

3 Get Religious-Freedom Awards

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An appreciative audience of several hundred gathered last night at the Richmond Marriott hotel to honor three men who champion religious freedom in Virginia, the nation and the world.

The Richmond-based First Freedom Center, formerly known as the Council for America's First Freedom, made the presentations at its 15th annual awards program.

Samuel E. Ericsson, president and CEO of Advocates International in Fairfax, received the Virginia First Freedom Award.

"The secret to religious liberty is to practice the golden rule of all faith traditions, organize and do something," Ericsson told last night's audience.

His organization focuses on legal strategies to advance religious freedom.

Douglas Laycock, a professor at the University of Michigan Law School, was awarded the National First Freedom Award. He said that after his career ends, he wants to be remembered for avoiding the "Puritan mistake."

"The Puritans came to Massachusetts for religious liberty, but they meant religious liberty only for themselves. Everyone else had the liberty to go anywhere in the world outside Massachusetts, and in the Puritan view, that was quite enough liberty for the likes of them," Laycock said.

But religious freedom is for believers and nonbelievers and should not include government pressure about what to believe, he said.

"I hope that the many organizations active on religious liberty issues will think more carefully about the Puritan mistake," he said.

The International First Freedom Award was presented to W. Cole Durham Jr., a law professor and director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University's J. Reuben Clark Law School.

"Freedom of religion or belief is a principle of tremendous social leverage," he said.

"There is now extensive empirical evidence that a country's performance in protecting religious freedom correlates not only with . . . freedom of speech and nondiscrimination"

but with other social benefits such as gender equality, high literacy rates and gross national product.

The audience also heard Albemarle County High School student Irteza Binte-Farid, winner of the center's national high school student essay competition last year, read her winning work.

The First Freedom Center, a nonpolitical and nondenominational nonprofit organization, works to increase understanding and respect for religious freedom in diverse communities worldwide through education.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of its founding.