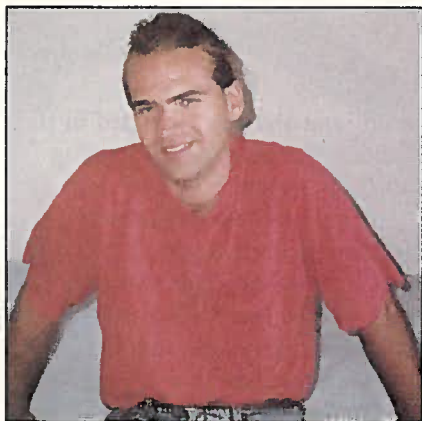
Arriving in the CAR, Olson had to win the local congregation's confidence, hire a 30-member crew and train them. He also had to finish the structure's working plans.

The design called for a complex structure seating 500. Building it would be tough, even for a seasoned architect. Olson was armed only with a creative mind, a basic understanding of architecture and a general knowledge of French.

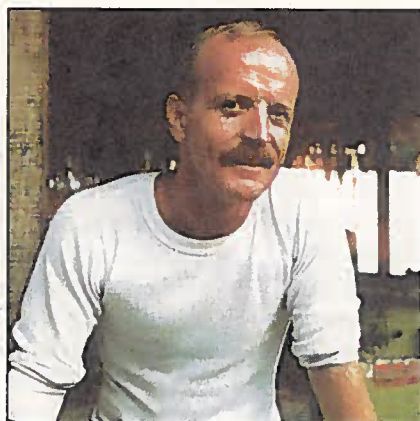
His confidence quickly faded. Supplies were scarce. Cost overruns

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Tim Olson -
He died for
his dream



Tim Dray -
He made
the dream
come true



St. Timothy - the church
they built in the Central
African Republic



Val Backlund - She paid
the price of loving Tim Olson

required impromptu design changes. Many of the unskilled workmen didn't know how to use basic measuring tools or how to build a vertical stone wall. Often he directed them to rebuild sections of the wall that weren't straight. A few times his frustration and unfamiliarity with the culture resulted in misunderstandings with workers.

Political conditions in the country were difficult. Poverty, high unemployment and a government that couldn't pay its workers created unrest. At times frustrated citizens struck out randomly against people who represented authority or wealth. Twice crowds stoned Olson's jeep as he drove through Bangui.

Olson's journal reveals his struggle with what it meant to be a servant during this time. "I'm tired of being the bad guy," he wrote. "The screamer ... who feels all this responsibility. Who wants it?"

After the stonings he wrote: "The streets ... have become my purgatory. Can a martyr die in an unknown country for an ambiguous cause, in the cross fire of a misunderstood political situation? If so, I have no time to be one. My urge for self-preservation is too great."

Often he was disgusted for expecting people to show him gratitude for "having given up so much to serve [in the CAR]. ... I'm ashamed of my own pride and self-righteousness. ... Africa is acting like a personal magnifying glass. ... It is painting my selfishness bright orange."

"No one told me I really had to be a servant," he wrote. "I told myself, but that was just talk. I didn't mean really suffer, swallow pride, be patient, think of others before yourself. I didn't mean follow Christ's example."

As Olson struggled, deep respect and warmth grew between him and the congregation and crew. Olson was "a friend, not a ruler. With [him] racial distinctions had

no place," one worker wrote.

As respect grew, so did the workers' skill and commitment. One day shortly before his death, Olson hurried from his hut, distressed that workers were tearing down a wall they'd just built. "Why?" he demanded to know.

"Patron," the workers responded, "it is not good enough." Olson smiled and walked away.

Yet his journal revealed his fears: "I feel more like a soldier in a besieged city, counting days to collapse. I worry about the church and its future, whether things will break loose before we have a chance to finish.

"I re-read Dad's most recent letter. He quotes Psalm 91. How wonderfully apropos: '[God's] faithfulness is a shield You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day because you have made the Lord your refuge ... no evil shall befall you.' "

Yet evil did befall him. On Nov. 27, 1991, Olson and his U.S. girlfriend were returning to Bangui after visiting a game preserve. Valerie Backlund's visit had been eventful—the couple had discussed marriage.

About midday, Backlund was driving along a narrow, rutted road when they came upon two vehicles blocking their way. Sensing danger, Olson yelled, "Go, just go—drive!"

Shots rang out, shattering the windshield. They threw themselves down on the seat. As the vehicle spun backward off the road and into the bush, Olson cried out, "My God, Val, my leg is in two."

A bullet severed an artery in his right leg; another bullet struck his back. Backlund's cheek was

grazed, and she was wounded in the shoulder. The African man riding with them was shot in both legs.

"This can't be happening," Backlund recalled thinking. "I'm going to wake up. This will end." But it didn't. Bandits surrounded the jeep and took the couple's money and possessions.

As they did, Olson's life was flowing away quickly. And he knew it. "Kiss me, Val," he said. "If this is it, I want you to know I love you."

Backlund thought, "It? This *isn't* it! How could it be *it*? There's too much life left for us."

Backlund elevated Olson's leg to slow the bleeding. Then she tried to fashion a tourniquet from a sheet. That, too, was futile.

"I fear I made his pain worse by begging him to hang on What additional pain did he endure because of my words: 'We're going to make it, Tim'? You're going to live. You have to live. I need you.

"He tried. But it was too much, and eventually he begged me to let him go. 'Let me die in peace, gotta' die,' he sputtered.

"I have precious memories of those last moments of his life as we said our last prayer together—the Lord's Prayer. I held his pale head in my hands and leaned close to his face. It must have taken tremendous effort, but he said every last word—even a bit ahead of me.

"I believe he heard and understood me as I told him insistently, 'Tim, I love you, your family loves you—you know that. And God loves you. He loves you so much he can't wait to be with you.'

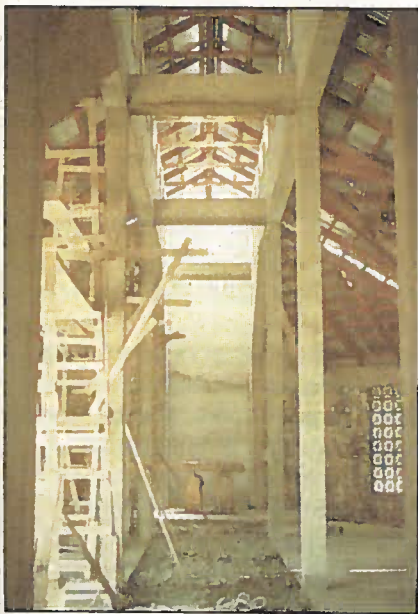
" 'I love God,' he said in return." Those were his last words.

For his funeral, Olson's parents asked his godfather to choose flowers, something with an African theme. He selected ginger flowers.

Olson's Minneapolis roommate, Doug, leaned over his casket and prayed the Lord's Prayer, as he had



Tim Olson taught local workers how to build straight walls



The dream is taking shape



Tim O. would have loved it



The flower that bloomed in the dust

said it with him often while they lived together. Tim's mother, however, still pauses and fights off tears when she comes to the words "deliver us from evil."

A more profound evil would soon agitate Tim Dray. In late November, Dray, an architect, took the bus to his office in Minneapolis.

As he rode, Dray read the newspaper over the shoulder of another passenger. "I caught headlines," he said. "I saw one about a volunteer killed in the CAR."

Dray quickly remembered phoning Olson eight months before and encouraging him to go to Africa. "I realized I had to get off and buy a paper," he said. "I had a gut feeling it was him."

"I was really stung," said Dray, who grew up in Shiloh Lutheran Church, Elmore, Minn. "I went to the funeral I saw so much tragedy and pain in the church that night that I was enraged. I wanted to stand up and say, 'This doesn't have to be this way.' But that wasn't the place, so I dodged out [before the funeral began]."

The next week he phoned Sletto of the ELCA global mission unit. Within 45 minutes, Dray said, "I was preparing to go to Africa." Within six weeks he was working with Olson's crew.

"There was no question in my mind," he said. "The tragedy was so immense. I've never felt like this before; my compulsion was equal to the tragedy.

"If no one had gone, the church would sit there, partially completed, a tragedy. And the world's such a tragic place. It's important for all of us to triumph over tragedy. It's not significant that I did this. Its significant that it was done."

Dray strove to honor the original

design, including notes Olson had left behind. For example, Olson had set two massive stones in front of the church, legs for an altar. His sketches suggested he wanted a single stone—5 feet long, 3 feet wide and 1 foot high—for the top. Dray and the crew searched quarries 100 miles away to find the right stone.

It took Dray and the workers a year—until early January 1993—to complete the church. "Old people from the countryside came to us [as we worked]," he said. "They said they would move here so they can live next to this church [which towers over the neighborhood.]

"The church is a place people take visitors and tell them the story. It has an oral history that is being told right now. It's a good story—tragic, but in the end a good story.

"Tim Olson is no longer here, and someday I won't be here. But the church and that history will continue to be told."

The story was told amid feasting, singing and 100-degree heat at a four-hour worship service Jan. 3, 1993. Gordon and Betty Olson arrived in Bangui several days before the dedication.

Stepping through the hand-carved front doors, they saw the huge ebony cross. Above the doors they saw carvings of the Crucifixion, communion and of missionaries who served the CAR. In the front was the baptismal font, a large stone bearing a carving of Jesus welcoming little children. Tim Olson had set it in place.

The Olsons walked through the church, touched its walls and wept. Stepping outside, the church grounds were bare, dry, red dust. But hugging the wall was a single red flower, growing wild—a ginger flower.

At the dedication, the local building chairman said: "We should

give homage to this great Lutheran martyr, the first, perhaps, for our country. Tim Olson is no longer with us. The congregation continues to mourn him. What is less sorrowful is that he died for the cause of the gospel."

Then, in a surprise to all, he announced the church's name—St. Timothy Lutheran Church of Bangui.

For the Olsons, the church that grew out of the dust of Tim's death has redeemed his life's work. But sometimes they still ask: "What do we say to the God who called Tim to come to Africa?"

Answers don't come easily for them or their daughter, Karna. Yet, through tears Betty Olson said: "Thank you, God, for the wonderful memories. Beyond the pain, there is a gratefulness for Tim's wisdom, his insight, his commitment."

The couple also struggles with Psalm 91, which Gordon had included in a letter to his son. "[God's] faithfulness is a shield," the Psalm says, "no evil shall befall you."

"It was hard to believe," Gordon Olson said. "Yet we used it at his funeral." Their pastor, the Rev. Hub Nelson, also read it at the funeral home before they made the arrangements.

"Its promise goes beyond this life," Olson said. "We take comfort that Tim is still under God's protection. Psalm 91 still gives us hope because Tim still lives."

Indeed. Tim lives in the memories of those who loved and worked with him. He lives in the stone and story of St. Timothy. And, his family confesses, he lives in the eternal mercy of God.

Tim lives, and this Christmas ginger flowers will bloom on the Olson's dining room table. ■