

Rev. Björn B. Jónsson, D.D.

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

When Björn B. Jónsson was called as the pastor of First Lutheran Church in 1914, succeeding Jón Bjarnason, his first pastoral duty in the city was to conduct the funeral of his predecessor! An earlier effort to secure an assistant for Bjarnason, whose health was declining, had failed to produce the desired result. When the founding pastor resigned, the matter of succession became urgent. Jónsson was selected from among a field of eight candidates, following a process that resembled one more commonly associated with electing the leader of a political party. After twenty-four ballots, Jónsson was at last nominated to be Bjarnason's successor! A formal call was extended and, the number of ballots notwithstanding, Jónsson accepted, arriving in Winnipeg in June.

Björn B. Jónsson was the son of Björn Jónsson and Thorbjörg Björnsdóttir, pioneer Icelandic immigrants who had come to Canada with the so-called "Large Group" in 1876, when the future minister was a young child. He was born at the farmstead Ás in Kelduhverfi on June 19, 1870. Ás was once one of the largest estates in Iceland, stretching from Europe's most powerful waterfall, Dettifoss, north to the Arctic ocean. It possessed abundant woodland in a country where forests were scarce, as well as fertile meadowland, but flooding in the decades before Jónsson's birth had greatly diminished its productive capacity. He and his parents settled near Lake Winnipeg following their arrival in Canada, relocating to Argyle in 1881. He was educated at public schools in Canada before attending Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. He graduated from the Maywood Lutheran Seminary in Chicago in 1893, one of two Icelandic students to complete their ministerial training that year. Their graduation ushered in an era during which the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod favoured American-trained clergy over those educated in Iceland, since it was increasingly believed that the training received in the old country was inadequate to the needs of the congregations in North America. B.B. Jónsson, as he was commonly known, was twice married. His first wife, Sigurbjörg Stefánsdóttir, died in 1905, long before he began his Winnipeg pastorate, while his second wife, Ingiríður



Guðmundsdóttir, was described as “an example of forthrightness and accomplishment” for her work in support of the church and her husband’s ministry.

Prior to his Winnipeg pastorate, Jónsson taught school briefly and was named mission pastor for the Icelandic Lutheran Synod following his ordination on June 25, 1893. He served simultaneously as pastor of four Minnesota congregations from 1894 until 1914, including St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Minneota, and the Vesterheim Congregation in Lyon County. In 1911, he added a fifth congregation to his circuit when he became pastor of the English Lutheran Church in Minneota, which he served until his move to Winnipeg! One congregant from those years later recalled, “Pastor Jónsson stole the hearts of the congregation and they could not resist him.” He was named chaplain of the Minnesota Legislature during its 1909 session, a singular honour for one who was a “double immigrant” to the United States.

One of the bright lights of the Lutheran Synod while a young minister, he was one of three ministers appointed to a committee charged with considering the affiliation of the Icelandic Lutherans with the General Council of the Lutheran Church in America, an umbrella organization that included in its membership forty-six of the fifty-seven Lutheran synods on this continent. In 1897, this committee supported the idea of affiliation in principle but recommended that the synod proceed with caution and careful consideration. At issue was the General Council’s requirement that the Icelandic Synod subscribe to certain creeds which were unfamiliar to the Icelanders, coupled with reduced congregational authority over their own affairs. Although changes were made to the synod’s bylaws, the vote to affiliate failed to receive the two-thirds majority necessary for ratification. After forty-three years of “consideration,” the synod finally affiliated with the United Lutheran Church in 1940 – two years after B.B. Jónsson’s death!

Around the turn of the century, Jónsson was appointed to the board of directors of the proposed Icelandic Lutheran academy. While this school did not materialize until the establishment of the Jón Bjarnason Academy a decade and half later, the board’s efforts led to the appointment of an Icelandic lecturer at Wesley College, a founding college of what is now the University of Winnipeg, in 1901. He was secretary of the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod for many years before becoming its president in 1908. So B.B. Jónsson was already a well-respected and important leader among Icelandic Lutherans by the time he was called to Winnipeg.

After a generation of religious conflict among the Icelanders in Manitoba, B.B. Jónsson was a diplomat who worked toward reconciliation and harmony, striving to reach across the divisions that existed. He eschewed factionalism and sought to build bridges between hitherto estranged constituencies, looking for opportunities to serve diverse needs and interests while preserving overall unity. When the Jón Bjarnason

Academy finally opened its doors in 1914, it was Jónsson's influence that led to the school admitting students without regard to religious affiliation, helping to heal relations between Lutherans and Unitarians.

In 1923, Jónsson inaugurated an English-language worship service on Sunday mornings, extending the reach of the church to a much broader constituency. Recognizing that the process of assimilation was well underway, the Sunday school was organized into English- and Icelandic-speaking units and by the 1930s, English became the sole language of instruction in the children's program. In this, First Lutheran Church under Jónsson's leadership was far in advance of the Unitarian Church further along Sargent Avenue, which clung tenaciously to the Icelandic language during this period. Yet, at the same time, the Lutheran Church encouraged the study of Icelandic by establishing a language school devoted to teaching the ancestral language.

In 1921, B.B. Jónsson led his congregation from its building at the corner of Bannatyne Avenue and Sherbrook Street to its present home on Victor Street, just south of Sargent Avenue. The building had been erected seven years earlier to house the Winnipeg Tabernacle, an Icelandic congregation first organized as a Lutheran church but later adhering to the so-called "New Theology," which had merged with the Unitarians to form the First Federated Church of Unitarians and Other Liberal Christians. First Lutheran acquired the building after a protracted legal dispute between First Federated Church and a remnant of the former Tabernacle congregation which objected to the merger.

Although the Sunday school reached its zenith in the 1920s and the English-speaking service grew rapidly, strengthening the church's membership base, the congregation struggled financially. It carried a large mortgage and had been unable to sell its former building. After renting it to the Salvation Army, the building was eventually sold to Holy Rosary Church but for much less money than the Lutherans had expected to realize on the sale.

Intermarriage grew rapidly in the years following the First World War and B.B. Jónsson reported that, by 1930 or so, four out of five weddings he conducted included a partner who was not Icelandic. Recognizing this inexorable trend, he encouraged the church to celebrate its Icelandic heritage while moving in the direction of becoming a church for Christians from far and wide, irrespective of their ethnic identity.

B.B. Jónsson did not restrict his efforts to First Lutheran Church. He was president of the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod for fifteen years, from 1908 until 1923, editor of *Sameiningin* (Unity), the synod's periodical, from 1907 to 1932, and editor of three other periodicals at different times – *Áramót* (Turn of the Year), *Kennarinn* (The Teacher) and *Vinland*. During the First World War, he was chairman of Canada's Lutheran Service Commission, which was responsible for meeting both spiritual and

temporal needs of Lutheran members of the military. An important figure in the establishment of Betel Home for the aged in Gimli, he presided at the institution's opening in 1915 and was responsible for naming it.

Luther Seminary of St. Paul, Minnesota recognized the value of his ministry in 1921, when it conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity. The esteem with which Jónsson was held by professional colleagues was twice demonstrated by his election as president of the Ministerial Association of Winnipeg, once in 1925 and then again in 1928.

B.B. Jónsson died in 1938, dampening the congregation's celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the church. Recalling his inspirational leadership, historian Wilhelm Kristjanson wrote, "He was one of the outstanding men in the history of his church. He had marked qualities of leadership and breadth of vision, and he successfully guided the fortunes of his church in a period of transition, with the second generation growing up into full and harmonious participation in the affairs of the congregation." Beyond the walls of the church itself, he was a respected leader who helped bridge the differences between churches, generations and ethnic communities.

Works Consulted

Valdimar J. Eylands, *Lutherans in Canada*. Winnipeg: The Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod in North America, 1945: 191-195 and 219.

Wilhelm Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*. Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965.

Walter J. Lindal, *The Icelanders in Canada*. Ottawa: National Publishing, 1967.

Tryggvi J. Oleson, *Saga Íslendinga í Vesturheimi*. Vol. 5. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs, 1963.

Olmar Sigurdson, "First Lutheran Church 1914-1953." In *75th Anniversary*. Winnipeg: First Lutheran Church, 1953: 13-19.

Charles Vandersluis, editor, *Ninety Years at St. Paul's*. Marshall, Minnesota: Ousman Printing, 1977.