

AN EDUCATIONAL UPDATE FROM
THE SOUTHEAST LAW INSTITUTE™, INC.

To: Interested Persons
Date: June 2018
From: A. Eric Johnston
Re: Faith Forums – The Opioid Crisis, Church Security and Violent Crime

During May, Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall held Faith Forums in Mobile, Montgomery, Birmingham and Huntsville. The Forums lasted about four and a half hours. They were hosted by churches in those areas. The purpose was to encourage participation between churches and the state in the opioid crisis, church security and violent crime. Marshall, who is a Christian, believes as many of us that the application of our faith to the world around us can be valuable in solving problems and helping people. While liberals depend on the government to do everything for them, conservatives believe government should be limited and the other institutions of church and family should be central to dealing with problems. We think General Marshall's outreach was significant. We have not seen it recently by any public official. Rather, we see public officials wanting to assume responsibility for everything and get funding for it. The church is a very important ingredient to solving our problems.

One of the most serious problems in America today is the opioid crisis. Shannon Royce, Director of Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, United States Department of Health and Human Services, spoke on "Engaging the Faith-Based Community in the Opioid Epidemic." We are aware of President Donald Trump's Administration's emphasis on religious freedom and setting up initiatives, like the recent formation of the White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative. Not only do these policies protect religious freedom, but they seek to make religion an important ingredient in our day to day lives. Ms. Royce, a Christian, provided many statistics and explained in some detail the work of the federal government through its agencies to deal with the opioid crisis. However, the important point of her message was that we, as believers, know that the best remedy to this problem is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Churches must provide help and resources for their members. It can be as simple as the Sunday morning pastoral prayer to include those with addiction problems. But also, the church must have interaction with and make provision of resources to members and referral to outside ministries who specialize in dealing with substance abuse problems.

Merely detoxing a person does not provide a basis for long-term recovery. Several years ago, we represented the faith-based substance abuse facilities in the State of Alabama. The State Department of Mental Health attempted to regulate them as medical facilities, which would have put most out of business. We secured an exemption from them from such regulation, since they are religious ministries and not medical organizations. There are many such programs in the state which provide residential long-term Gospel-based rehabilitation. Those organizations have set up an accrediting agency, the Alabama Association of Christian Recovery Ministries. One of the most significant things churches can do is work with that Association and its member organizations to help their congregations.

Robert T. Thetford, a retired FBI Agent and now Operations Manager of the Institute for Criminal Justice Education provided "Church Protection Training Overview." He reviewed statistics of church and school shootings. Churches and schools are similar "soft targets" which need special protection. It is not only shootings from which churches need protection, but also theft, burglary, and, importantly, child abuse. From not only his law enforcement experience, but as a Christian and regular churchgoer, Mr. Thetford strongly recommended churches participate in training activities. The Alabama Law Enforcement Agency ("ALEA") will provide training to persons who can then work within their own churches to provide security. SLI supports the need for churches to have adequate security. This is particularly true if they have additional weekday ministries, like church schools and daycares. Churches should investigate resources available to give them direction on how to do this.

Attorney General Steve Marshall spoke on "The Church's Rightful Role in Crime Reduction" giving statistics on increasing crime rates. After a period of lower crime rates, crime rates have begun to increase. Perhaps, the church's involvement in this area is not as great as the two above. However, it is important to churches to have community outreaches to help persons avoid a life of crime.

We are grateful to General Marshall for sponsoring these Faith Forums. We hope it sets an example for other government officials. One of the biggest jobs for SLI is dealing with government agencies which want to diminish religious freedom, rather than work with it. Three major issues come to mind: the effort of the Department of Mental Health to regulate faith-based substance abuse facilities, the effort of the Alabama Department of Education to regulate church schools, and the more recent effort of the Alabama Department of Human Relations to regulate church daycares. In each of these, we fought for and achieved religious freedom. We really should not have to do that. We hope other Alabama agencies will take a lesson from the Attorney General's Office.

Just as important, and the objective of the Faith Forums, is the need for church participation. Unfortunately, but typically, church participation in the Faith Forums was low. The church cannot do what it must do, unless it educates itself and applies that knowledge through the love of Christ. We constantly hear of the decline of the culture. Where is your church?

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