

# Olsen, Olaf Johan

## (1887–1978)

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The Norwegian Olaf Johan Olsen<sup>1</sup>, also known as Iceland-Olsen and the Apostle to Iceland, had a remarkable mission career in the Seventh-day Adventist Church as a missionary pastor, leader, and administrator. In Iceland, over a period of 33 years, he raised up the local church from almost nothing to eight congregations, second only to the Lutheran State Church.

## Early Years

Olaf Johan Olsen was born in 1887 in Jørstad, Norway, to Kornelius Mikal Olsen (1856-1930) and Kristine Danielsdatter Vigmostad (1861- c. 1925) as the firstborn of five children. The little boy learned to read early in his life. He had a remarkable memory and was able to recite long texts verbatim. The family emigrated in 1900 to New York in the United States of America. In 1906, when his family became Adventists, the course was set for Olaf's future. He went to Union College in Nebraska and took his exams there in 1907. That same year, he went back to Norway, on his own, and enrolled in the private school Hallings at Frogner in Oslo. He completed his studies in 1910 with best grades.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason he went back to Norway was to see his girlfriend, Aline Josefine Hervik (b. 1883 in Brekne). They were married in 1911 in Lyngdal, and soon after were asked to meet in Copenhagen with the leadership of the Adventist Church in Scandinavia for a missionary appointment. Olsen was given a missionary license and offered a choice between Iceland or China. He accepted and chose to go to Iceland.<sup>3 4</sup>



Pastor O.J. Olsen.

Photo courtesy of by Sylvi Vigmo.

## Working in Iceland

In August 1911, the young couple travelled to Iceland. Olaf was 24 and Aline was expecting their first child. He wanted to identify with the Icelandic population and decided to learn the language as quickly as possible. He worked hard on it and never preached through an interpreter. At the beginning, he had one of the women sitting on the first row point out his language mistakes and help him make the necessary corrections. In this way, he also won the hearts of the people.<sup>5</sup>

His introduction to work in Iceland was not without major challenges. Because of financial misconduct, his otherwise successful predecessor had been dismissed by the Nordic Union Conference but did not want to step down. The church building Betel in Reykjavik had burned down in January 1910, and the church membership was in disarray. Twenty-three of the 40 baptized members sided with Olsen, and the remainder supported their previous pastor. As a result, from 1911-1914, there were two Adventist congregations in Reykjavik. Gradually the support for the previous pastor dwindled. After some delay, Olsen was granted the Royal Commission as the leader of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Iceland in the summer of 1912.<sup>6</sup> Around 1914, he was ordained into the gospel ministry and granted ministerial credentials.<sup>7</sup> From then until 1947, he was the only ordained Adventist minister in Iceland, except for a few years in the 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

One of his first initiatives was to rebuild the church, Betel, in Reykjavík. Money was scarce among the membership, but Olsen called them for a planning meeting and a season of prayer. They agreed that every member would give part of his or her income every week until the building had been raised. With these agreements in writing, Olsen went to the building material suppliers and bought the materials on credit. The concrete blocks for the foundation were laid by the congregation themselves, and the construction took place in their spare time. The church was built without public donations or help from other Adventist entities and was opened and dedicated at the beginning of 1912.<sup>9</sup>

Olsen set out to conquer Iceland with and for the gospel. As he realized the impossibility of reaching a population of 85,000 spread out in small communities and farming areas on the 103,000 square km large island with almost nonexistent roads, he decided to focus on reviving the publishing and colporteur work. All the books and other literature had been destroyed in a fire in 1910. Therefore, he had the book *Christ our Savior* (*Kristur frelsarti vor*) by Ellen G. White translated and published in 1912.<sup>10</sup> He wanted to see Adventist literature spread far and wide, and he, along with members of the church, went door to door to sell the book. In Reykjavík alone, more than 2,500 books were sold. Within a year, the number of printed copies exceeded 10,000. That meant that a book was sold in every other Icelandic home. He would continue to publish other books and pamphlets at high speed.<sup>11</sup> A monthly paper *Ljosvakin* (*Rays of Light*) presenting the Adventist message was also published with a circulation of 1,500.<sup>12</sup>

Olsen had a clear strategy. He let the written word prepare the ground. Then he travelled from place to place and preached. He became an outstanding speaker and was able to present complex issues without notes, even

quoting from the Bible, at length, from memory. His “was a typical Adventist prophetic preaching approach, where he interpreted current events in the light of biblical prophecy, an approach to religion that Icelanders had never encountered before.”<sup>13</sup> When he preached in the towns, the halls were usually filled. Many attendees invited him to their homes, and it was not unusual that he would hold up to 10 house meetings a day. With few and poor roads, it was almost unbelievable that this was possible. His down-to-earth presentations appealed to the people. The weather was another challenge on the long and lonely roads. Strong winds could be replaced by snow or heavy rain. Sometimes he would be soaked to the skin when he held meetings or had devotions. When he moved around, people were hospitable and received him with food and drink and a warm place to stay. But not all were excited about his missionary efforts. Some ministers from the Lutheran State Church warned their members about the new heresy and wrote against him in the newspapers.<sup>14</sup>

Two separate incidents helped change this attitude. The first took place in Hafnarfjörður in the fall of 1918, when an influenza epidemic caused the death of hundreds of people. Olsen was due to start a series of meetings, but instead offered his help to the people. Kristjánsson tells the story: “In Hafnarfjörður, Olsen’s volunteered help was welcome. He visited rich and poor alike, caring for their medical needs. Olsen suggested that a town meeting be held to discuss the situation. Teams were organized to collect money to purchase food for needy families... Many reevaluated their opinion of Adventism as they witnessed Olsen’s unselfish attitude. Thus, in December when it was considered safe to start evangelistic meetings, Olsen had a full house.”<sup>15</sup>

The second incidence happened during a typhoid epidemic in the Vestmannaeyjar in the spring of 1923 where Olsen was running an evangelistic campaign. When the epidemic broke out, all public gatherings were prohibited by the authorities.<sup>16</sup> Forty-two stricken people were lying in their homes for three days with little medical aid. The doctor in town was at a loss of what to do. It was too risky to move the patients to the hospital in the capital, Reykjavík. Olsen pointed to a large vacant hall that was scheduled for demolition and suggested that it be turned into a temporary hospital by dividing it into two sections, one for men and one for women. Here the stricken could be in isolation and receive the necessary treatment. The doctor challenged Olsen to prepare the hall. “With another person’s help he worked from five in the morning until eleven at night for two days, scrubbing, hammering, building the partitions, and improving beds. When the hall was clean and the partition was finished, he appointed six men as stretcher-bearers to carry the pale-faced men, women, and children from their homes to the ‘hospital.’” For about 30 days, he and two trained nurses served the patients as doctors, dietitians, nurses, technicians, cooks, housekeepers, and janitors.<sup>17</sup> The epidemic died out, and the opposition against Olsen evaporated. The practical godliness of the pastor shone through.

## The Vestmannaeyjar Years

Another interesting episode in the life of O. J. Olsen was when he had recently moved with his family to Vestmannaeyjar in 1922 before the epidemic. When he announced his first series of meetings, he invited the

people to the largest room he could find. He was warned that there would be some opposition from a group of people in the State Church. They indeed came and were easy to spot. They sat on the first benches, nicely dressed and keeping their hats on, which was intended as an insult. Olsen did not lose his composure, but instead started the meeting by asking the congregation to sing the national anthem. Immediately, all the hats came off. Having gained the attention of the audience, he proceeded with the meeting.<sup>18</sup> “At the next meeting, two days later, the hall was so crowded half an hour before, that I could scarcely get in,” Olsen reported. “The next seven meetings were held in a larger hall, and then into a still larger concert hall, which seated about 800. An hour before the meeting, the doors were opened, and the hall was filled immediately... Often I had to talk on the same subject twice. The population of this island is 3,300... Meetings are held three times a week. Thirty or forty will soon be baptized, and more are deeply interested.”<sup>19</sup>

When his evangelistic meetings were forced to stop because of the outbreak of typhoid fever, he visited the interested people in their homes. At one point, he had requests from 100 families for visits. “[This is] the hardest work I have ever done. To visit with ten or fifteen families every day, study the Bible with them, and answer many questions, is serious business, and demands much physical endurance.”<sup>20</sup> Planning for a long-term presence of the Adventist Church on the island, Olsen thought of other projects. Being a skilled carpenter, he constructed a house to serve as living quarters for himself and his family as well as a meeting place for yet unbaptized members, and with a facility for a clinic. The house was finished in the fall of 1923 and became known as “Baðhúsið” (“the Bath-House”). On his initiative, a hydrotherapy clinic was set up by Katy Henriksen from Denmark, who was a graduate from Skodsborg Sanatorium and was later joined by Steinunn Sigurdsson. The clinic, which remained in operation for decades, also set in motion a badly needed reform in hygienic standards in the community.<sup>21</sup> In February 1924, a church was organized with 30 members. Under Olsen’s leadership and entirely by their own means, the members constructed a church building that could seat 175 people. And in 1928, a church school was opened.<sup>22</sup>

## Back in Reykjavík

Olsen moved back to Reykjavík in 1927. A new church building in the capital with a seating capacity of 275 had been dedicated in 1926. Olsen launched a series of meetings and filled the church every night. Within a year and a half, 61 new members were added to the church. During these years, Olsen also held meetings in the new church building in Vestmannaeyjar, and several members were added there as well.<sup>23</sup> But Olsen and his coworkers were not satisfied with this. They developed a bold plan to spread the Advent message “to all major towns on the northern coast, move eastward, and slowly go around the entire coast of Iceland.”<sup>24</sup> Colporteur work proved to be successful again. In 1929 he could write: “There can now hardly be found a single home in the whole of Iceland that has not received some of our literature; and the seeds now begin to show some results.”<sup>25</sup>

## The Call to Norway

In 1933, the leadership in the West Nordic Union sent a call for Olsen to serve as Bible teacher at the Onsrud Mission School in Norway. It came as a shock when it was announced at the annual conference in Reykjavík. "It was with heartfelt grief that leader and people responded to such a call, but Brother Olsen had raised up a loyal people, and he gave them a final lesson in loyalty by accepting the call."<sup>26</sup> He had worked hard for 22 years to raise up a church in Iceland, and it was clear that he had lost his heart to the island and its people and that they loved him. When he left, he wrote the following: "'The Lord's ways are not our ways'. There is no Bible passage that is sometimes as difficult to understand as this one... When I stood on the ship and saw the last white mountaintops disappear in the horizon, I couldn't help asking 'Why?'. In Iceland I have fought my hardest battles, ... but also won my greatest victories."<sup>27</sup> No doubt his many years of experience and preaching activity as well as his practical skills benefitted the mission school. He took over as principal in 1934 when he, together with the students, began renovating some of the buildings and built a new dormitory. It was also in these years that many of the students went out as missionaries to Africa.<sup>28</sup> He remained at Onsrud for three years (1933-1936), but as soon as he got the chance, he went back with his family to Iceland.

## In Iceland Again and at the Division

In Iceland, he served as conference president another 10 years. The 1930s were hard in Iceland as well as in other places. The poverty was debilitating, and the population growth was small. The missionary work was slower. He built schools and started several companies to create jobs.<sup>29</sup> The people in Iceland were cut off from both the Union and the Division during World War II until the annual meeting in Reykjavík in 1947, where P. G. Nelson, president of the West Nordic Union, and G. A. Lindsay, president of the Northern European Division, were present. At this meeting, Olsen laid down his leadership of the conference and was asked to join the Division staff.<sup>30</sup> He was appointed field secretary for the Northern European Division, a position he held for six years until his retirement.<sup>31</sup>

## Family and Legacy

Olaf Johan and Aline Olsen had six children--Ether, Ruth, Harald, Olav, Josef, and Viola. Because Olsen was travelling much of the time, it was left to the milder and more sensitive Aline to care for the young ones.<sup>32</sup> Olsen was a soulwinner. He led his brother-in-law to conversion with his brothers, sisters, and parents. This enterprising family went to the United States, and two of the brothers, Peter Gerhard and Oscar Herwick, became well-known pastors there.<sup>33</sup>

In their retirement, Olaf Johan and Aline Olsen moved back to Norway and settled in Lyngdal. Aline died at the age of 82 in 1965. Olsen then decided to move back to Iceland, and in 1967, he married Kristin Gudmundsdottir

(b. 1899). They only had a short time together as she soon died from a stroke. He then moved again to stay with his youngest son Josef and his family in Borås, Sweden, where he died at the age of 91 in 1978.<sup>34</sup>

Looking back at Olsen's contribution to the Church and society in Iceland, we can safely establish that he was able to understand the Icelandic mind and present needs in society. Through extensive colporteur activity and evangelistic meetings, he significantly impacted the population at the time and caused considerable growth in membership.<sup>35</sup> The Church grew from a divided few to eight vibrant congregations with 449 members.<sup>36</sup> He left a general awareness within the population about what the Adventist cause was all about, a solid foundation that others later were able to build on.

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## NOTES

1. Later he was mostly known as O. J. Olsen in denominational publications when his older Norwegian namesake O. J. Olsen Røst, who had been the first Adventist minister to visit Iceland in 1893, was no longer was active in Church service.
2. Arno Vigmostad, *Olaf Johan Olsen from Jørstad: Pastor and Missionary in Iceland*, (Forlagshuset Vigmostad and Bjørke, Bergen, Norway), April 10, 2021, 1-3.
3. Ibid., 4.
4. "Iceland Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1911), 110.
5. Vigmostad, 5.
6. Guðni Kristjánsson, "Early History and Development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Iceland." Research paper, Andrews University, School of Graduate Studies, 1977, 6,65, 66.
7. "Iceland Mission," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1916), 118.
8. "Iceland Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1947), 139.
9. Arno Vigmostad, 6; *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Iceland."
10. J. C. Raft, "Good News from Far Countries," *The Missionary Worker*, November 3, 1913, 172.
11. "Beretninger fra O. J. Olsen ved Unionsmødet i sommer," *Evangeliets Sendebud*, September 9, 1914; Arno Vigmostad 6-7.
12. W. E. Read, "Iceland," *ARH*, January 10, 1924, 19.
13. Reynir Guðsteinsson, "Aðventistaöfningin í Vestmannaeyjum 40 ára," *Blik*, 1965, 87.
14. Vigmostad, 8.
15. Kristjánsson, 34.
16. Eric Gudmundsson, "A Strategy for Revitalization and Growth of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Iceland," Professional Dissertations D.Min., Andrews University, Michigan, U.S.A., 2005, 196-197.
17. Catherine M. Buxbaum, "Apostle to Iceland," *Youth Instructor*, April 20, 1948, 4.



18. Vigmostad, 10.
19. O. J. Olsen, "Our Work in Iceland," *ARH*, November 5, 1925, 9-10.
20. O. J. Olsen, "Vestmannaøerne, Island," *Missionsefterretninger*, May 1923, 45.
21. Guðsteinsson, 87; J. C. Raft, "Iceland," *ARH*, December 29, 1921, 10.
22. Gudmundsson, 208.
23. *Ibid.*, 211.
24. *Ibid.*, 212.
25. O. J. Olsen, "Island," *Missionsefterretninger*, January 1929, 4.
26. W. T. Bartlett, "Iceland," *ARH*, November 23, 1933, 14.
27. O. J. Olsen, "Island-Onsrud," *Bræðrabandið*, September-November 1933, 81, quoted in Kristjánsson, 61.
28. Scattered remarks by L. Munderspach in *Missionsefterretninger* in the years 1933-1935; Kjell Helgesen in e-mail to Sven Hagen Jensen, February 6, 2023.
29. Vigmostad, 10.
30. G. A. Lindsay, "Visiting Iceland," *ARH*, December 11, 1947, 15.
31. *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbooks* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1947-1953).
32. Vigmostad, 9.
33. Arno Vigmostad in e-mail to Sven Hagen Jensen February 6, 2023.
34. Vigmostad, 11-12.
35. Gudmundsson, 215.
36. "Iceland Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1947), 139.



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