

Religious-freedom awards going to 3

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By ROBIN FARMER
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Three men who protect religious freedom will be honored this week with the 2008 First Freedom Awards.

Presented by The Council for America's First Freedom, the program will be held at The Jefferson Hotel on Wednesday at 7 p.m.

The celebration honors three men in Richmond, "where the first legislative codification of religious freedom was done," said Robert A. Seiple, council president and CEO.

"So it's a chance to honor people and recognize the historical legacy that is ours. We can celebrate the impact of the legacy on the American dream and what it means for the rest of the world. We talk about democracy being the best gift America has to offer, but it's hollow if it doesn't include religious freedom," he said.

The International First Freedom Award recipient is Jakob Finci, president of the Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He is also president of La Benevolencija, the Jewish cultural, educational and humanitarian society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which provides aid to all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina regardless of religion.

Winner of the National First Freedom Award is John Witte Jr., the Jonas Robitscher professor of law and director of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University. Witte is a specialist in legal history, marriage law and religious liberty.

The Virginia First Freedom Award will go to Charles C. Haynes, senior scholar at the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center in Washington and director of the First Amendment Center's educational program in schools, which addresses issues concerning religious liberty in American public life.

The awards are given to individuals who have either made it their life's work or have gone beyond the call of duty when it comes to protecting freedom of religion or extending it to others who don't have it in other parts of the world, said Maureen Rosenbaum, marketing director for the council.

"Just keeping people informed about their right to religious freedom keeps them informed and educated on the issues," she said. "The more knowledge they have about other people's religion, the more respect there is for people of other faiths."

The date of the award ceremony ties into National Religious Freedom Day, which is observed each year on Jan. 16, the anniversary of the date that the Virginia General Assembly enacted the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786. The landmark law was the first that guaranteed religious liberty and became the precursor for the First Amendment pledge of freedom of religion.

Not enough people know about Virginia's role, Seiple said.

"More people need to be more aware and not simply at a superficial level. there is no question that religion has begun to play a major role in the geopolitical landscape of our world and religious freedom is a part of that."

Past recipients include Madeleine K. Albright, former secretary of state, who received the First Freedom Distinguished Service Award in 2007; Abdelfattah Amor, former United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, former Prime Minister Tony Blair of Great Britain; and Seiple, the first U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.

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