

Women in international mission

An Interview With: Tim Colvin Living and working in South Africa

by Ana Gobledale

I FIRST MET Tim and her husband, Larry, in Texas, when Tod and I slept in their living room for a week! We were on missionary deputation and the Colvins were our hosts. I have since visited Tim, Larry and Katie in Gaborone, Botswana, and now can picture them at Kuruman, the oldest continuous Christian mission in southern Africa—sitting perhaps on the very bench where David Livingstone proposed to the daughter of Robert Moffet! I feel honored to be a colleague in international mission with Tim!

Instead of creating an article out of the responses I have received from my email interview, as I have in previous issues of *Common Lot*, I've decided to let you read the responses as the missionary has written them. So now, I'd like to introduce Tim Colvin, missionary with Global Ministries, and invite you to read on and get to know her better.

Ana



Where are you from, and what's your family background (church, etc)?

I'm from a small town in west Texas that looks exactly like the edge of the Kalahari Desert where we live now. When I went away to college, I vowed never to move back to dusty, dry, bare west Texas. Sometimes I think God plunked me down in the Kalahari out of spite! The eldest of 5 children, I grew up in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) where my grandfather sat next to me in the pew and my grandmother kept her eye on me from the choir.

What work do you do now?

I currently serve as pastor of a congregation in the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA). The church, in a so-called "coloured" township, is located in the Northern Cape province of South Africa at the edge of the Kalahari Desert. The town of Kuruman is built on a spring that provides 20 million litres of water every day so this really is an oasis in the desert. It is quite green and lush with all kinds of fruits and vegetables, though the growing season is not year round since the winters are really cold.

The town of Kuruman, like most towns in South Africa, was divided into townships during the apartheid era. Kuruman itself was for whites, Mthibistad was for blacks, and Wrenchville where we live was for coloreds (racially mixed). Those communities still exist today, though the white community is slowly becoming integrated. We are the only whites in Wrenchville.

We live in my church's manse. Serving the church is a 24/7 job so living in the manse, rather than at the mission where Larry works, allows me to be available to the people and to keep up with what's going on in the community in which my members live.



You have an interesting first name, "Tim." Where did it come from?

I was named for a college friend of my mother. Though I never met the woman, I think we must be the only women with this name. I've always enjoyed it. It serves as a nice ice-

breaker when meeting someone new.

When we first arrived, many reacted in horror when they found out we lived in the colored community. “Aren’t you afraid?” Actually, we are not and never have been afraid during our time in southern Africa. I know bad things happen here, but don’t they happen everywhere?

The church had been vacant for 2 years when I arrived. They struggle to pay a minister a full-time salary. One of our goals while I am here is to get them strong enough to call their own minister. The congregation had hoped for an intern to serve them part-time but were totally shocked to discover their new “predikant” was not only a woman, but a white American who speaks English! (The people here speak Afrikaans.)

What experiences as a child, or people who influenced you as a child, helped to lead you to your commitment to the church and to mission?

A jolly round Sunday School Superintendent used to welcome every child to church each Sunday morning, calling us by name and making us feel as if he had been waiting especially for us to walk through the door. It was a place I knew I was welcomed and embraced no matter what. That has been my model for ministry. To me that is God’s grace in action.

Share any significant events in your faith journey that will help the women of the church to better understand your call to international mission.

I served as Associate Minister for 9 years at Downey Avenue Christian Church, among many retired missionaries and church leaders. Every Wednesday, I joined The Quilters for lunch and listened to Bertha Gilchrist and others talk of their days in the mission field, experiences that I still find unbelievable. When I joined the mission staff of Global Ministries, I told them it was their fault for influencing me as they had! From these women—and their husbands—I gained a sense of mission that my ministry had been missing.

What happened to make you consider international mission?

My husband and I both served in local churches but had always talked about working overseas so when we found ourselves ready to relocate at the same time, we sent our applications to Global Ministries. We trusted that if it was what God wanted, it would happen. God must have been waiting for those applications because we were asked to leave for Africa within weeks.

Share a story from your current work or life situation or share a time when you met Christ/God face-to-face.

On the first Tuesday of each month I deliver home-bound communion to my sick and elderly church members. One day I offered to take one of the older women with me on my “rounds”, as she doesn’t get out very much. The first person we visited was her cousin, who turned 100 on 4 January. He is blind and doesn’t hear too well but his mind is still sharp. We began talking to him as we entered the front door and by the time we came to his bedroom, he knew there was someone with me. The cousin kept talking to him as her old legs took her slowly toward his bed. Finally he recognized the voice of the woman he had not seen in many years. The look of joy on his face was priceless, as was the very animated conversation that followed. As we shared the bread and cup, we thanked God for the fellowship and for God’s spirit that moved the woman to venture out of her house that day. Since then home-bound communion has become a social event for older members of our church who climb into Reverend’s car every chance they get and spend the morning laughing and telling stories with their childhood friends.

What is the most rewarding part of your work?

Discovering that local church ministry—as the sole pastor—is not so bad. And discovering that I enjoy preaching!!

What is the most challenging aspect of your work?

Discovering that local church ministry can be a real pain in the—neck, and that sometimes I’d just as soon not have to preach. I think it’s one of those love/hate things.

What spiritual disciplines strengthen you in your work and daily life?

Prayer and meditation; also visiting with my church members keeps me in touch with what I’m about and why I do what I do.

Where else have you served with Global Ministries?

Our first assignment overseas was in Botswana, where my husband, Larry, and I worked at a theological college. I tended the library full of old, dated books “graciously donated” by retired ministers, and tutored

Old Testament students in the distance education program. After 2 1/2 years of that, we were invited by the Botswana Synod of UCCSA to serve as coordinators of the HIV/AIDS ministry, which we did for 2 years. Both assignments allowed us to travel extensively throughout the country and see things many life-long residents of the country never saw.

You have 2 daughters. How has this impacted your decisions to live and work internationally?

One of our considerations when we applied to be missionaries was the future of our children. Micky was finishing high school and Katy was ready to start school. The timing was good for a change and we wanted both girls to have a broader world view that living overseas can provide. Micky joined us shortly after we arrived and spent a year in Botswana, a “gap year” for her before going back to Chicago to work and live. It was a good experience for her and one that continues to have an impact on her life. Arriving in southern Africa at 5 years old, Katy was like a sponge when it came to picking up languages and customs. She has adapted to our changed lifestyle better than any of us, whether we live in a so-called “colored” community, a neighborhood of “black” people, or entertain friends from Norway in our home. She is truly a child of the world with a sense of community and family that causes her to claim brothers and sisters in 4 different countries and 3 continents. Try explaining that to a teacher on parents’ night! She has just turned 12 and is looking forward to going to boarding school next year. My only regret is that, due to the loooooong plane rides between the US and Africa, neither of the girls enjoys traveling, much to the dismay of their parents.

What’s your favorite Bible verse?

“Oh, gosh, that really depends on the kind of day I’m having. Often Psalm 55:6 comes to mind. “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.”

It is usually followed at some point by verse 16.

“But I call to God, and the Lord saves me.”

But lately Proverbs 3:5 has served me well. We are already contemplating home leave next year and

this verse provides reassurance for me.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.”

What’s your favorite hymn or chorus?

A chorus I’ve learned since being here in South Africa is

As, as jy net glo, alles is moontlik, as as jy net glo.

Dumela fela, tsothe dirogile, dumela fela.

If, if you believe, all things are possible, if, if you believe.

It is always sung in Afrikaans, Setswana, and English.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Tim’s grandparents played an important role in her early church life. How does your church encourage and support grandparents and grandchildren participating together in the life of the church?
2. What Bible passage “serves you well”?
3. Visiting parishioners is an important part of Tim’s ministry, and now for others in her congregation. When was the last time you “ventured out” to pay a visit to a home-bound parishioner? How might your church grow in the area of home visitation?
4. Many children, like Katy, live with their Global Ministries missionary parents around the world. These children, sometimes called “Third Culture Kids” are “transplants”, yet are at home where they live. Whom in your community is a “transplant”? How can you help them feel more “at home” in your community?

PRAYER OPPORTUNITIES

1. Katy, Mickey and other children of missionaries serving Global Ministries.
2. Grandparents serving as faith role models for their grandchildren.
3. Tim and Larry in their ministry in Kuruman, South Africa
4. The United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA), our International Partner Church in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mocambique.