

Fred E. Woods, “Icelandic Conversion and Emigration: A Sesquicentennial Sketch,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Europe*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon and Brent L. Top (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2003), 1–21.

Icelandic Conversion and Emigration: A Sesquicentennial Sketch

Fred E. Woods

A millennium ago, Iceland embraced a movement that would shape her people’s future far beyond the volcanic eruptions that had configured her land in the past. In A.D. 1000, the Icelandic nation adopted Christianity as its official religion, and the ice of paganism began to melt.^[1] The year 2000 marked the millennial anniversary of this transforming event, which native Icelanders recognized with much celebration.

It was also a year of reflection for Latter-day Saints: the summer of 2000 marked the dedication of the first Latter-day Saint chapel in Iceland, located near Reykjavik, the capital of the Icelandic nation. How did the restored gospel come to Iceland? This query could not be appropriately answered without briefly examining the inspiring story of Guðmundur Guðmundsson, one of Iceland’s first converts and missionaries who helped open Iceland to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ in 1851.^[2]

Conversion of Guðmundur Guðmundsson

Guðmundur Guðmundsson was born on 10 March 1825 to Guðmundur Benediktsson and Guðrun Vigfúsdóttir on a farm at Artun in the Rangarvalla district of the Oddi Parish in Iceland. He was christened into the Lutheran Church, the most prominent religion in Iceland, on 23 March 1825 at his home.^[3] At nineteen, he left his native land for Denmark to refine his skills of goldsmithing, which he had been introduced to in his youth. After four years in Copenhagen, he passed the journeyman’s exam and then worked for a time in Denmark.^[4] While taking an evening stroll in the spring of 1850, Guðmundur saw a group of people listening to a missionary on a street corner. Before he came within range of the missionary’s call, Guðmundur heard an inner voice say, “What that man is saying is true, listen to him.”^[5] He stayed and listened to the Elder, Peter O. Hansen, and as a result his life would be changed forever.^[6] Soon thereafter, Guðmundur visited a Church meeting in Copenhagen. He later reflected:

It was then that I, for the first time, heard and saw our beloved Apostle Erastus Snow. I understood and believed the doctrines taught by him and his companions, and I was baptized in the most devoted sincerity and repentance Feb. 15, 1851 by Peter O. Hansen. I testify before God and men that my heart was renewed, and I realized that the gospel was the power of God unto salvation.^[7]

About this same time, Guðmundur’s childhood friend, Pórarinn Hafliðason, who had come to Copenhagen to learn the trade of cabinetmaking, likewise joined the Church.^[8] As the spring of 1851 beckoned, Elder Erastus Snow ordained Pórarinn a priest and Guðmundur a teacher.^[9] According to Elder Erastus Snow, LDS Apostle and the Scandinavian Mission president, a third Icelander also joined the Church in Copenhagen about this time. In a letter to Elder Franklin D. Richards dated 10 July 1851, Elder Snow noted, “In the spring three Icelanders who had embraced the faith in Copenhagen returned to their native land, with the Book of Mormon and pamphlets, two of whom I ordained and commanded them to labor among their people, as the Lord opened their way.”^[10]

Pórarinn arranged for Guðmundur and himself to go on two separate voyages to the Westman Islands (Vestmannaeyjar). Pórarinn arrived first, and Guðmundur followed shortly thereafter, arriving on 12 May.^[11] Guðmundur then returned to his hometown on the mainland, perhaps in hopes of teaching the gospel to his family. His reception was quite different from what he had expected—he had anticipated that all Icelanders would joyfully receive the glad tidings of the gospel as he had. He reported his disappointment:

I expected that every person would believe a message so desirable. . . . I had felt, that the fruit of the Gospel was more sweet and desirable[than] any other fruit, and I wished first and foremost that my relatives would partake of it, but Alas! Laman and Lemuel would not; I preached to my brothers, but they would not receive me, and my pious parents had died, and I felt alone, like Elias of old in the cave; yet, a short time after, I found some friends that were believing, and continued to be faithful, though the laws were hard against us, and so were the priests and the reports of the press. I was often rebuked and spit on and mocked, but I was full of the love of God. . . . I did not feel the least anger or indignation against any being. ^[12]

Guðmundur and Þórarinn soon returned to the Westman Islands and they began to preach the gospel, but the local papers had already begun to publish false reports about “Mormons.” Religious leaders warned the people not to listen to these missionaries, whom they called “false prophets, who had come to deceive their countrymen.” ^[13]

The missionaries’ first converts were Benedikt Hansson and his wife, Ragnhildur Stefánsdóttir. As a result of the preaching and conversions, the elders were forbidden to preach or to try to obtain any more converts. ^[14] The missionaries now had to act with greater caution by teaching interested parties in private. Another blow to the work came when Þórarinn’s wife, who was strongly opposed to the conversion of her husband, burned his Church literature, and according to Magnus Bjarnason (whom Þórarinn had introduced to the gospel), she “became desperate and threatened to drown herself.” Þórarinn thereupon ceased to do missionary work. ^[15]

Ironically, in December of the same year, it was not his distraught wife who drowned but rather Þórarinn himself, who died in a fishing accident. Guðmundur informed Copenhagen of this tragic event, noting that twenty-four people on the island desired baptism, but no one was authorized to perform the ordinance. He labored alone for some time until Elder John Lorentzen was called during the April 1853 Copenhagen Conference to serve as Guðmundsson’s companion. Lorentzen was also sustained as the president of the Icelandic mission. ^[16]

Guðmundsson was grateful to receive his new companion, who ordained him an Elder and baptized several people on the Westman Islands. On 19 June 1853, President Lorentzen organized the first branch of the Church on the Westman Islands, consisting of six members and Elder Guðmundsson as branch president. ^[17] Presidents Lorentzen and Guðmundsson labored together until Guðmundsson returned to Denmark in 1854, having baptized nine people since the latter’s conversion in 1851. ^[18] Guðmundsson was planning to immigrate to Zion, but he decided to first serve a mission. He therefore spent about eighteen months serving as an Elder in Denmark.

After serving first in Sjaeland, he was assigned to the city of Kalundborg, where he was arrested for preaching the gospel and spent about seven weeks in prison. ^[19] Upon his release, the Copenhagen police forced him into Danish military service. Following a difficult term of military service, in which he was the victim of ridicule and scorn for his religious beliefs, he was finally discharged from the military, being found unfit for service due to poor lungs. Guðmundsson viewed this assessment as providential, knowing his lungs were healthy. He then appeared at the Copenhagen Conference, where priesthood leaders rejoiced to see that he was free and recommended that he immigrate to Zion. ^[20]

Guðmundsson left Copenhagen in the spring of 1857 and joined a company of 536 Saints in Liverpool (for whom he cooked to pay his passage across the Atlantic) on the *Westmoreland*. The group reached Salt Lake in the fall of 1857. ^[21]

Early Icelandic Church Immigration to America

Guðmundsson was not the first Icelandic Church member to reach America. Early converts Samuel and Margret Bjarnason, along with Helga Jónsdóttir, left the Westman Islands in 1854 for Liverpool. On 7 January 1855 they embarked on the ship *James Nesmith* and eventually arrived in the Salt Lake Valley on 7 September 1855. Upon their arrival, President Brigham Young directed them to settle in Spanish Fork, feeling they would fit in well with the Danes. Samuel, Margret, and Helga were not only the first Latter-day Saint Icelanders to gather to Utah but also the first known

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Icelanders to immigrate to America. The immigration of these first three Saints paved the way for others to follow. It is estimated that about 410 Icelanders immigrated to Utah between 1854 and 1914, just prior to the outbreak of World War I,^[23] but this represents only a small fragment of the Scandinavian Saints who gathered during this period.^[24]

In July of 1855, another Latter-day Saint Icelandic convert named Þórður Dídriksson left his native land for America. He sailed from Liverpool on the 12 December 1855 voyage of the *John J. Boyd*. Concerning his voyage he said: “The weather being so bad nearly all the passengers became seasick. I was very sick myself and so afraid I would die that I could not sleep. . . . I often heard the emigrants ask if the Icelandic was still alive and the usual answer was, ‘It won’t be long until he is gone.’”^[25] Charles R. Savage reported the following concerning this voyage:

Notwithstanding that our company consisted of Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, Icelanders, Italians, English, Irish, and Scotch, the rules adopted proved efficacious in maintaining a strict “entente cordiale” among us all. The Saints were at the sound of trumpet called to prayer morning and evening. Meetings were also frequently held in the Danish, English, and Italian languages during the voyage. On the whole, we enjoyed ourselves first-rate, notwithstanding the many gales and hurricanes we experienced, from the breaking up of the fine weather. . . . Our captain got superstitious on account of the long passage, and ordered that there should be no singing on board; the mate said that all the ships that had preachers on board were always sure of a bad passage.^[26]

According to one Church passenger, the captain had remarked to Knud Peterson, “If I hadn’t [those] damned Mormons on board I would have been in New York six weeks ago,” to which Peterson replied, “If you hadn’t Mormons on board you would have been in hell six weeks ago.”^[27] The group finally reached New York, but because of economic difficulties most of these emigrants had to find employment along the way. Þórður worked for several months in the sweltering heat of St. Louis and finally arrived in Salt Lake with the Daniel McArthur company in the fall of 1856. He then settled in Spanish Fork, where his family was known for their kindness and hospitality, especially in assisting other Icelandic immigrants who arrived in Spanish Fork in the latter half of the 19th century.^[28]

In 1857 eleven known Icelandic Latter-day Saints gathered together to Zion. Leaving Iceland on the vessel *Aldofina*, they sailed from Liverpool on the *Wyoming*.^[29] No known groups of Icelandic Saints emigrated from Iceland between 1858 and 1872, nor were any missionaries sent to Iceland until Magnus Bjarnason and Loftur Johnson (Loftur Jónsson) in 1873. They had immigrated to Utah with the 1857 group.^[30] Bjarnason and Johnson were the first of twenty-three missionaries in Iceland, including twenty-one native Icelanders who immigrated to Utah and later served missions to Iceland during the period of 1873—1914.^[31] They launched the second and largest wave of LDS Icelandic immigration to Utah, which subsided at the turn of the century. This was also a time of mass emigration from Iceland as a whole. From 1872 to 1900, about 16,000 of the total population of 70,000 emigrated, mostly to North America. After 1900 very few emigrated.^[32]

Bjarnason and Jónsson arrived on the Westman Islands on 17 July 1873 and began to preach the gospel. However, the Lutheran clergy opposed them. Magnus Bjarnason recounted, “We were called into court three times, but after being submitted to a rigid examination we were again set at liberty.”^[33] By the time the missionaries left the Westman Islands in the spring of 1874, a branch had again been organized, and eleven Icelanders had caught the spirit of their message and gathered with them to Zion. The missionaries’ labors had been rewarded, notwithstanding the fact that they had experienced considerable persecution as well as exposure to harsh weather.^[34] Einar Eiríksson, one of the Westman Islands converts of 1874, wrote of the spiritual preparation he received prior to the arrival of the missionaries, “having been appraised [apprised] of their coming by dreams and visions.”^[35]

In 1875 two more native Icelanders who had previously gathered to Utah were called to labor in their native land. Þórður Dídriksson and Samuel Bjarnason labored in Iceland for one year. Although they did not baptize anyone during this time, they established many friendships and several Icelanders immigrated with them to Utah when Dídriksson and Bjarnason concluded their mission.^[36] Furthermore, just three years after he returned to Spanish Fork

from his mission, Didriksson wrote the first known missionary tract in Icelandic, a 186-page work titled *A Voice of Warning and Truthy* which proved to be a useful missionary tool that would be used by missionaries in Iceland during periods of the next century.^[37] Until 1880 missionary work of the previous three decades had been largely confined to the Westman Islands. In 1879 Elders John Eyvindson and Jacob B. Johnson labored on the mainland and

used Dídriksson's missionary tract.^[38] In the spring of 1880 Elder John Eyvindson baptized three people in Reykjavik, the first known baptisms in the capital city.^[39] Eyvindson wrote concerning this event, "When the report spread about the baptism of these three sisters, the spirit of persecution was fiercely displayed by the people, and we were in danger from mobs." The persecution persisted for some time, and the elders were in danger of being stoned even while walking the streets of Reykjavik.^[40]

Notwithstanding, when their mission concluded and Eyvindson and Johnson embarked for America, they were accompanied by a group of twenty-two converts from Reykjavik, embarking on the ship *Camoens*^[41] One of their converts, Eiríkur á Brunum, wrote about his experience on this voyage:

On the evening of the 8th of July, 1881 I went on board the ship *Camoens*, a horse transport ship of Kokkels, after I, with some effort, a scuffle, and some tribulation of soul and body, was made to protect my grandson, of 14 months old, before 10 sturdy men of Reykjavik, who intended to attack my daughter and tear the child from her bosom at the command of her child's father, who then wished to be such, but would not acknowledge the boy when newborn.^[42]

On 12 July they landed at the dock of Granton's Harbor near Edinburgh, Scotland. The group then traveled by train to Liverpool before embarking on the steamer *Nevada*.⁴⁵^[43] Having crossed the Atlantic, Elder John Eyvindson reported in a letter to British Mission president Albert Carrington of the successful voyage on the *Nevada*, over which Eyvindson presided and noted that an Icelandic mother had given birth to twins:

We have had a pleasant journey, and for the most part good health and spirits. On the 23rd and 24th we had strong wind blowing from the south-west, and the rough sea began to make the sisters seasick. Peace and satisfaction have existed. We have had our prayers daily. We expect to reach New York tomorrow morning.

On the 25th, one of the sisters had twins. Her husband is with the company. Both the mother and the children are doing well. One is a boy and the other a girl. The name of the boy is Halldór Tomas Atlander, and was blessed by Elder J. [John] Eyvindson, that of the girl, Victoria Nevada, and she was blessed by Elder J. [Jacob] B. Johnson New York, July 29th. We arrived at Castle Garden at 11 o'clock yesterday, all in good health and spirits, and we expect to leave here at 6 p.m. tomorrow night.^[44]

By the time Eyvindson returned to his home in Spanish Fork, he could report of being not only an eyewitness of multiple births but also an eyewitness of the conversion of many souls. During his ministry, which lasted two years and four months, he and his companion witnessed twenty-eight baptisms, and during this same period fifty-seven Icelanders immigrated to Utah.^[45] Eyvindson and Jónsson launched the peak decade of LDS emigration in the 1880s.^[46] Yet missionary work in Iceland continued to be as hard as ice, and conversions came as a result of much travail. One missionary, writing in 1881 to the *Scandiaviens Stjerne*, noted, "Conditions in Iceland are deplorable." This was largely the result of a famine in the land and the people's "bigotry and hatred toward the Latter-day Saints."^[47] In this same year a ray of sunshine shown on the Icelandic Saints when LDS Iclander Jón Jónsson translated the First Book of Nephi into Icelandic.^[48] Now the Icelanders could read in their native tongue about Lehi and his family's successful voyage to a promised land.

In 1883 John A. Sutton reported his experience of leading a group of LDS Icelandic emigrants across the Atlantic, having met them in Liverpool just prior to embarkation:

We arrived here [Queenstown] at 9:35 this (Sunday) morning, all well, no seasickness. With the assistance of the interpreter, I effected an organization of the Icelanders, and appointed Elder Thorarinn Bjarnason to take charge, and have morning and evening prayer at 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. They appear to be very good people. I am studying Icelandic, with the assistance of a Danish and Icelandic Grammar. ^[49]

The year 1886 was the peak year for baptisms and emigration. ^[50] Notwithstanding, their successful journey did not come without a price. One group who crossed the Atlantic in 1886 aboard the *Alaska* reported their challenge of passing through customs at New York:

Brother Hart ^[51] met us at the landing, and after being introduced to the Saints, rendered us valuable assistance in getting our luggage inspected etc. When we reached Castle Gardens we had considerable delay and trouble in answering needless and impertinent interrogatories by the Emigration Commissioners, who were seemingly determined to find fault. This was the more apparent from the fact that the most rigid scrutiny and closest investigation in the examination of the condition and prospects of the Icelandic Saints were observed in every detail, consuming more time with the twenty-three of our people than with 375 other emigrants who had previously passed muster. ^[52]

In spite of these obstacles, these Latter-day Saint Icelanders made their way to Utah, where they combined their efforts with that of other LDS Icelandic emigrants in bringing a positive impact to the state. John Torgeirson, an Icelandic convert, outlined some of the salient features of his native land and noble people. Torgeirson mentioned that the history of Iceland contained more evidence to demonstrate their Israelite origin than the history of any other country. ^[53] He also boasted of the fact that literacy in Iceland was unmatched and that “idiocy is nearly unknown, insanity is very rare and only two murders have been committed during the last one hundred years. . . . [and] the National Library in Reykjavik is the largest, having over 10,000 volumes.” ^[54] Such a legacy of literate people no doubt influenced Utah for good.

During this same year, the Icelandic Saints continued to gather. One small group (about twenty-two to twenty-five in number) embarked from Iceland on the *Thyra* and landed in Leith, Scotland, before taking a train to Liverpool, the primary port of embarkation for the Saints. From Liverpool they joined other foreign converts and crossed the Atlantic on the *Wyoming*. This group chartered a new route of emigration, which had just been altered for the 1887 season. Instead of traveling directly from New York to Utah, this company reembarked from New York and took a twenty-four-hour trip on the Old Dominion Steam line and came to port in Norfolk, Virginia. They then continued their travel via Kansas City and Denver by rail, arriving in Utah 25 July 1887. ^[55]

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, missionary work in Iceland continued to be difficult. Conversions were sparse, and few Mormon Icelanders immigrated to Utah. During this period the elders continued to try to harvest souls primarily on the southern coast of Iceland’s mainland, making their headquarters at Reykjavik, with occasional seasonal trips to the Westman Islands. ^[56] However others traveled to different regions of the country in search of more fertile fields. In the fall of 1894 Elder Thorarinn Bjarnason wrote of challenges he faced traveling across Iceland’s wilderness to the eastern territory of Iceland.

I am traveling on foot, except when I have a guide to take me across the rivers and through unknown places. Once in crossing a large river on a ferry boat, we became fast in an icefloe which threatened to drive us into the sea. The breakers were very dangerous, and would certainly have upset the boat if we had been taken a little further out. We barely escaped by throwing a rope to those people who were standing on shore who caught it and kept us from going farther. ^[57]

In 1899 Elder Halldór Johnson, struggling with poor health, reponed an additional seasonal challenge during the summer months, when the Icelanders were too busy working to stop and listen. He stated, “Nearly all the people are ^[58]

engaged for two months, from daylight to dark in haymaking.”

This statement concerning the difficulty of harvesting souls seemed to be a type of the seasonal spiritual famine that occurred at the dawn of the twentieth century, when few converts were made, and emigration subsequently came to an ebb. On 29 April 1901 Elder Lorenzo Anderson and Elder John Johannesson had even ritually washed their feet as a witness against the inhabitants of Reykjavik as a whole. ^[59]

During the fall of 1901, Elder Johannesson traveled to the northwest and began proselyting in the city of Akureyri. Having found a more receptive people there, he left a blessing rather than a curse on the inhabitants, although he initially met stiff opposition:

In October I took a steamboat to this town, which has about 1,400 inhabitants, and when I arrived here I was told it would be no use for me to stop here, as I would be killed. But I was not afraid, for I knew I was directed by the Lord and would be preserved by His power. . . . A Methodist preacher here commenced to warn the people against me and my tracts, but as a general rule the effect of that was to awaken the people to investigate. . . . I was led to invoke the blessing of the Almighty upon the country and its inhabitants, and since that time everything seems to have changed for the better. The whole community seems to be friendly towards me, and many have told me that they have been greatly deceived about our religion. The people as a rule are courteous, kind, intelligent and reasonable. They have lost confidence in their own ministers. They are seeking the streams of “living water.” ^[60]

Notwithstanding this friendly reception, apparently few actually drank from the living water, and there is no evidence indicating that any of the inhabitants of Akureyri actually entered the waters of baptism.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, the few Icelanders who did eventually convert immigrated to Canada. On 16 June 1903 Elder Johannesson led a small company of LDS Icelandic emigrants to gather in Raymond, Alberta. ^[61] The early twentieth-century missionaries sent to labor in their native country of Iceland worked diligently, believing there were still souls to harvest in Iceland. Before his release, Elder Loftur Bjarnason, who labored faithfully and alone as a missionary in Iceland from 1903 to 1906, reported thirty-eight members of the Church in Iceland. ^[62] In 1905 he also noted, “Reykjavik is a city of about eight or nine thousand inhabitants, and it would be of great value for the work if the Church owned a house here.” ^[63] Yet it would be nearly a century until a chapel would come to Iceland.

In 1914, at the conclusion of Elder Einar Eiríksson's second term as a missionary in Iceland, the Icelandic Mission was closed. ^[64] World War I dawned, and with it emigration from Iceland in general ceased. For the next fifty years there was no organized branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Iceland. It was not until a branch was established on the NATO base in Keflavik in 1965 that a priesthood presidency again existed on Icelandic soil. Yet another decade would elapse before the Icelandic Mission would reopen. ^[65] In 1975 Byron T. Geslison was sent to labor in Iceland among his people, accompanied by his wife and two of his sons who had just returned from their full-time missions in Korea and Japan. ^[66] Two years later, 18 September 1977, Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin dedicated the land of Iceland for the preaching of the gospel. Among other things, Elder Wirthlin prayed, “I invoke thy blessings upon the [Icelandic] government. Through the principles of the Gospel may they be inspired.” ^[67]

Events occurred in Utah which would influence the Icelandic politicians abroad. In 1989 Thor Leifson of Spanish Fork, Utah, was appointed the first honorary consul in the United States. ^[68] He would be followed in 1995 by Clark T. Thorstenson of Provo, Utah. The stewardship of the Icelandic Consul to the western United States included the western states of Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, and Colorado. ^[69] During their years of service, these two Latter-day Saints hosted prominent Icelanders, which included meeting two presidents of Iceland and arranging for the visit of several ambassadors from Iceland. Furthermore, they were successful in setting up meetings between Icelandic government officials and the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latterday Saints as well as Utah governmental leaders.

In December 1996 Consul Thorstenson extended a personal invitation to Iceland's president, Olafur Ragnar

Grímsson, and his wife to visit Utah. The year 1997 marked the centennial of Spanish Fork’s “Iceland Days” as well as the sesquicentennial celebration of the Mormon pioneers entering the Salt Lake Valley. [70] In 1996 Thorstenson made arrangements to have the first large organized group of descendants of Icelandic Latter-day Saint pioneers visit Iceland. The tour was led by Lil Shepherd, who was at this time serving as the president of the Icelandic Association of Utah Inc. Simultaneously, Icelandic descendent Mark Geslison and the Brigham Young University Folk Music Ensemble presented several concerts on the mainland and on the Westman Islands. In the summer of 1997 Shepherd again escorted another group of Western Icelanders back to their homeland. Lil and her group made dozens of contacts with native Icelandic relatives they had never met before. These tours and the BYU concerts generated positive television, radio, and newspaper reports throughout the nation. [71]

Shortly after the tour group returned home, President Grímsson and his wife arrived in Utah and were hosted by Lil Shepherd. Arrangements were made for the Grímssons to meet Church leaders such as Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and Elder Merrill J. Bateman, president of Brigham Young University. Friendships were established, seeds were cultivated, and Icelandic soil was finally prepared for Latter-day Saints to enjoy a permanency in the land of fire and ice.

Three years later, on 30 June 2000, a cluster of Icelandic Saints from Utah and Church members from Iceland met to celebrate the erection of a monument on the Westman Islands which listed the names of 410 Icelandic Latter-day Saints who had gathered to Utah between 1854 and 1914, most of whom were from the Westman Islands. Just four days later, President Grímsson and many Icelandic Saints gathered for the opening of a permanent museum exhibit at the Icelandic Emigration Center in Hofsfós, Iceland. This exhibit, titled “The Road to Zion,” featured the story of these 410 Icelandic Latter-day Saints who gathered to Utah (mostly Spanish Fork) between 1854 and 1914. The Icelandic Association of Utah Inc. rallied to support these historic projects. Throughout the duration of these projects, David A. Ashby, president of the Icelandic Association, and vice-consul J. Brent Haymond spearheaded efforts to move plans forward in a timely manner. Bliss Anderson, whom Ashby referred to as “our most active genealogist” in the Icelandic Association, labored diligently to provide the names of the Icelanders who gathered to Utah. [72] Yet the crowning achievement for the Icelandic Saints in 2000 was the dedication of a Latter-day Saint chapel in the area of Reykjavik, which occurred on 4 July 2000.

The twenty-first century has now dawned, and Icelandic converts (along with other international Latter-day Saints) are encouraged to remain in their homeland and build Zion in their own countries. [73] Yet the posterity of Icelandic Saints who have gathered to Utah have not forgotten their homeland. They still maintain a great love for their people and country and are proud of their noble heritage. Many are active in the Icelandic Association of Utah and annually gather for “Iceland Days.” Others are involved in the Regional Family History Center at Spanish Fork and have been influenced by the untiring dedication of genealogist Bliss Anderson, who resides in Spanish Fork. [74]

The work of God is moving forward, and the Spirit of the Lord again appears to be brooding over the Icelanders at home and abroad. The inspirational story of the Church in Iceland reminds us that God is mindful of all His children; indeed, He remembers those who are upon the isles of the sea.

[1] Michael Fell, *And Some Fell into Good Soil: A History of Christianity in Iceland* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 1.

[2] According to the title page of “The Life History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” compiled by Lavon Brunt Eyring (n.p., 1984), L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, “Gudmundur Gudmundsson changed his name to Gudmund Gudmundsen after arriving in Utah.” He is also referred to in other accounts by the first name Gudmund; others use the surname Gudmundson. The writer recognizes these variables and has chosen to use his proper Icelandic name of Guðmundur Guðmundsson in this article. For a more complete sketch of his life see my article “Fire on Ice: The Conversion and Life of Guðmundur Guðmundsson,” *BYU Studies* 39, no. 2 (2000): 57—72. Select portions of this piece have been adopted into this article. Although there have been several articles published by non-LDS authors on the topic of the early history of the Icelandic Mormons, there are very few sources in English. Two secondary sources of note are “The First Icelandic Settlement in America,” in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, comp. Kate B. Carter (Salt Lake City: Daughters of Utah Pioneers, 1964), 7:477—556. Currently

the Icelandic Association of Utah has made available for sale a typescript copy of LaNora Allred, “The Icelanders of Utah” (n.p., 1988), which contains useful information but should be used carefully as it contains several errors and is poorly documented. Two of the best primary sources on this topic in English are the Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission and the Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, which are both housed at the Church Archives in Salt Lake City. The author is currently doing research on a book which will tell the history of the Icelandic Latter—day Saints from 1851 to the present.

- [3] This information derived from the Oddi Parish Records was provided by Sigríður Siguðrardóttir and Valgeir Sigurðsson, native Icelanders.
- [4] Eyring, “History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” 4–5.
- [5] Eyring, “History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” 7.
- [6] For a bibliographic sketch of Peter O. Hansen, see Andrew Jenson, *Latterday Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Company, 1914), 2:766—67.
- [7] Jenson, *Biographical Encyclopedia*, 3:639. The Copenhagen Branch Membership Records (Church Archives) verify that Guðmundur was indeed baptized on 15 February 1851 by Peter O. Hansen, and that he was confirmed by ChristianChristiansen the same day.
- [8] Eyring, “History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson,” 5—6.
- [9] The Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, 10 March 1851, Church Archives, states that Pórarinn was ordained a priest. It further notes that on the date of 18 April 1851, Guðmundur was ordained a teacher
- [10] Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, 10 July 1851. The third convert was probably Jón Johannesson who had also come to Denmark to learn the art of goldsmithing. It is not known why he was not sent forth as a missionary and little is known of his life in the Church. He apparently moved to Keflavík, and it is not known whether he kept his faith (see LaNora Allred, “The Icelanders of Utah” [n.p., 1988], 8—9, copy of typescript in author’s possession).
- [11] Andrew Jenson, “Scandinavian Mission: Iceland Conference,” *Deseret Semi—Weekly*, 25 September 1911, 9.
- [12] Gudmundur Gudmundsson, “Autobiography of Gudmund Gudmundsson,” holograph, microfilm [1], Church Archives; see also Jenson, “Gudmund Gudmundsson,” *Biographical Encyclopedia*, 3:639.
- [13] Jenson, “Scandinavian Mission: Iceland Conference,” 9.
- [14] Elder John Thorgierson, Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, April 1851, indicates that the baptism of this couple led to the charge for the missionaries to no longer proselyte, but “The First Icelandic Settlement in America,” in *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 7:492–93, notes that Benedikt and Ragnhildur immigrated to Copenhagen and were then baptized on 10 December 1852. In any case, it appears that it was their conversion which sparked the opposition. Carter further notes that the Hansson family immigrated to America in 1859, but Benedikt died in Omaha, Nebraska, and thus Ragnhildur was left to continue her journey with her two children (Ephraim and Mary), arriving in Utah in 1862. After remaining in Salt Lake City for a time, the Hansson family moved to Spanish Fork and joined the community of other Icelandic Saints who had previously gathered. The Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Island) Parish Registers substantiate the fact that they emigrated from the Westman Islands to Copenhagen in 1852 and further note that Benedikt was thirty-five years old and Ragnihuldur was thirty-seven years old at the time of their emigration (see *Index to Persons Emigrating from Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland to Copenhagen, Utah, Hafnarford, Reykjavik, Seydisjordur, and America, from 1823—1913*, extracted by John Y. Bearnson from Registers GS #12712, parts one and two, and GS #12594, parts one and two, for the Genealogical Society [1970], 13, 30, located in the Harold B. Lee Library).
- [15] Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, 10 April 1851.
- [16] Ibid.
- [17]

Jenson, "Scandinavian Mission: Iceland Conference," 9; Eyring, "History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson," 64.

[18] According to the Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands) Parish Records, Guðmundur left the Westman Islands for Copenhagen in 1854 (see *Index to Persons*, 11).

[19] Eyring, "History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson," 67.

[20] Rachel Minnie Garff, *Peter Niels Garff* (Murray, Utah: The Family of George Peter and Tyrphena Garff, 1983), 15.

[21] Garff, *Peter Niels Garff*, 15. Manuscript History of the Scandinavian Mission, 18 April 1857, notes, "A company of emigrating saints numbering 536 souls bound for Utah sailed from Copenhagen Denmark on the steamer 'L. N. Hvidt in charge of Heber C. Haight who accompanied the emigrants to England." Eyring, "History of Gudmundur Gudmundsson," 77, indicates that Gudmundur served as a cook on the passage.

[22] Carter, "The First Icelandic Settlement in America," *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 7:482–83.

[23] Research list in authors possession compiled in spring 2000 by Bliss Anderson, who is a member of the Icelandic Association of Utah. This list reveals that 204 of the 410 Icelanders who immigrated to Utah were from the Westman Islands, located just twelve miles from the southwest coast of Iceland. The Westman Islands are a group of 14 islands in which only one (Heimaey) is inhabited. In the summer of 2000, a monument was erected on this inhabited island to commemorate those Icelanders who had immigrated to Utah (1854–1914). This island represents less than 1 percent of the total land mass of Iceland which is nearly 40,000 miles, slightly smaller than England (Allred, "The Icelanders of Utah," 2, 13, 16). Icelandic mission president Loftur Bjarnason wrote in an ardele titled "Traveling in Iceland," *Millennial Star* 66, no. 19 (1904): 302, that the uninhabited islands were used mainly for sheep and that the largest island [Heimaey] had a population of only eight hundred people. He also stated, "About two-thirds of those that have embraced the Gospel from this country [during a fifty year period (1854—1904)] have come from this place, and indeed we feel the same spirit of goodwill toward our people that has ever existed here." Although his estimate appears to be a little high, it is very impressive that nearly half of the total number of Icelandic emigrants to Utah were from this small island and that apparently one-fourth of the total number of inhabitants of Heimaey were converted. It should also be pointed out that although not all of those who gathered were Latter-day Saints at the time of embarkment, many later joined the Church in Spanish Fork. Further, some of those who gathered to Utah left the Church and chose instead to return to the Lutheran Church, which was the prominent religious denomination in Iceland. In any case, most of the total number remained active Latter-day Saints.

[24] William Mulder states, "Altogether, of the 46,497 converts which Scandinavia yielded between 1850–1905, 50 percent were Danish, slightly less than 36 percent were Swedish, and not quite 14 percent were Norwegian. Of the 22,653 of these 'members of record' who emigrated, 56 percent were Danish, a little over 32 percent were Swedish, 11 percent were Norwegian, and a fraction Icelandic" (*Homeward to Zion* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957], 107).

[25] Carter, "The First Icelandic Settlement in America," *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 7:485.

[26] Letter from Charles R. Savage to John Taylor, *Millennial Star* 18, no. 13 (1856): 206.

[27] Autobiography of Peter Gottfredson, Church Archives, 8–9.

[28] Autobiographical Sketch of Theodur Didrickson, Church Archives, 7. See also "The Life of Einer Erickson," 21—23, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah wherein Erickson notes on his arrival in Spanish Fork on 18 July 1878, "I was gladly received by my Family at Elder Theodur Dedicson's home."

[29] Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1851–1914, LDS Church Archives, 1857, 14. This does not include Guðmundur Guðmundsson, who voyaged on the *Westmoreland* with the Garff family, whom he was instrumental in converting.

[30] Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1857, 14.

[31] The Historical Record of the Icelandic Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1873–1914, Church Archives, 2, contains a "Register of Elders" that lists the twenty-three missionaries by name. There are also

individual columns for the date they arrived on their mission in Iceland with remarks concerning release and leadership appointment dates, and where they were residing at the time of their call. Fifteen of these missionaries resided in Spanish Fork, six in Cleveland, Utah, one (John Johannesson) in Raymond, Alberta Canada and one in Brigham City (Lorenzo Andersen). Allred, *The Icelanders of Utah*, 11, lists Andersen as the lone Dane from the Danish Mission as all others were native Icelanders.

[32] Allred, *The Icelanders of Utah*, 16.

[33] Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1873, 15.

[34] Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1874, 27 and 29 May 1874, 17–18. Only one of the eleven left as a member of the Church. However, the other ten were baptized after arriving in Utah. The group sailed from Iceland to Great Britain on the ship *Hermine* and on the *Nevada* from Liverpool to New York.

[35] Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 29 May 1874.

[36] One of the emigrants had previously been baptized, while the other three or four other emigrants had not yet been baptized (see Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1875, 8 August 1875).

[37] A copy of this work is housed in the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City. Byron Geslison, who was called to reopen the Icelandic Mission in 1975, indicated that the missionaries still used Þórður's tract a century after it was written (see oral interviews with Byron Geslison and his family in the winter of 2000).

[38] Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1879. "The Gospel to the Icelanders," *Millennial Star* 41, no. 37 (1879): 587, notes that these missionaries had a copy of the manuscript and were planning on printing no less than two thousand copies of the tract. In an article written a quarter century later by President Loftur Bjarnason titled "The Work of the Lord in Iceland," *Millennial Star* 66, no. 10 (1904): 145–47, he states, "The precious truths this book contains (referring to Thordur Didricksson's missionary tract) have been the cause of many accepting the Gospel and emigrating to Utah, where they are to-day staunch and faithful Latter-day Saints."

[39] Marius A. Christensen, "History of the Danish Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1850—1964" (masters thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, 1966), 128

[40] Letter of John Eyvindson to President William Budge, *Millennial Star* 42, no. 22 (31 May 1880): 350; see also Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 22 March 1880.

[41] Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 7 July 1881, lists 17 of the 22 emigrants by name.

[42] Vilhjálmur Gíslason, *Eiríkur A Brúnum* (Reykjavik: Isafoldarprentsmiðja H.F., 1946), 116, translated for author by Darron S. Allred.

[43] Vilhjálmur Gíslason, *Eiríkur A Brúnum*, 116; see also John Bartholomew, *Gazetteer of the British Isles: Including Summary of 1951 Census* (Edinburgh: John Bartholomew & Son, n.d.), 301, for details regarding the location of Granton Harbor.

[44] Letter from John Eyvindson to Pres. A. Carrington, *Millennial Star* 43, no. 35 (1881): 554–55.

[45] Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 1881, 7 July 1881.

[46] Research compiled by Bliss Anderson (a member of the Icelandic Association of Utah), reveals that 264 of the 410 Icelanders who emigrated to Utah during the period of 1854–1914 did so during the decade of the 1880s.

[47] Christensen, "History of the Danish Mission," 128.

[48] This is the first known translation of a portion of the Book of Mormon. The original is in the possession of Marian P. Robbins, who is the great-granddaughter of Jón Jónsson.

[49] Letter of John A. Sutton, *Millennial Star* 45, no. 30 (1883): 479. Sutton may have been motivated to learn Icelandic due to his loneliness on the voyage. In a letter written two weeks later, he commented that he would have rather taken a thousand Englishmen across the ocean because he found it difficult to converse with the Icelanders and did

not have a Saint to converse with in his language (see *Millennial Star* 45, no. 33 [1883]: 527).

- [50] Manuscript History of the Icelandic Mission, 31 December 1886. Allred, *The Icelanders of Utah*, 18, notes that there were 63 Icelanders who immigrated to Spanish Fork in 1886. Bliss Anderson's research suggests as many as 78 gathered to Utah for this year.
- [51] This was James H. Hart, who served admirably as the emigration agent at New York from 1882 to 1887. He was a very successful politician and attorney and even continued to serve in the Bear Lake Stake Presidency, in spite of his seasonal emigration assignments in the east. See Edward L. Hart, *Mormon in Motion: The Life and Journals of James H. Hart, 1825—1906, in England, France and America* (Salt Lake City: Windsor Books, printed by Deseret Press, 1978), for details of his life and experience as an emigration agent.
- [52] "The Icelanders," *Millennial Star* 48, no. 32 (1886): 507.
- [53] In oral interviews conducted in the winter of 2000 with Byron Geslison, who served as a patriarch in Iceland in the late 20th century, he indicated that every blessing he gave in Iceland reflected that the recipient was from the tribe of Ephraim. The only exception was a foreigner who was temporarily stationed at the NATO base in Keflavík.
- [54] John Torgeirson, "The People of Iceland," *Deseret Evening News*, 24 January 1887,2.
- [55] Between 5,000 to 6,000 Saints came through Norfolk on this new route from 1887 to 1890. For more information concerning the cause of the rerouting and the experience of these Saints through the port of Norfolk, see Fred E. Woods, "Norfolk and Mormon Folk: Latter-day Saint Immigration through Old Dominion, 1887–1890," *Mormon Historical Studies* 1, no. 1 (spring 2000): 73–91.
- [56] Loftur Bjarnason, "The Work of the Lord in Iceland," *Millennial Star* 66, no. 10 (1904): 146, further notes, "There are many parts of this country that have not been yet covered, as the Elders, who come here have labored principally in those localities in which they were born and reared. It is only along the southern coast of the mainland and in the Westman Islands that the Gospel has to any extent been preached, while the greater portions of the northern and eastern countries have never been visited." See also *Millennial Star* 66, no. 12 (1904): 188 and 66 (1904): 301—2, for evidence of seasonal proselyting in the Westman Islands.
- [57] *Millennial Star* 56, no. 51 (1894): 806. Elder Bjarnason, writing a decade later, also spoke of the difficulties missionaries encountered proselyting in the country. Here he noted, "Houses are scattered, being from a half mile to a mile and a half apart, and the only method of traveling is either by foot or on ponies. Often it is impossible to go from one farmhouse to another without being accompanied by a guide, on account of the dangerous streams that are to be encountered, which only experienced men can find the way to cross. To purchase a horse and pay a guide wages, together with other expenses, has made traveling in this country both expensive and difficult," *Millennial Star* 66, no. 10 (1904): 146.
- [58] British Mission Manuscript History, Church Archives, 2 Nov. 1899, 1. Andrew Jenson, *Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4:342, notes that Halldór Johnson labored as a missionary in Iceland from 1898—1900. Five years later, Icelandic Mission President Loftur Bjarnason elaborated on the difficult climatic conditions in Iceland. In an article titled "The Work of the Lord in Iceland," *Millennial Star* 66, no. 10 (1904): 145—47, he stated, "During the winter season it is practically impossible to travel around in the country and, during the summer months the people are so busy that they could not, even if they felt so disposed, spare time enough to listen to an Elder explain the principles of the Gospel. Early in spring and late in autumn are the only seasons that the farmers can be approached, for then they have a little leisure time to spare. This being the case, the Elders have spent the winters in the towns and cines along the coast. These are the principal business places as well as seaports and rendezvous for sailors and fishermen."
- [59] "Record of Members of the Icelandic Mission, 1874–1914," Church Archives, 88.
- [60] "Preaching in Iceland," *Millennial Star* 64, no. 27 (1902): 427–28.
- [61] "Record of Members of the Icelandic Mission, 1874–1914," Church Archives, 78 ff. Page 88 indicates that the Saints who emigrated with Elder John
- [62] Johanneson "took passage on the S. S. Laura for Raymond Alberta Canada via [the] Albion Line." According to the

Millennial Star 65, no. 27 (1903): 426, Elder Johanneson and four Saints were to emigrate via Glasgow. The “Historical Record of the Icelandic Mission of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints 1873—1914,” Church Archives, 14—15, 17 notes that three of the group were GuðTinna Sasmundsdóttir, Jón Grímsson, and Guðnurður Jónsson. Elder Halldór Johnson reported that due to the unfavorable temporal prospects in Iceland during this period, “many are emigrating to Canada, and many more would do so if their finances would allow.” See *Millennial Star* 62, no. 27 (1900): 426.

62 Loftur Bjarnason, “From Iceland,” *Millennial Star* 68, no. 8 (1906): 121. Furthermore, seven months later, the *Millennial Star* 68, no. 38 (1906): 607, reported Loftur Bjarnason was in charge of fifty-three emigrating Saints from Iceland. The Historical Record of the Icelandic Mission, 1873—1914, 62—63, reports twenty-seven Church members and thirteen children under the age of eight. On these pages there is also a statistical membership list for the years 1900 to 1911. By 1911, there were only twenty-six members and three children under the age of eight that were recorded.

[63] Elder Bjarnason, “Notes from Iceland,” *Millennial Star* 67, no. 41 (1905): 653. Writing from Reykjavik, Halldór Johnson, noted five years earlier, “If we had a meeting house here we could get many listeners, and, I believe, many would join the Church.” See “Abstract of Correspondence,” *Millennial Star* 62, no. 15 (1900): 234.

[64] “Historical Record of Icelandic Mission, 1873–1914,” 41: “July 8, 1914, Elder Einar Eriksen, who commenced his labors on the Island July 11, 1913, was released today, on account of a discontinuance of missionary work in Iceland, and in compliance with instructions received from the First Presidency.”

[65] Although there was no organized LDS branch between 1914 and 1964, in 1930 two full-time missionaries were sent to Iceland from the Scandinavian Mission to serve for a few months. Their names were James C. Ostegar and F. Lynn Michelsen (see Marius A. Christensen, “History of the Danish Mission of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1850–1964” [unpublished master’s thesis, 1966], 129). Christensen also points out that in 1955 Elder Spencer W. Kimball raised the question of opening up missionary work in Iceland and indicated that in 1961 President McKay sent Alvin R. Dyer, Assistant to the Council of the Twelve, to Iceland to look into the possibility of again sending missionaries to Iceland (131). For the interesting story of events leading up to missionary work again opening up in Iceland, see 1973 typescript of interview of Grant Ruel Ipsen, president of the Danish Mission, Church Archives, 1—6. Latter-day Saint David B. Timmins also made friends for America and the Church while serving as the U.S. diplomat to Iceland from 1958 to 1960. According to Timmins, during this time he met with the Lutheran bishop of Iceland, who informed Timmins that he “would be pleased to welcome Mormon missionaries back to Iceland . . . because he felt we had a message which would improve the moral climate of his countrymen which he considered deteriorating. Timmins also noted that he and his family met Iceland’s elite when they accepted an invitation to visit the country home of Halldor Laxness who had won a Nobel prize for literature. He discussed his future novel *Paradise Regained* (published in 1962) which focused on a Latter-day Saint Icelandic emigrant who returned to his homeland (see David B. Timmins, “The Second Beginning of the Church in Iceland,” unpublished three-page document in the possession of Clark T. Thorstenson).

[66] Byron T. Geslison, “Mission Report of Iceland,” December 1977, 4–5, in possession of Byron T. Geslison.

[67] Geslison, “Mission Report,” 19.

[68] Autobiographical Sketch of Thor Leifson, in *Icelandic Memories*, vol. 1, compiled by Phyllis H. Ashby and in her possession, (n.p., n.d.).

[69] Autobiographical Sketch of Clark T. Thorstenson, in *Icelandic Memories*, vol. 1.

[70] According to LaNora Allred, “The Icelanders of Utah,” (n.p., 1988), 39, “In 1897 under the leadership of Einar H. Jonson the Icelanders formed a committee to plan a special holiday in commemoration of the settlement of Iceland in the year 1894. Although the actual date of settlement was June 17, the committee decided upon August 2 as the day.”

[71] Interviews with Clark T Thorstenson on 10 July 2001 and David A. Ashby on 11 July 2001.

[72] Interview with David A. Ashby on 6 July 2000. Ashby served as the president of the Icelandic Association of Utah Inc. from 1994 to 1995 and from 1999 to 2000. John K. Johnson is now serving as president for the duration of 2001 to 2002, but Ashby is still very involved with this organization and is currently serving as the chairman of public

affairs.

[73] On 1 December the First Presidency issued the following statement: “We wish to reiterate the long-standing counsel to members of the Church to remain in their homelands rather than immigrate to the United States. As members throughout the world remain in their homelands, working to rebuild the Church in their native countries, great blessings will come to them personally and to the Church collectively” (see *Church News*, 11 December 1999, 7).

[74] This center is owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1995 Clark T Thorstenson was instrumental in arranging to have the Icelandic genealogical materials transferred from the LDS Family History Center in Salt Lake to the Regional Family History Center in Spanish Fork, which is an important source for this topic of study.