On May 15, 2015, the San Diego County Superior Court presented its first Court-Clergy Conference, hosted by First United Methodist Church, San Diego. The Honorable Laura Halgren, California Superior Court Judge from San Diego and a longtime NAWJ member, chaired this incredible conference. Approximately 100 clergy members attended and 26 San Diego Superior Court judges participated, either as speakers or luncheon table discussion leaders. The response from everyone was overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

The theme of our program was “Building Community Through Justice.” The goal of the conference in San Diego was to reach out to clergy members who are called upon to minister to parishioners in times of legal crises. These troubles could be caused by marital discord, domestic violence, aging, immigration issues, crime, addiction, or child abuse and neglect. For example, when a parishioner has concerns about a child who has been arrested, or fears an elder is unable to care for herself or himself, or has been a victim of domestic violence, the clergy member often has no idea of what to do or what will happen. If the clergy could leave our conference feeling better equipped to assist and support the members of their faith community and also come away with ideas of how they could work together with the courts to improve justice in our community, this effort would be worthwhile.

The focus of the day was on “nuts and bolts.” Ten judges from San Diego Superior Court presented on their area of expertise. The topics included a court overview (presented by Presiding Judge of Superior Court Judge from San Diego and a longtime NAWJ member, family law [Judge Barry Prouse]), domestic violence [Judges Michael Cheek and Enrique Camarena], elder abuse and conservatorships, Judge [Julia Kelety, a NAWJ member, immigration [Judge Tamila E. Ipema, NAWJ member and District 14 Director], criminal law [Judges Laura Halgren and Judge Desiree Bruce Lye, both NAWJ members, collaborative courts, juvenile delinquency and juvenile dependency [Judges Laura Blomme, NAWJ member, and Judge Brooke Willis]. In addition, the general counsel from the local Catholic diocese spoke on mandatory reporting requirements for clergy and two lay clergy members spoke about faith-based organizations that deal with domestic violence, the clergy member often has no idea of what to do or what will happen. If the clergy could leave our conference feeling better equipped to assist and support the members of their faith community and also come away with ideas of how they could work together with the courts to improve justice in our community, this effort would be worthwhile.

The program format included the goal of encouraging dialogue between clergy and judges. Judge Halgren solicited questions as time permitted throughout the day and wrapped up with a general question and answer session. In addition, judges who were not speakers were invited to attend for the lunch portion of the event, sitting at tables throughout the room to answer questions and hear from the clergy members about their experiences with the court system. Twenty-four judges participated in this segment. The lunch hour was quite lively, generating a lot of energy from the conversations.

A variety of resources were provided in a program folder so that the clergy members could refer to them in the future when needed. For each topic, the speakers provided a summary sheet that identified three main points to remember, three ways in which clergy could help their congregants and three or more websites and contacts they could turn to for more information. Additional handouts and brochures were included in the materials. These items were very well received.

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Congratulations Judge Laura Hageman for this immensely successful community service program.