

Analysis: ‘A Prairie Home Companion’ made American religion real

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Religion experts perennially complain mass entertainment culture is ignorant about religion and portrays it badly. But there’s one show they overlook.

For 42 years, Garrison Keillor’s deep, soothing voice brought a slice of Americana into our homes and cars through his popular radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*.



For four decades years, Garrison Keillor served as host and chief storyteller on “A Prairie Home Companion.” (RNS photo courtesy of Prairie Home Productions)Keillor, who ended his run as host July 2 in an episode taped at the Hollywood Bowl, also brought a healthy dose of religion to the show.

For church people, the stories and songs had a familiar and humorous ring.

They also transmitted a bit of education and an accurate portrayal of American Protestantism to the religiously uninitiated.

Good-natured critic who understands religious devotion

Keillor was reared in Plymouth Brethren churches but attended Protestant mainline churches most of his life. Indeed, he was so immersed in these churches he could critique and satirize them without betraying his own obvious appreciation and devotion.

Best-known for his comedic portrayals of Lutheranism in his native Minnesota, Keillor had a deep understanding of the entire American Christian landscape, from literal-Bible fundamentalism to Dutch Calvinism.

His show, which broadcast mostly from the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minn., is surely the most widely known portrayal of Lutheran cultural strength in the Upper Midwest.

Saturday afternoon hymn-singing

It was one of the only programs to air on National Public Radio member stations in which listeners could hear hymns. Keillor and his musical guests sang hymns throughout the year, often in keeping with the liturgical calendar.

The fictional hometown of Lake Wobegon, which seems as real to me as any imaginary place could possibly be, is well-known for its two churches—a Lutheran one, of course, and a Catholic parish named Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility.

The Catholics in Lake Wobegon worship with Father Emil and some dedicated German nuns. The Norwegians are Lutheran. The townsfolk seem very much alike, in spite of their different confessional and national heritages. Yet they imagine themselves quite different from one another.

Highlighted differences and deep similarities

Religious difference in Lake Wobegon serves as a microcosm for Keillor to opine on a great question for Christians and for all Americans: How different are we, really?

Church people, especially mainline Protestants, found something whimsical, comforting and yet very real in Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church and its longtime pastor, David Ingqvist.

And Keillor masterfully chronicled contemporary challenges and changes in both churches' traditions through the pastors' successors, Father Wilmer and Pastor Liz.

Synthesis of conservative and liberal church traditions

A stalwart liberal, Keillor generally resisted the temptation to intertwine religion and politics, both on the show and in his own life. But when religious conservatives dismayed by the leftward tilt of the mainline denominations wonder what makes those pew dwellers tick, Keillor embodies the answer.

He is the consummate churchman of his place and time, a synthesis of his evangelical childhood, his fondness for sacred music and his progressive politics. Even the uneasy tension between Keillor's traditionalism and his tolerance resonates with generations of liberal Protestants.

It is fitting, then, that President Obama, a fellow traveler of Keillor's liberal Christianity, called in to the final show.

"One of the reasons I miss driving is that you kept me company," Obama told Keillor. "*A Prairie Home Companion* made me feel better and more human."

I rarely made a point to tune in on Saturday evenings. But if I was in the

car driving any distance, I almost always tuned in. As a professional observer of American Christianity, I frequently was struck by the depth of Keillor's own religious literacy and his admirable skill in transmitting religious culture.

Over four decades, Keillor showed what is good, endearing and enduring about his brand of Protestantism.

Saturday night at the Los Angeles stadium, Keillor and his onstage singers led the Hollywood Bowl in singing the chorus of the great old hymn "We're Marching to Zion."

No one but Garrison Keillor could have done such a thing. And it seems likely that no one will again.

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