



Signing on to America's first freedom

Signatures sought for religious liberty commemoration

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By ROBIN FARMER
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

An American's faith, or lack of it, is a freedom rooted in Virginia law.

As a reminder, a consortium of historic, civic and religious organizations seeks 15,000 signatures on a reprint of the 1786 Virginia statute that established religious freedom and was the basis for the First Amendment.

Mark Howell, convener of the Consortium for Richmond's Religious History, explains the importance of the project.

What was the impact of Virginia's legislation?

Virginia took a leadership role in the 1780s to guarantee citizens the freedom to worship or not as they see fit. Protestant denominations, Jews and Catholics all benefited from the legislation.

What is the purpose of the project to collect signatures?

We got together as a group, 10 organizations, to use history as a way of getting people to come to grips with the importance of religious freedom. The 1786 statute is one of Thomas Jefferson's most important writings, guaranteeing freedom of religion. We want to collect 15,000 signatures to reaffirm the importance of religious freedom and expose people to the statute. Everyone who signs gets a copy of the statute.

What will be done with the signatures?

On January 16, 2008, we hope to present all the signatures to Gov. [Timothy M.] Kaine on the anniversary of the statute coming into law.

Who are consortium members?

A More Perfect Union, Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives, The Council for America's First Freedom, Historic Polegreen Church Foundation, The Interfaith Council of Greater Richmond [and] The Museum of Virginia Catholic History. Also, St. John's Church, Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church, Soka Gakkai (Buddhists) Richmond Chapter, and The Virginia Baptist Historical Society.

What are some of the Richmond area's emerging religions?

Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Baha'i, Buddhist and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. I tend to call them Mormons, but they prefer the long title.

What is the consortium's next step?

We will have a meeting to see what's next for the consortium in July. Our focus is how we can use history to expand the notion of religious freedom and religious toleration.

How do people sign the petition?

We're encouraging civic and religious groups to contact us about sponsoring their own signing. They can reach us at programs@historicpolegreen.org or leave a message at (804) 261-3837.

Contact Robin Farmer at (804) 649-6312 or rfarmer@timesdispatch.com.

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