

Rev. Jón Bjarnason, D.D.

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

The first ordained minister among the Icelandic immigrants in North America was Jón Bjarnason, a man of clear conviction, singular devotion and native leadership ability. The founding minister of First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg, there was no aspect of the early life of the Icelandic community in this city that remained untouched by his influence, whether sacred or secular.

Jón Bjarnason was born November 15, 1845, at the farmstead Thvottá in Álftafjörður, along the southeastern coast of Iceland. The home of Síðu-Hallur during the Saga Age, the early Christian missionary Thangbrand wintered there, converting the pagan Síðu-Hallur and his family to Christianity. It was an auspicious place for the birth of the man who was to carry that faith across the Atlantic, where he became the foremost clergyman in the history of the Icelandic people in Canada. Bjarnason's father, Bjarni Sveinsson, was himself a minister and a scholar of Greek and Roman literature, while his mother, Rósa Brynjólfsdóttir, came from a family of clergymen.

When he was sixteen years old, he entered Latin School at Reykjavik, which he found lacking in its spiritual substance. After completing his studies there, he entered the Theological Seminary, receiving his degree in 1869, when he was still twenty-three. After ordination, he briefly served as assistant pastor to his father.

Bjarnason married Lára Guðjónsen, the daughter of Iceland's leading musicologist, on his twenty-fifth birthday. Reflecting on how the two of them ministered together, Walter Lindal observed, "it is very rare that a minister and his wife form such a perfect team as did Rev. Jón Bjarnason and Frú Lára, as she was always called. They were both devote and sincere, both equally anxious to give of themselves ... Both were good teachers, a training much needed during the pioneer days." In the fall of 1873, the Bjarnasons left Iceland for Milwaukee, where a small group of Icelandic émigrés had settled. Soon after his arrival, Bjarnason accepted a position as an instructor at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. Teaching classical languages and geography, it looked to be the beginning of a promising academic career. On the first



Sunday in August, 1874, Bjarnason preached the first sermon ever delivered in Icelandic on this side of the Atlantic, when he presided at a special service marking the millennium of the settlement of Iceland, and was elected president of the Icelandic Association that was formed on that occasion. Finding the leaders of the Norwegian Synod reactionary, he left his position at Luther College and went to work for the newspaper *Skandinaven* in Chicago until 1876, when he was named editor of *Budstikken*, a Norwegian newspaper in Minneapolis.

In 1877, Bjarnason responded to a call from five Icelandic congregations in New Iceland, the Icelandic settlement on the western shore of Lake Winnipeg. Although the publishers of *Budstikken* were already paying him far more than he had been offered by the Lake Winnipeg congregations, they offered him a substantial raise to remain but he felt his duty lay in returning to the calling for which he had trained, so he headed for Manitoba. Bjarnason's circuit extended from just north of present-day Winnipeg Beach to the isolated community on Hecla Island, then known as Mikley. Conditions were primitive as there were as yet no churches in which the congregations could meet for worship.

As it happened, two ministers arrived in the district within a month of one another – Bjarnason and Páll Thorláksson. While both were Lutheran, the two men espoused different doctrines, Thorláksson having been trained at a conservative American seminary belonging to the Missouri Synod and presently adhered to the Norwegian Synod, which aroused suspicion among some Icelanders. Bjarnason, in contrast, represented the mainstream tendencies of Icelandic Lutheranism, which was relatively liberal when compared to that of other Lutheran churches in North America. It was not long before the differences between the followers of these two charismatic ministers – called *Jónsmenn* and *Pálsmenn* – spilled over into a public argument. Early in 1878, Bjarnason's followers convened a series of meetings at Gimli to discuss spiritual matters, which were attended by representatives of both groups. Towards the end of March, the colony council was sufficiently concerned about the brewing controversy that it convened a public meeting to try to find some common ground. The meeting opened at 10 o'clock one morning and continued until 11 o'clock the following night! While members of the two groups departed on amicable terms, it was not the end of the matter.

A year later, Bjarnason published an essay entitled "Necessary Exhortation" in the newspaper *Framfari* (Progress), outlining the varied ways in which the teachings of Thorláksson and the Missouri Synod differed from the common Icelandic understanding of Lutheranism. In March 1879 there was a second religious disputation, the two ministers engaging in a public debate on themes ranging from the inspiration of the Bible to the nature of the sacraments. Even though the settlers had barely had time

to construct housing and were still struggling to earn a meagre living from the land, they took time to come from across the settlement to hear the ministers debate the fine points of Christian doctrine. The social harmony of the colony was irreparably damaged by the second disputation.

Thorláksson joined an exodus of disappointed immigrants to a more promising new settlement in Pembina County, Dakota Territory. Then, the following year, Bjarnason ordained Halldór Briem as his successor and returned to Iceland, where he served a parish in Seyðisfjörður, near where he had grown up. This allowed him to be near his father, whose health was failing.

In 1884, Bjarnason received a call to return to Manitoba as minister of the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg. The first Lutheran service in Winnipeg had been conducted by him nearly seven years earlier – on October 21, 1877 – and he had then taken the lead in organizing a congregation but services were infrequent in the years that followed, never exceeding five in any given year. After Bjarnason returned to Winnipeg in 1884, the church quickly grew numerically and organizationally. Meeting in the Progressive Society Hall and other rented premises, the young congregation resolved to erect their own church, which was accomplished during the summer of 1887. A week before Christmas that year, Bjarnason presided over the dedication of a frame building at the southwest corner of McWilliam Avenue and Nena Street (now Pacific and Sherbrook), which was the congregation's home for the next seventeen years. Under Bjarnason's pastoral leadership, First Lutheran Church became much more than a spiritual home, as important as that was – it was also a community centre, serving various secular needs of the Icelandic community in Winnipeg.

Less than a year after returning to the Canadian prairies, Bjarnason was elected as the first president of The Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod of America, a position he held until 1908. The synod initially brought together twelve congregations from both sides of the international border, reinforcing their connection to the Church of Iceland while steering an independent course from the established Lutheran bodies on the continent. Within five years, the synod nearly doubled in size and, by the turn of the century, it had increased to thirty-two congregations. Taking seriously the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, Bjarnason encouraged lay members to take the lead in many church activities and was especially supportive of the work with children and youth. He was also editor of *Sameiningin* (Unity), the official organ of the synod, from the time it began publication until his death nearly three decades later. This periodical proved to be important both here and in Iceland, since the state church in the old country did not yet have a publication of its own. It was also an important vehicle through which Bjarnason sought to influence the Icelanders in North America on both sacred and secular matters. This impressive record of service was recognized in 1910,

when Thiel College in Pennsylvania awarded him the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree.

Like many other clergymen of this era, Bjarnason opposed the use of intoxicating substances. He promoted the establishment of the short-lived Temperance Society, serving as its president. While its main purpose was to reduce and eventually eliminate the use of alcohol among the Icelandic population in Winnipeg, the Temperance Society also became a forum for young people to practice their public speaking skills and served to bring Icelanders into greater contact with the larger population of the city, as the society worked with other temperance groups to affect public policy. Despite his devotion to temperance, Bjarnason did not support legal prohibition and discouraged both church and synod from taking a stand on that political issue, preferring to appeal to individual conscience in order to achieve his desired end.

As a new century beckoned, the leaders of First Lutheran Church determined that their existing facility was no longer meeting the needs of church members, so plans were made to construct a new church to replace it. Land was acquired a few blocks to the south, at the corner of Bannatyne Avenue and Sherbrook Street, and construction began in the spring of 1903. On June 26 of the following year, Bjarnason led worship for the last time in the old church before leading a procession of members south along Sherbrook Street to their new 800-seat church, which was as impressive a cathedral as any that the Icelandic people had yet known. Before the year was out, the church was seriously damaged by fire.

Bjarnason could be unsparing in controversy when he considered fundamental issues to be at stake and it seems that, throughout his career, he found himself battling one adversary or another. In the early years in New Iceland, it was the proto-fundamentalism of the Norwegian and Missouri synods against which he struggled, seeming to espouse a liberal position. Yet when the radical Unitarian movement emerged among the Icelanders, he defended what he deemed to be the traditional teachings of the Christian church in Iceland. Then, in the new century, when Friðrik J. Bergmann advocated a liberal stance, Bjarnason once again held his ground. Reflecting on Bjarnason's manifold gifts as a leader, Walter Lindal lamented, "the only fault that might be found in his leadership was that, at times, it lacked tolerance."

Despite the seemingly ever-present controversies, Bjarnason was highly esteemed among the Icelandic people in Canada – even among his adversaries. When his theological nemesis, Björn Pétursson, was married, it was Bjarnason who presided at the wedding and the two men remained friends despite the harsh things they wrote about one another in the press! Rögnvaldur Pétursson, the leader of the Unitarians, lauded Bjarnason's intellect. One of Iceland's leading clerics, Matthías Jochumsson, who betrayed strong liberal leanings himself, said of Jón Bjarnason, "A more earnest

and sincere man has not donned a clerical robe in this country.” Even those who disagreed most with Bjarnason strongly admired his integrity and genius.

Jón Bjarnason died in Winnipeg on June 3, 1914. His remains were buried two weeks later on the day traditionally marked as Iceland’s national holiday. Although his successor, Björn B. Jónsson, had been selected several months before, Bjarnason’s funeral proved to be his first official act in his new pulpit.

Early in his pastorate at First Lutheran Church, Jón Bjarnason had donated the honorarium he received for editing *Sameiningin* to launch a fund to support the establishment of an Icelandic Lutheran academy. A year before his death, the dream of establishing such an institution was finally realized. When Bjarnason died, this private high school was named the Jón Bjarnason Academy in his honour. Ten years after classes first commenced, the academy moved into its own building at 652 Home Street and it received permission to teach first and second year arts courses from the University of Manitoba. From the beginning, the student body included both Lutherans and Unitarians, so the academy served to bridge the religious chasm that had divided the Icelandic community for decades. When the Winnipeg School Division discontinued twelfth grade instruction in 1930, as an austerity measure, students from outside the Icelandic community flocked to the Jón Bjarnason Academy and the student population became increasingly diverse. Ten years later, when the twelfth grade was restored to the public schools in Winnipeg, the board of directors decided to close the academy. While the dream of establishing a permanent junior college within the Icelandic Lutheran Synod ultimately failed, the Jón Bjarnason Academy proved to be an important community centre at a time when other Icelandic Canadian institutions were declining in influence. Ralph Waldo Emerson maintained that “an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man” and so it was that the Jón Bjarnason Academy was the lengthened shadow of Winnipeg’s pioneer Icelandic pastor, extending his influence for more than a generation after his death. The significance of that memorial reaches heavenward as surely as the marble that now marks his final resting place.

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