

Rev. Valdimar J. Eylands, D.D., Th.D.

By Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson

Reflecting on the significance of Pastor V.J. Eylands, an admirer of his noted that he was “a man of strong character, inherited from his ancestors and augmented by adverse conditions and struggles to obtain the education necessary to fulfill his versatile talents as pastor and mentor to the communities he served. He was a true son of Iceland and Canada.” For Winnipeggers, he was the revered pastor of First Lutheran Church, a leader of the Icelandic community, and a committed citizen in the city’s West End.

Valdimar J. Eylands was born March 3, 1901, at Víðidal in Hunavatnssysla, Iceland, the son of Jón Daníelsson and Sigurlaug Thorsteinsdóttir. Educated in Iceland, he later received the Bachelor of Arts degree from Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota in 1922 and the Bachelor of Divinity degree from Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul in 1925, graduating with honours. Ordained in 1925, he served churches at Upham, North Dakota and Blaine and Bellingham, in Washington. While serving in Upham, he was married to Lilja Johnson, sister of Nels Johnson, who was Attorney-General of North Dakota. In March 1938, he was called to the First Lutheran Church of



Winnipeg as assistant pastor to B.B. Jónsson, simultaneously serving the church in Selkirk. Before summer, Jónsson died and Eylands was called as his successor, being installed on September 18 of that year.

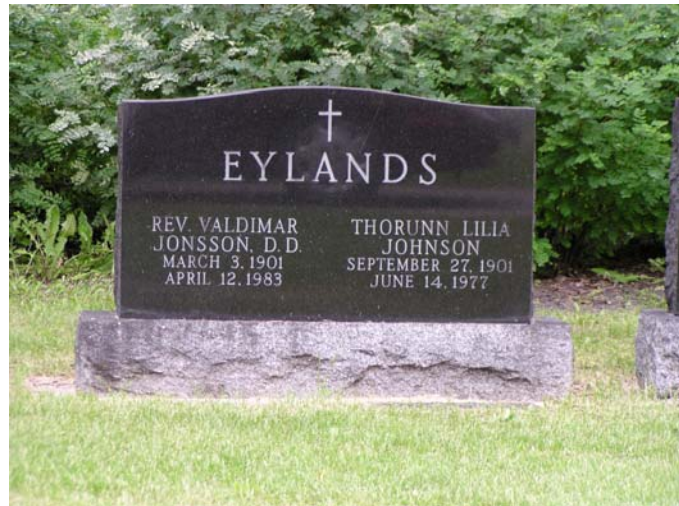
Eylands’ sermons were memorable for his careful biblical scholarship, which showed both spiritual depth and critical awareness, as well as his capacity to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of ancient truths. While he never strayed from the core message of the Christian scriptures, as he understood them, he knew that people would not listen to their saving message “unless they sense something is being said that is of personal importance to them.”

During Eylands’ pastorate, interethnic marriages at First Lutheran Church reached ninety percent and one mark of his accomplishment is the large proportion of such couples who remained active in the church, although one partner was not of Icelandic background. During his career, he married 844 couples, baptized 1,410 children and presided at 1,066 funerals.

By the fall of 1966, the linguistic transition was complete, making real the motto, “The Faith of the Fathers in the Language of Their Children.” While the occasional Icelandic sermon continued to be offered on special occasions, First Lutheran Church had become an English-language, culturally diverse congregation. Early in his pastorate, he had launched *Our Parish Messenger*, a weekly bulletin in English.

Despite these major changes in congregational life, First Lutheran Church by no means lost its Icelandic flavour or keen awareness of its heritage. Like his two predecessors, Eylands was editor of *Sameiningin* (Unity), the monthly periodical of the Icelandic Lutheran Synod, serving until 1961. Eylands exchanged pulpits with Eiríkur Brynjólfsson from 1947 until 1948, serving the church at Útskálar, near Keflavík in Iceland, while Brynjólfsson filled the pulpit at First Lutheran Church. This exchange rekindled a sense of connection between the Church of Iceland and its flagship church in North America.

V.J. Eylands wrote the first inclusive historical survey of Canadian Lutheranism, published as *Lutherans in Canada* in 1945, which grew out of his own struggle to understand the diverse ethnic and doctrinal strands of his denomination in this country. “I cherish the hope,” he wrote, “that this book may ... contribute something toward further understanding and closer co-operation between the numerous and divergent elements of



the great Lutheran Church, in this great and blessed Dominion of Canada.” It achieved this end and more. Eylands’ history proved to be a vital milestone in the development of a distinctive Canadian Lutheran identity which, in time, overcame ethnic distinctions and led to the establishment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada.

Eylands’ contributions to the church were twice recognized with honorary doctorates. On the occasion of the diamond jubilee of First Lutheran Church, in 1953, he was awarded the Doctor of Divinity degree by United College, now the University of Winnipeg. Nearly a quarter century later, in 1977, the University of Iceland recognized his service to the church and Icelandic community on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as his writing, by awarding him the Doctor of Theology degree.

Eylands was president of the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba from 1949 until 1952, during which time he also served as a member of the general committee charged with promoting the creation of an Icelandic chair at the University of Manitoba.

After visiting the Holy Land in the summer of 1960, Eylands' impressions of life there – “some pathetic, some ridiculous, some sublime and inspiring” – showed his immense sensitivity to the complexity of the situation and his empathy for downtrodden people, while noting “the future looks ominous.” He was highly critical of the rampant commercialism that prevailed near the sacred sites of Jerusalem, while dismissing what he described as local superstitions about Jesus, particularly the tendency to attribute particular places to events in his life when, in fact, the exact locations are unknown. Yet, noting Goethe's assertion that one must visit the homeland of a poet if one is to understand that poet, Eylands observed, “if that is true of a poet, it is no less true of the great minds of all ages.” So it was that his own pilgrimage to the land of Jesus was “a sublime and inspiring experience.”

To mark his sixtieth birthday in 1961, Eylands' friends and admirers arranged the publication of an anthology of his writings, *Arfur og Æfintyr* (Essays and Travel). This eclectic collection includes an account of his early life in Iceland, an essay on the Winnipeg flood of 1950, sermons and speeches, and a travelogue detailing his 1960 pilgrimage through Europe and the Middle East.

V.J. Eylands died on April 12, 1983. Throughout his life, whatever other interests he had and whatever offices he held, he was first and foremost a devoted Lutheran pastor. In his last Christmas message, he conveyed his deep faith, with its abiding love of God and keen sense of justice and fairness: “Atheistic wisdom failed us. Superficial wisdom failed us. Mechanics without morality failed us. Competition without conscience failed us. But God has not degraded nor deserted us. ... Believing in the good news of the gospel we find our spirits moved, our vision enlarged, and our hearts warmed. ... We are called, not to solve the riddles of the universe, but to respond to the voice of its maker whom we call our Father in Heaven. He wants us to be a part of the world's cure and not of its cancer. He wants us to help make this world a better place in which *everyone* can live a meaningful and happy life. The *joyful news* of the gospel means not only that we are called to serve God and fellowmen in love, but also that we are saved, if we would have it so.” As pastor and mentor, author and community leader, V.J. Eylands was a faithful messenger of that gospel, spreading its good news far and wide, while living according to its demands.

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