

Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson, D.D.

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

As a minister and editor, businessman and cultural advocate, Rögnvaldur Pétursson stands out as one of the pre-eminent leaders of Canada's Icelandic community during the first four decades of the twentieth century. A man of enormous intellect, his reputation as a religious leader and literary figure extended far beyond his adopted city. Indeed, he was fittingly described as "a highly esteemed and widely recognized citizen in the foremost cultural circles of Canada and the United States."



Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson in the late 1930s.

Rögnvaldur Pétursson was born at Ríp in the Skagafjörður region of Iceland on August 14, 1877, the son of Pétur Björnsson and Margrét Björnsdóttir. When he was six years old, the family emigrated to the United States, settling at Hallson in what was then Dakota Territory. He was the second born of four remarkable brothers – the others being Björn, Hannes and Ólafur – all of whom went on to distinguished careers in Manitoba. Their father was a member of the Icelandic Cultural Society, an organization of freethinkers and religious liberals that had been inspired by the Ethical Culture movement of Felix Adler.

Pétursson attended Wesley College, now the University of Winnipeg, from 1896 until 1898, when he proceeded to Meadville Theological School, which was then in Pennsylvania, to train for the Unitarian ministry. He excelled at Meadville and graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1902, receiving the Perkins Scholarship, which enabled him to study Old Norse and German at Harvard University the following year. At Harvard, he was a roommate of the brilliant Arctic explorer, Vilhjálmur Stefánsson.

The selection of Rögnvaldur Pétursson as minister of the First Icelandic Unitarian Society in 1903 ushered in a period of unprecedented growth and vitality for that struggling congregation. At first, his preaching was considered too intellectual by some but, over time, he became noted for his warmth and human sympathy in the pulpit. Even so, his sermons were described as, "elevated in thought, imaginative, models of structure and form, and polished in style." He argued for the fundamental unity of all religious experience, weaving together the ancient truths of pagan mythology and

Christian scripture with the insights of modern philosophy and science. For him, religious experience was forever evolving, preserving what was best in older forms while being refined by newer discoveries and insights. "The older faith," he once wrote, "though superseded by a later one, still lived on in lay and legend, saga and song. It afforded the valuable privilege of contrast and comparison, so essential for right thinking and unbiased judgment. For it must always remain true, that he who knows only one religion knows none."

Two years into his ministry, the First Icelandic Unitarian Society built a new church on the southeast corner of Sargent Avenue and Nena Street (now Sherbrook), which was architecturally modelled on the historic Unitarian church in Meadville, Pennsylvania. With a portico resembling that of an Athenian temple, the new building could seat three hundred in its main auditorium and featured stained glass windows that had been designed and executed by Friðrik (Fred) Swanson, a local artist. The congregation prospered at the new site, which was more centrally located as the Icelandic community became increasingly dispersed through the west end of the city. A cultural society was organized, patterned on the one in North Dakota, and the church became as much a cultural centre as a religious one.

In 1909, Pétursson was appointed field secretary of the American Unitarian Association with responsibility for the Icelandic congregations across the Canadian prairies, while Guðmundur A. Árnason was called as his successor in Winnipeg. After six years, Pétursson returned as minister of the First Icelandic Unitarian Society while continuing to serve as field secretary. The following year, he and Friðrik J. Bergmann, minister of the Winnipeg Tabernacle, initiated talks aimed at merging their two congregations, as well as those that were allied with them. (Founded as a free Lutheran church, the Winnipeg Tabernacle had grown increasingly liberal under Bergmann's leadership and was the flagship church of the so-called New Theology congregations, so it seemed natural for the two movements to merge to create a united liberal church.) The merger was accomplished in 1920, two years after Bergmann's untimely death, creating the First Federated Church of



Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson presiding at a confirmation service at the First Icelandic Unitarian Church, on the southeast corner of Sargent Avenue and Sherbrook Street, sometime around 1915. Among those confirmed were two young men who later went on to become Unitarian ministers – Philip M. Petursson and H.I.S. (Ingi) Borgford – and Pétursson's daughter, Margrét.

Unitarians and Other Liberal Christians. Ragnar Kvaran was called to take charge of the newly merged congregation while Pétursson continued as field secretary, organizing the United Conference of Icelandic Churches to bring together the Unitarian and New Theology churches into a single association. Pétursson resigned as field secretary in 1928, to devote his attention to business and community service, but he continued to be the dominant personality in the Western Canadian region of the denomination. After a seven year hiatus, he returned as field secretary in 1935, continuing until his death nearly five years later.

Pétursson was the founding president of the Icelandic National League in North America (INL). The INL was established to promote good citizenship among people of Icelandic descent, work for the preservation of the Icelandic language and its literature in North America, and promote goodwill and cooperation between the people of Iceland and their kin in North America. At the time of the INL's founding, Pétursson said, "The first step is to know oneself, and this one cannot do, who knows nothing of the history of the people from whom one is descended. In every civilized country, history and literature are the basis of higher education. To be fully developed as individuals and the best possible citizens of this, their country, the people of Icelandic origin must study their own language and literature at the same time as the official courses of study."

The Icelandic National League transcended partisan politics and sectarian religion, bridging the two greatest sources of division among the Icelandic immigrants and their descendents in Canada and the United States. (Indeed, while the first president was a Unitarian minister and a Conservative in politics, the vice president was a Lutheran layman and a Liberal.) The INL provided two travelling language instructors from 1919 until 1933, published an annual periodical, *Tímarít*, and sponsored the publication of several important historical and literary works. In addition, the League provided opportunities for networking across the usual social boundaries of the community. In 1922, the INL named Pétursson to head a committee to study the establishment of a chair in Icelandic studies at the University of Manitoba. When the millennium of Iceland's Althing, the world's oldest parliament, was commemorated in 1930, Pétursson was the principal organizer of the North American delegations and, nearly a decade later, he arranged the Icelandic exhibition at the New York World's Fair.

After the Jón Bjarnason Academy was reorganized as a nondenominational institution in 1935, Pétursson joined the board of the school. Despite the desperate financial conditions that prevailed in the midst the country's worst depression, the board managed to pay off the outstanding mortgage, liquidate other debts and bring the school's city taxes up to date!

Rögnvaldur Pétursson was a towering figure in Icelandic letters on both sides of the Atlantic. In 1904, Pétursson launched the monthly magazine *Heimir*, which was primarily a literary publication, serving as editor until 1910. (The title of the magazine came from the name of the protagonist of an Old Norse myth about the encounter between northern and southern societies.) Pétursson organized Viking Press in 1913 to acquire ownership of *Heimskringla*, an Icelandic weekly published in Winnipeg, serving as editor for a year before turning the editor's chair over to a ministerial colleague. For the last twenty years of his life, he was the managing editor of that paper. From 1919 until his death, Pétursson edited *Tímarit*, the annual publication of the Icelandic National League, which was also mostly a literary publication. When the noteworthy Icelandic Canadian poet, Stephan G. Stephansson, died in 1927, Pétursson was named as his literary executor.



The Pétursson brothers (clockwise from top left): Hannes, Björn, Ólafur and Rögnvaldur.

Although he was a prolific writer, most of Pétursson's work appeared in magazines and newspapers rather than books. He wrote *Ferðalýsingar* (Travelogues) in 1914, which chronicled his tour of Iceland two years earlier. A decade after his death, an anthology of his sermons and lectures, *Fögur er foldin* (Fair Is the Earth), was published in Reykjavík, Iceland. Edited by Thorkell Jóhannesson, who was rector of the University of Iceland and his wife's nephew, its wide array of topics and warmth of tone convey some sense of Pétursson's character and appeal.

When he was twenty-one, Pétursson married Hólmfríður Jónasdóttir Kristjánsson and they had four children: Margrét, Thorvaldur, Ólafur and Pétur. After living on Notre Dame Avenue during the early years of his ministry, the Péturssons moved to an elegant residence at 45 Home Street. They were known as "generous and congenial hosts" to an astonishingly wide and varied circle of friends.

Pétursson was honoured by his alma mater, Meadville Theological School, when it conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity in 1928. Two years later, the University of Iceland granted him an honorary Doctor of Philosophy degree on the occasion of the millennium of the Althing (Iceland's parliament). In 1939, the

government of Iceland recognized his lifetime of service to Icelandic literature and culture by making him a Grand Knight Commander in the Order of the Falcon. He died only weeks later, on January 30, 1940.

Reflecting on Pétursson's life and work, Louis C. Cornish, former president of the American Unitarian Association, lauded "his sterling qualities of character, his prophetic spirit, and his wide influence on both sides of the sea. ... As preacher, administrator, adviser and welcome friend, wherever he went he was loved and trusted, and he became widely known, particularly in western Canada. ... He lived the abundant life of consecration and service, he gave himself freely and without stint, and his labour was not without satisfying recognition."

The Sacred Triad

"The sacred Triad – Wisdom, Fortitude, Justice – not only reveals the divine manifestations of the Universe but also implies the goal set for human attainment and perfection. This the ancient Hávamál makes clear. It reiterates, over and over again, that wisdom, discernment, the understanding heart, is not only to be coveted above all things, but is the underlying principle of the Perfect Life. "No more precious burden," it declares, "can one carry on Life's highway than supreme wisdom. In unknown parts it excels riches, which are a dire distress." Freedom, self-reliance, courage, endurance, justice – such are the requisites of happiness. It is reared on wisdom. Wisdom dissipates fear, dispels error, clarifies the vision, enlightens the judgment. "It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path." The individual, thus emancipated by Wisdom, is free. He is raised to his highest estate, empowered with freedom of choice, invested with the dignity of a personal responsibility."

- Rögnvaldur Pétursson, D.D.

Loving Friends of the Deities

"The early Norse religion did not distinguish sharply between the purely metaphysical and ethical. Human relationship to the divine was felt to be that of friendship, sustained by communion and adoration, never by supplication nor fear. Scores of passages in the classic writers, referring to devotees of the ancient faith, speak of them as the "friends" or "loving friends" of the deities, never as fearing them nor as their servants or slaves. The "Fear of God" is an experience utterly unknown to the North."

- Rögnvaldur Pétursson, D.D.

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