

What does it mean to be a Christian Legal Aid Program?

During the 2015 Christian Legal Society conference, attorneys from across the country came to DC to fellowship and share testimony about the ways God is working in various areas of law. The topics at the CLS conference ranged from the religious liberty issues facing Christian attorneys to the challenges posed to legal aid programs. During the conference, an open discussion forum entitled, “What does it mean to be a Christian Legal Aid Program?” was conducted to attempt to define the role of Christian legal aid organizations and discuss the varying views on the topic. Various legal aid program directors and volunteer attorneys shared their experiences during the forum and their responses have been summarized to answer five key questions that consistently challenge Christian legal aid.

1) Should Christian legal aid programs have faith requirements?

The answer to this question varied considerably from program to program. Some programs require only paid staff and board members to sign a faith statement or affirm a guiding document such as the Apostle’s Creed. While most programs do not require volunteers to affirm a faith statement, some programs do require their volunteers to be Christians. A few individuals voiced concern that, in the past, these requirements led to the perception that volunteers and clients would not receive help or be welcomed if they were not Christians. In order to remedy this problem, some clinics allowed attorneys from different faiths and backgrounds to volunteer, but made sure to emphasize a commitment to Christian standards while encouraging prayer with clients. Despite the various perceptions of Christian legal aid, each program made their legal services available to any client seeking help, no matter what their beliefs or background might be.

2) How should legal aid programs expand their talent pool (e.g. attorneys, volunteers, and staff) for their day to day operations?

The success of any legal aid program is dependent on the volunteer talent pool available to an organization on a regular basis. One way to expand legal aid is to partner with other Christian organizations such as soup kitchens and churches. Some programs operate out of churches and are supported by the tithes and talents of the congregation. Other programs operate out of law schools or private law firms. Additional recruiting options suggested during the forum included reaching out to local CLS chapters, creating a community presence of Christian lawyers beyond pro-bono legal work, and partnering with additional organizations such as universities, law firms, and churches.

3) How should we react to clients that are uncomfortable with our faith?

Christian legal aid organizations should clearly state that they operate in accordance with Biblical doctrine. Most organizations encourage praying with clients before and after meetings. While most clients accept the prayers legal advisors offer, some individuals are uncomfortable

with this display of faith. In handling these situations, some clinics encourage forging long-term friendships with clients in order to display the love of God without pressuring the client. Lawyers in other clinics ask clients if they can pray silently to themselves before they start the session in order to ask God for the strength to help the client with their problem. Overall, it is important to emphasize that God's love in mercy is the motivation behind Christian legal aid while making sure that everyone feels welcome in the programs.

4) How do we handle funding?

Again, this really depends on the program. Clinics across the country are funded by both Christian and secular donors and they frequently run into issues on both sides. It is important to clearly define the governing principles of the organization that can be used to determine who funding will and will not be accepted from. While there are various sources of funding, if we are seeking God first and allowing him to lead, he will provide for the needs of Christian legal aid and allow us to impact the world eternally for his kingdom.

5) What is the difference between Christian legal aid and secular legal aid?

Secular legal aid seeks to fix a temporary legal issue. Christian legal aid sees that legal issues as an opportunity to impact a soul eternally and point people to Christ. Additionally, Christian legal aid can be a ministry to attorneys. These programs can minister to both Christian attorneys, that might not feel like they can share their faith in the workplace, and attorneys that are of different faiths

There are always going to be walls and obstacles to legal ministries but as long as the focus is set on the eternal hope we have in Jesus Christ our work will be a testimony to the rest of the earth.

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life- comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.” 1 John 2:15-17 NIV

[prepared by Alli Washburn July 2016]