

What UUs Owe to Icelandic Immigrants

Icelandic immigrants founded Unitarian congregations in Canada and the US. Their Canadian congregations were foundational to Unitarianism in that nation.

Once again, we owe a debt of gratitude to the scholarship of Stefan Jonasson, the author.

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During the last two decades of the 19th century and well into the 20th, there was an extensive Unitarian mission to the Nordic immigrant communities in Canada and the United States beginning with the appointment of the acclaimed poet Kristofer Janson as a missionary to the Norwegians of Minnesota in 1881. At first rather small, these missions blossomed – mostly among Icelanders, Norwegians, and Finns – during the early decades of the 20th century when they were sometimes referred to as “Foreign Missions at Home.” Denominational officials in Boston looked upon Scandinavians as the immigrant group most congenial to the culture of Unitarians, who were concentrated in New England. The Nordic missions were the most significant attempt at ethnic diversification ever undertaken by the American Unitarian Association – and the Icelandic mission was the most significant among them.



Unitarian church in Blaine, Washington, founded by Icelandic immigrants

At least 61 Nordic congregations and preaching stations were organized under the auspices of the American Unitarian Association: 33 Icelandic, 10 Finnish, 9 Norwegian, 6 Swedish, one Danish, and two pan-Scandinavian. Although many of these congregations were short-lived, 20 of them survived for at least a quarter of a century, while another 15 survived for at least a decade. Three of the churches founded by Icelandic immigrants continue to exist while another two retain their buildings but are dormant; two of the Norwegian churches and one Finnish church also remain.

Unitarian Influences in Iceland

While some may be surprised by Unitarian inroads among the Icelandic immigrants, they shouldn't be. In his book *Icelandic Church Saga*, John Hood, an Anglican priest who served as a chaplain in the British forces during the occupation of Iceland in the Second World War, wrote:

In the first half of the eighteenth century Bishop Finnur Jonsson records only two cases of marked Socinianism, a Unitarian tendency latent in Icelandic Lutheranism. But Icelanders are tolerant and Lutheranism is a liberal creed. Much Unitarianism existed unchecked, especially when bishops were infected. At the end of the century, when intercourse with a larger world increased, a wave of 'enlightenment' broke on the hard gray shores of Icelandic realism. On the crest of this movement wrote the versatile continentalised leader Magnus Stephensen [sic]. ... His new book, published in 1801, had the appeal of sentimental rhymes and ideas. The old hymns were purged not only from obsolete and difficult words, but also from what were considered difficult doctrines, such as the Divinity of Christ and the Atonement, and the Person and Work of the Holy Spirit; so that the result was a Socinian hymn-book.

In addition to the Chief Justice Magnús Stephenson, Icelandic Unitarians have generally claimed mathematician and poet Björn Gunnlaugsson as one of the principal thinkers who influenced the development of Unitarianism among the Icelandic people.

The first Icelander to openly espouse Unitarianism, however, was Magnús Eiríksson, a theologian and popular tutor in Copenhagen. A champion of the higher criticism of the Bible, as well as an advocate for the rights of women and religious minorities, Eiríksson declared his Unitarian views at a conference of the Danish People's Church in Copenhagen in 1871, amidst jeers, saying, "Even if it was at the price of my eternal salvation, I cannot hush the voice of my conscience and conviction!"

Among those in attendance that day was Matthías Jochumsson (below left), a Church of Iceland pastor and author of the lyrics of *Ó guð vors lands*, who had Unitarian sympathies of his own. He described himself as a "disciple and friend" of William Ellery



Channing, the prominent Unitarian clergyman in Boston, and maintained collegial relations with prominent British Unitarians, even being recognized as an official correspondent by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association. The Unitarians in Winnipeg tried to recruit him as their minister in 1894, but he found their brand of Unitarianism to be too rationalistic, in contrast to his own tendency towards romanticism.



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From Influence to Organization

When the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod was organized among the Icelandic immigrants in 1885, the liberals, who later formed the core of the Unitarian movement, objected to two of the key decisions made by the new synod. First of all, the liberals suggested that the name of the new synod should simply be the Christian Church, preferring what they considered to be a more broad and inclusive name. After all, while everyone knows that the official doctrine of the Church of Iceland is Lutheran, the church itself is known simply as *Þjóðkirkjan* – the National Church. Secondly, the liberals insisted that women should be entitled to vote and hold office in the new synod. They lost on both counts and the cracks that led to the Unitarian separation began to form at the synod's organizational meeting.



Stephan G. Stephansson (left) and Björn Pétursson (below right), who both lived in North Dakota at the time, subscribed to a magazine called *The Index*, a weekly devoted to free thought and free religion. (Charles Darwin was also among its subscribers.) Through *The Index*, they became acquainted with the Free Religious Association, a humanistic offshoot of the Unitarians, and the Ethical Culture Society, which had been founded among liberal Jews in New York City by Felix Adler. Under their influence, Stephansson founded the short-lived Icelandic Cultural Society in North

Dakota in 1888, which brought together Icelandic freethinkers while raising the ire of the Lutheran Synod. Björn was among the members of the Cultural Society, along with several others who would later be prominent in establishing the Icelandic Unitarian movement.

When *The Index* ceased publication in 1886, its subscription list was transferred to *Unity*, the magazine of the Western Unitarian Conference. Björn Pétursson responded to an advertisement in *Unity* and entered into correspondence with Jennie McCaine, who was the general secretary of the Post Office Mission of the Minnesota Unitarian Conference. It was a fateful encounter. The following year, Björn was appointed missionary to the Icelanders on the Canadian and American prairies. By 1890, his relationship with Jennie McCaine had blossomed into romance and the two were married in Winnipeg – by the Lutheran pastor, Jón Bjarnason! They gathered a following in the city and founded the First Icelandic Unitarian Society of Winnipeg, which was formally established on February 1, 1891. By the end of the following year, they consecrated their own building, Unity Hall, across the street from First Lutheran Church.





The First Icelandic Unitarian Church of Winnipeg (1905)

Magnus Skaptason's 1891 Sermon Turns Five Congregations Unitarian

North of the city, Magnús Skaptason had come from the old country to serve the Lutheran parishes of New Iceland in 1887. On Palm Sunday in 1891, he preached a sermon at Hecla in which he rejected the doctrines of hell and eternal punishment, denied the Augsburg Confession, and declared the Christian scriptures to be the work of human hands. During the week that followed, he continued to deliver the same message as he worked his way along the lake. Although most of his congregants supported him, resistance grew and the synod sent officials to intervene. By the time the dust settled, five of the seven congregations withdrew from the synod to form the Icelandic Free Church, which soon affiliated with the American Unitarian Association. Icelandic Unitarianism went from a single congregation to a movement.

The Icelandic Free Church sponsored the publication of the first Unitarian periodical in Western Canada, *Dagsbrun* (Dawn), a magazine of religious literature and scholarship. Magnús moved to Winnipeg following Björn Pétursson's death to fill the pulpit there and most of the breakaway congregations became dormant, but the Winnipeg congregation survived and thrived along with loosely organized pockets of Unitarians throughout the Icelandic communities.

The Golden Years of Icelandic Unitarianism

In 1901, the Western Icelandic Unitarian Free Church Association (later abbreviated to the Icelandic Unitarian Association) was organized at Gimli under the leadership of Magnús Skaptason. It was actually the first denominational organization established among Unitarians in Canada. The new conference eventually grew to include member congregations and individuals from the West Coast to the Great Lakes, along with some from the northern counties of Minnesota, North Dakota, and Washington. New congregations were organized and promising young men were sent to Meadville Theological School and Harvard Divinity



School to study for the ministry. Among this new generation of leaders was Vilhjalmur Stefansson, a Harvard ministerial student who abandoned his studies but went on to a brilliant career as an Arctic explorer and ethnologist, remaining an active Unitarian for the remainder of his life. The association launched a religious periodical, *Heimir*, and, after a few years, the American Unitarian Association named Rögnvaldur Pétursson as a field secretary to serve the Icelandic churches.

Icelandic Unitarians thrived under Rögnvaldur's leadership. In addition to his work as a minister, he edited *Heimir*, engaged in several business ventures, served briefly as editor of *Heimskringla*, and was the founding president of the Icelandic National League.

By the end of the First World War, eight of the eleven Unitarian churches on the Canadian prairies were Icelandic. At that time, there were only sixteen Unitarian congregations in all of Canada, so the Icelanders dominated their faith in the country. The Icelandic Unitarian Association was reorganized as the United Conference of Icelandic Churches in 1923 when the adherents of the liberal New Theology were added to its membership. (The New Theology, which prevailed for a time in the Church of Iceland, was promoted among Icelanders in North America by Friðrik J. Bergmann, who was the most vociferous opponent of Unitarianism in the 1890s but who had become increasingly liberal after the turn of the century.) Three years later, the Western

By 1918, eight of the sixteen Unitarian churches in Canada were Icelandic. In 1921 Icelanders accounted for about two-fifths of the Unitarians in Canada. Twenty years later more than half of Canadian Unitarians were of Icelandic origin, and perhaps one-fifth of the Icelandic community in Canada identified as Unitarians.

Canada Alliance of Unitarian Women was organized to bring together the women's societies of the Icelandic Unitarian churches. The alliance was the first Icelandic Unitarian organization to imagine that its membership might one day include women from beyond the Icelandic community.

By the time of the 1921 census, about one in six Canadians of Icelandic ancestry were adherents of Unitarianism and Icelanders accounted for about two-fifths of the Unitarians in Canada. Twenty years later, following the addition of the New Theology, more than half of Canadian Unitarians were of Icelandic origin, and perhaps one-fifth of the Icelandic community in Canada identified as Unitarians.

The Icelandic Unitarian movement continued to grow during the 1920s and 1930s, reaching its peak around 1940, after which decline set in, driven by the impact of the Great Depression and Second World War, the loss of ministerial leadership, intermarriage, and the demographic transition that followed the war. By then, the third generation Icelandic North Americans had emerged and they were destined to take their place in the mainstream of society, which included an embrace of



Unitarian Church in Gimli, Manitoba

mainstream religions or a departure from religious affiliation altogether. In 1944, the conference launched a new periodical, *Brautin*, which continued publishing until 1952.

On the occasion of its 50th anniversary, in 1951, the United Conference of Icelandic Churches decided to transform itself into a more inclusive regional association, expanding its membership beyond the Icelandic community. Recognizing the changing complexion of

Canada's first Unitarian interchurch association was the Icelandic Unitarian Association, organized in Gimli, Manitoba, in 1901.

prairie Canadian Unitarianism, the delegates to the 1952 convention voted to reorganize the United Conference as the Western Canada Unitarian Conference, which came into being the following year when the Bishop of Iceland sent greetings to the Icelandic Unitarian community for the last time.

Since then, the influence of Unitarianism has continued to be felt in the Icelandic community and Icelanders have continued to influence Unitarian Universalism. Icelandic services continued to be held in several congregations until the 1960s. Many people of Icelandic descent are still found in Unitarian congregations across the continent, from Miami to Vancouver and from Ottawa to Los Angeles, and three congregations still

proudly proclaim their Icelandic origins while others have absorbed Icelandic congregations into their numbers. And many Unitarian Universalists celebrate the fact that the Icelandic

Unitarian movement flourished within their midst for the better part of three-quarters of a century – a memory that continues to be cherished.

About the Author

Stefan Jonasson is a journalist, historian, folklorist, and Unitarian minister. He is presently Editor of *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, the Icelandic community newspaper that has been published in Winnipeg since 1886. Prior to this, he was a member of the professional staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association for 24 years, serving successively as District Executive for Western Canada, Director for Large Congregations, and Director of Growth Strategies. He also served as minister to the historically Icelandic Unitarian congregations in Arborg and Gimli, Manitoba.



A graduate of the University of Winnipeg, Stefan holds degrees in arts and theology.

He won the University Gold Medal in Religious Studies in 1988 and the Governor General of Canada's Gold Medal for Academic Excellence in 1997. Since graduation, he has served as President of the University of Winnipeg Alumni Association and he is the Chair of the university's Board of Regents.

Stefan is President of the Icelandic National League of North America. He is also a member of the Interfaith Roundtable in Winnipeg, the editorial board of Icelandic Connection magazine, and the board of directors of the St. James Scholarship Foundation. He frequently leads tours for Icelanders visiting Manitoba and has also been a guide for North American visitors to Iceland. He was the INLNA's International Visitor to Iceland in 2017.

He received the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2013 and he was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Icelandic Order of the Falcon in 2019. Among his other honors are the Betty Gorshe Heritage Award for contributions to preserving, understanding, and celebrating Unitarian Universalist history and the Joan Inga Eyolfson Cadham Award for promotion of Icelandic culture and heritage through literature, arts, and media.

Stefan lives in Winnipeg with his wife, Cindy Nagamori Jonasson, although they spend as much time as they can at their country retreat in New Iceland. They have two adult daughters.

As an Icelandic Roots volunteer, Stefan serves as an expert on matters related to the church and clergy. He is currently working on several projects to help tell the story of Icelandic churches and clergy.