

Rev. Philip M. Petursson, D.D.

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

Minister and politician, educator and social activist, Philip M. Petursson was a beacon of progressive thought and something of an icon in both Winnipeg's West End and the Icelandic community across the province. At the time of his death, he was the longest-serving Unitarian minister anywhere in Canada, but his influence in Winnipeg extended far beyond the pulpit.

Philip Markus Petursson was born at Pinecreek, Minnesota (a couple of miles south of the international boundary) on October 21, 1902, one of ten children born to Ólafur Pétursson and Annie McNab. When he was eight months old, his parents moved to Foam Lake, Saskatchewan, where they farmed and operated a store. After nine years, the family moved once again, this time to Winnipeg where Ólafur Pétursson prospered in business.



Most of Petursson's memories of his Saskatchewan childhood were faint but he vividly recalled his first encounter with religion, which scarcely suggested that a career in the ministry was in the offing. When he was about six years old, a schoolmate noticed that he didn't attend Sunday school, inquiring why. "I had no idea what a Sunday school was and I didn't know why I wasn't going," he later recalled, "so I fell back on the safest answer – 'my mother won't let me.'" The next week, the future minister found himself in Sunday school! Not long afterward, the teacher asked her students how many of them were ready to give their hearts to Jesus. Everyone raised their hands, except for Petursson. When the teacher asked him why he didn't join the others, he protested, "'Cause I need it myself!"

After graduation from high school, Petursson attended the Winnipeg Normal School, followed by a year of study at the University of Manitoba. Although he only taught school for three years, he maintained his teacher's certificate throughout his adult life and, even as a clergyman, his vocation for teaching shone through his work as a minister and politician. Encouraged by both his father and his uncle, who was also a Unitarian minister, Petursson headed for Chicago to train for the ministry. He completed both his undergraduate degree and his graduate coursework at the same time and was awarded the Bachelor of Philosophy degree by the University of Chicago

in 1929. Three years later, after completing his thesis, "The Development of Liberalism Amongst the Icelanders in North America," he was awarded the Bachelor of Divinity by Meadville Theological School, a Unitarian seminary affiliated of the University of Chicago.

Petursson was called to be minister of All Souls Church in Winnipeg in 1929. Founded twenty-five years earlier by H.F.M. Ross and Arthur Puttee, the first Labour member of the Canadian parliament, the fortunes of All Souls Church had waxed and waned during the intervening years. During its heyday, a small church was built on the northeast corner of Furby Street and Westminster Avenue, in what was then a rather upscale neighbourhood. The congregation had strong ties to the labour movement throughout its history, so the young Petursson was a natural fit, since he had come under the influence of socialist thinking while a student in Chicago, much to the displeasure of his otherwise conservative family.

After five years at All Souls, Petursson was invited to become minister of First Federated Church, which had been established in 1921 through a merger of the First Icelandic Unitarian Society and the Winnipeg Tabernacle. By this time, All Souls Church had moved from its own building and was sharing space with the Federated Church, consolidating the Unitarian presence in the city on the northwest corner of Sargent Avenue and Banning Street. Petursson spent a year in Iceland improving his command of the language before returning to take charge of both congregations, which merged a decade later to form a single church. From then until his retirement, he preached in English at the morning service and in Icelandic in the evening.

Although the congregation was legally First Federated Church until the 1990s, as the years passed it was commonly known simply as the Unitarian Church of Winnipeg. During Petursson's ministry, he opened the pulpit to a wide array of progressive guests – J.S. Woodsworth, Stanley Knowles, Brock Chisholm, and Joe Zuken. Petursson himself waded into a variety of controversial issues. In the 1930s, he crossed swords with the chief justice of the Manitoba Court of Appeal over punishment. In the 1950s, he challenged public funding for private and parochial schools. He engaged in a spirited and public debate with James R. Mutchmor, the moderator of the United Church of Canada, about the virtues of child care. He was also a leader in the establishment of the Funeral Planning and Memorial Society of Manitoba, which brought him the enmity of undertakers far and wide.

In a 1942 radio broadcast, Petursson remarked that, "Religion must become more human centered – more generally humanistic – and must concern itself more with serving men's souls by giving them an abundant life here, instead of continually calling on them to repent sins into which they have too often been driven by social and economic wrongs, which we permit to exist within the social order."

Petursson was named Regional Director for the Western Canada by the American Unitarian Association in 1943, a position he held through various changes of nomenclature until 1966. In this role, he guided the transition of the United Conference of Icelandic Churches into becoming the ethnically and linguistically inclusive Western Canada Unitarian Conference. During his long tenure, he was instrumental in establishing new congregations in Thunder Bay, Regina, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Calgary. Amazingly, he undertook this responsibility while continuing to serve as minister of the Banning Street church!



Despite his manifold contributions to the church and the Icelandic community, Petursson is most widely remembered as a politician. He was elected to the Winnipeg School Board in 1942 as a Labour member and continued to serve until 1951, after which he appointed to the Winnipeg Municipal Hospital Commission. He was chairman of the Winnipeg School survey committee in 1948 and an advocate of the Reavis survey of Winnipeg schools. He twice ran for parliament. The first time, he stood as the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) candidate in Norquay, where he placed a second behind the Liberal candidate. After his retirement, in 1965, he stood as the New Democratic Party (NDP) candidate in Winnipeg South Centre, increasing his party's share of the vote but placing a distant third.

Petursson was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba in 1966, representing the constituency of Wellington. When the New Democratic Party formed the government three years later, he was asked by Edward Schreyer to join the cabinet, thereby becoming a "minister" for the second time! As Minister of Cultural Affairs from 1969 until 1971, he oversaw arrangements for the celebration of Manitoba's centennial as a province, a fitting portfolio for someone whose professional experience emphasized the importance of ceremony. Although he loved the legislature, he was happy to leave the cabinet after the centennial celebration, since he preferred life as a backbencher, which enabled him to influence government policy without the daily chore of implementing it. He served three terms in the legislature but when it prorogued in 1977, he did not stand for re-election.

Petursson was president of the Icelandic National League of North America and also served on the general committee that was formed to promote the establishment of an

Icelandic department at the University of Manitoba. In 1959, he was one of the key figures responsible for amalgamating Winnipeg's two Icelandic newspapers to create *Lögberg-Heimskringla*. By maintaining the historical continuity of its predecessors, this newspaper is the oldest continuously published ethnic publication in North America. Over the years, his community service included work with the Welfare Council, Family Bureau and the Canadian Mental Health Association.

Petursson was the recipient of numerous honours during his life but two stand out from among the others. In 1952, he received the Knight Cross of the Order of the Falcon, the highest honour bestowed by the Icelandic government, for his contributions to the preservation and promotion of Icelandic culture in North America. While he was Minister of Cultural Affairs, in 1970, his alma mater, Meadville Theological School, awarded him the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in recognition of his long and distinguished ministry.

Petursson married Thorey Gislason in 1926, around the time that he commenced his studies in Chicago. They had two children, Anna and Philip, the latter of whom became a mechanical engineer. A year after Thorey's death in 1978, Petursson married Kathryn Bower.

Philip M. Petursson died on May 12, 1988 – Manitoba Day – after a lengthy struggle with Alzheimer's disease, which robbed him of his much-deserved rest after so many years of public service. Nevertheless, he remained active through most of the years that followed his second retirement in 1977, conducting rites of passage, guest preaching, mentoring ministerial students and enjoying the summers at his lakeside retreat.

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