

## **FRANCIS MAKEMIE: CHAMPION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

by Tom Cox

Today few of the Presbyterians in the United States remember Francis Makemie, although we are his heirs and his story bears recounting. As recently as 2001 Makemie Monument Park in Maryland stood abandoned and largely forgotten.

Makemie was born in 1658 in Ulster — the source of most of North America's Presbyterians in the Colonial and Early National periods. He felt called upon to enter the ministry, but the necessary education was closed to him in his native Ireland, for at that time only Anglicans were admitted to Irish universities. Makemie crossed to Scotland, obtained an education at the University of Glasgow and was then ordained by the Presbytery of Laggan in Ireland. In due course, he was sent to North America as a missionary.

Soon after arrival in America, Makemie clashed with authorities in Virginia, but ere long managed to obtain a license to preach under the terms of Parliament's Religious Toleration Act of 1689 and, in the process, demonstrated his respect for the law and civil authority. He preached in Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Maryland, supplying numerous struggling little congregations, and established churches at Snow Hill and Rehoboth, on Maryland's rural Eastern Shore — both survived with memberships of just over 100 in 2003, that in Snow Hill appropriately called Makemie Presbyterian Church.

In 1707 Makemie joined with other Presbyterians from the Middle Colonies to form the Presbytery of Philadelphia, which he served as moderator. Independent of foreign control, it was America's first presbytery.

But all this did Makemie little good when he went to New York to preach. Lord Cornbury, the governor and a staunch Anglican, ordered Makemie to refrain from preaching and closed the churches to him. Makemie responded by obtaining a private dwelling in which to preach and opening wide the windows and doors so all in the vicinity could hear him — and know what he was doing. The open doors and windows may also have been a rather flamboyant attempt to abide by the terms of the Religious Toleration Act, for the rights granted under it were specifically withheld from those meeting behind locked doors.

The governor promptly had Makemie arrested and jailed, saying that the Toleration Act, which had primarily been designed to protect Presbyterians in Scotland and Protestant dissenters in England, did not apply in the colonies. Makemie insisted it did, and besides pointed out that he had a license to preach. Lord Cornbury was adamant; Makemie responded by seeking a writ of *habeas corpus*, demanding that the governor show some law that justified the jailing; the governor could not, and, after forty-six days in jail, Makemie got his writ from the court and won his freedom. It was one of the colonies' first major cases regarding freedom of religion — and it would not to be the last. Indeed, Presbyterians soon became the leading champions of the political and religious rights of colonists. Francis Makemie's account of his experience, *A Narrative of a New and Unusual American Imprisonment*, published in 1707, is a milestone document in the struggle.

Makemie died in 1708 at the age of fifty. During his life, he had made a far greater impact than many who lived far longer. Fortunately, his monument in Maryland is being restored.