



Supreme Court of Tennessee

Administrative Office of the Courts
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ELIZABETH A. SYKES
Director

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CONTACT: Michele Wojciechowski
Office: 615-532-6047
mwojciechowski@tncourts.gov

FAITH-BASED INITIATIVE SEEKS TO ALIGN PRO BONO ATTORNEYS WITH THEIR WORSHIP COMMUNITIES

Nashville, Tenn. – In an effort to reach more people in need of information about legal services, the Tennessee Supreme Court’s Access to Justice Commission has formed a faith-based initiative to engage lawyers within their place of worship.

The Tennessee Faith and Justice Alliance (TFJA) is a program developed by the Access to Justice Commission to support and encourage faith-based groups in Tennessee who commit to providing legal resources to their congregations and communities.

It’s one of the first programs of its kind in the country created to align needs seen at the local church level with possible legal resources that are nearby, perhaps even within the same congregation. The notion is to connect with people in need in a place they already go to seek help with a problem. That place is quite often their place of worship.

“Faith communities are a natural fit with our efforts to help those in need find access to legal advice,” said Tennessee Supreme Court Justice Cornelia A. Clark. “And with our goal of helping more lawyers find more occasions to provide pro bono services, this is the ideal opportunity for attorneys to put faith in action in their own worship communities.”

The pilot project for the initiative kicked off last month with members of the Tennessee Conference of the United Methodist Church. Church leaders and volunteer attorneys gathered to learn more about the program, assign attorneys to congregations, and receive training on how the program works.

The program is flexible to meet the needs and resources of a particular community. The United Methodist Church's TFJA project is designed to pair an attorney with a place of worship. When a leader or clergy member of that congregation learns of a member's legal need, that leader can then refer the person to the local attorney who has volunteered to serve as a resource to that congregation. That attorney in turn will provide the legal advice needed, or make connections with other resources that can provide the necessary services.

Twenty-four attorneys associated with UMC churches have already committed their service to the program for their church or another UMC church in the Nashville area that does not have an attorney in the congregation. Fourteen churches have at least one attorney aligned with their congregation.

The TFJA program, which has plans to expand to all faiths and geographic areas of the state, is flexible to meet the needs of a particular community. The UMC model is just one way to offer services. Other organizations may consider monthly legal clinics or other offerings.

The TJFA is a project of the Access to Justice Commission and was formed in 2012. The Access to Justice Commission is tasked with making recommendations to the Supreme Court of projects and programs necessary for enhancing access to justice.

For more information, or if you are interested in developing a similar program in your faith-community, contact Palmer Williams, Pro Bono Coordinator at the Administrative Office of the Courts, palmer.williams@tncourts.gov or 615-741-2687 ext. 1414.