Pastor John Ericson’s Ministry at St. Luke’s Historic Church & Museum

John Ericson is the Executive Director of St. Luke's Historic Church & Museum and pastor of Reformation Lutheran Church in Newport News. In the article below, Pastor Ericson shares information about the early American religious experience which provides an example of how Pastor Ericson serves at St. Luke's Historic Church & Museum. He can be reached at: jericson@historicstlukes.org if you'd like to learn more about St. Luke's or about his experience as a bi-vocational pastor.

Born from Conflict: The Early American Religious Experience

On July 15, 1685, James Scott, the 1st Duke of Monmouth, stepped onto the scaffold in London to face execution for treason. Monmouth had attempted to overthrow his uncle, King James II, largely because of the king’s Catholicism. His failed rebellion ended with his beheading before a large crowd.

Ironically, James II himself would be deposed only three years later in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.



While that revolution was largely bloodless, the century that produced it was anything but. Across Europe, religious conflict defined the age. Wars such as the Dutch War of Independence, the Thirty Years’ War, and the English Civil Wars claimed millions of lives. The devastation was so severe that parts of the German states required nearly a century to recover their pre-war population after the Thirty Years’ War.

It was in the shadow of these conflicts that the early American religious experience took shape.

I serve as a public historian at St. Luke’s Historic Church & Museum in Isle of Wight County, Virginia. St. Luke’s is home to the oldest extant church building in Virginia, completed around the same time as Monmouth’s rebellion. Known locally as the “Old Brick Church,” it was built as part of the established Church of England.

In colonial Virginia, the church was not simply a place of worship but a central institution of public life. The largest tax many colonists paid was the tithe, a mandatory church tax that supported the local Anglican parish. Attendance at worship was required at least once a month, and religious dissenters could face legal penalties or social exclusion.

Because of this reality, the familiar claim that America was founded upon principles of religious freedom does not fully hold up under historical scrutiny. In most of the thirteen colonies, voting and public office were restricted to professing Trinitarian Christians. Only one colony—Maryland—initially extended toleration to Roman Catholics, and even there those protections were revoked in 1649 and again in 1692.

It is also impossible to speak meaningfully about religious freedom in colonial America without acknowledging the reality of chattel slavery. Enslaved Africans were stripped of their languages, cultures, and religious traditions as part of the process of enslavement. The ideals of liberty existed alongside systems that denied freedom to many.

Even after the founding of the United States, true religious freedom developed slowly. Several states maintained religious establishment laws into the early nineteenth century, with the final establishments disappearing by 1835. Article VI of the Constitution prohibited religious tests for federal office, and the First Amendment barred Congress from establishing religion or interfering with its free exercise. Yet those protections originally applied only to the federal government.

It was not until the twentieth century, through Supreme Court rulings interpreting the Fourteenth Amendment, that the protections of the First Amendment were applied to the states.

Today those interpretations are again being debated. Recent legislation in states such as Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments or mandating Bible instruction in public schools will likely face judicial review. Whether earlier precedents remain intact is an open question.

At St. Luke's, we believe the lessons of history matter in these conversations. If there is not religious freedom for all, there is not truly religious freedom for anyone.

Our Old Brick Church provides a powerful stage from which to tell the dramatic stories of America's early religious past. Through lectures and educational programs, we explore topics such as religion and race, faith during the American Revolution, and the role of religion in shaping the Constitution.

As the nation approaches the 250th anniversary of American independence, honest reflection on our past is essential. Understanding the struggles that shaped religious liberty helps us live more faithfully into the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the continuing effort to form a more perfect union.

We invite you to engage with St. Luke's through our programs, podcast, or by visiting in person. Groups of ten or more from congregations are welcome to tour free of charge. By learning from the past, we can help ensure that the promise of liberty and justice extends to all.

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