

Organized According to the Laws of Man to Do the Work of God

How Legal Missions Are Furthering the Work of the Church

BY RACHEL EDWARDS

With a focus on enabling “individuals and families to do the work of salvation and exaltation,”¹ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has grown to include over 30,000 congregations in more than 160 countries and territories and gospel resources and programs in over 110 languages. One thing is certain: it is “a gigantic and complex” organization, as Marshall Tanner, an attorney with the Church’s Office of General Counsel (OGC), puts it. What may be less obvious is that every aspect of the Church’s organization and function is affected by the law and by the law’s variation from country to country.

For nearly 30 years Elder Lance B. Wickman, emeritus general authority and general counsel for the Church, has presided over the legal work of the Church. “Virtually everything the Church does is touched by law,” he says. “To the extent that our missionaries can’t enter a country, to the extent that we can’t print and distribute literature, to the extent that our people can’t

meet, to the extent that we can’t pay our tithes and offerings, to the extent that we can’t build buildings and acquire property for that purpose, we really don’t have a church.”

Much of this behind-the-scenes legal work is facilitated by seasoned attorneys hired as area legal counsel (ALC) or called as full-time senior missionaries known as associate area legal counsel (AALC). Each ALC is given responsibility for a specific area of the world and, with the help of the AALC, oversees, guides, and consults with local attorneys and law firms on legal matters ranging from real estate projects to immigration matters to corporate maintenance for various Church legal entities.

Bill Atkin, associate general counsel for the Church, has overseen the international legal affairs of the Church since 1996. “We started with five ALC, each hired to manage an enormous territory,” he recalls. Today there are ALC and AALC in 17 areas around the globe—and Atkin reports that there is an ongoing need for this type of missionary service.



Guided by an Unseen Hand

In 2013, when M. Steven and Kathryn (Kate) Andersen began preparing for senior missionary service, neither was aware of the option of serving a legal mission. “We never knew there was such a thing until a few months before our calling,” Steve recalls. “A friend in our ward who was connected through marriage to Dic Johnson, the ALC in Central America at that time, mentioned that there was a need for an AALC there.” That same day, Steve was on the phone with Johnson, and by the end of that conversation, Steve and Kate felt it was the perfect type of missionary service for them. Over the next several weeks, the couple met

with Elder Wickman and Atkin to discuss the particulars. They received their official call in February 2013 to the Central America Area Office, which oversees Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. By May 2013 they were living and serving in Guatemala City.

Both Steve and Kate graduated from Brigham Young University in 1972 and then moved to San Francisco, California, where Steve attended UC Hastings College of Law. Following his graduation in 1975, the family moved to San Diego, California, and Steve spent the next 38 years as a trial attorney, building and maintaining a private practice in business and real estate litigation. Kate volunteered extensively in the community and in the schools their five daughters attended. Steve officially retired in 2012, and soon after, the couple began pursuing

Michael and Christine Van Wagenen

AALC, ASIA AREA OFFICE, HONG KONG, CHINA, 2014–16

“To help further the Lord’s work by living among and serving people in Asia was a great blessing,” Michael Van Wagenen says. “We had the opportunity



to live our covenants in a deeper way.” Michael was in-house counsel for A&K Railroad Materials Inc., and Christine was a homemaker, owner of a cooking school, and a Welfare Square service missionary. “We like to share with anyone who will listen about the marvelous experience we had on our mission,” says Christine, who piloted a self-reliance program in a local branch and served in the family history and humanitarian aid departments in the Asia Area Office. “There was real work to be done. We witnessed miracles every day.”

a senior missionary opportunity for the Church. "I always had the desire to serve a senior mission and assumed that we would," Kate says, "although the way the opportunity and assignment came was unexpected."

Atkin says that the ogc and area presidency make it a priority to find meaningful assignments for non-attorney spouses of AALC: "This is a mission for both spouses, and we want both to have a great experience." Kate served as facilitator of one of the first international Pathway cohorts and taught English at Funval, a school established by a former mission president to teach English and marketable skills to native Spanish-speaking returned missionaries. "Both the Pathway and Funval opportunities were particularly gratifying to me," Kate says. "Witnessing young people gain greater knowledge, faith, hope, and confidence in

making their way in the world and witnessing their gratitude for opportunities that came to them brought me great joy."

Atkin has worked with more than 200 AALC and says that, for many, the Church is their most intellectually challenging client. "Laws are not written for Church projects," he says. "The parliaments of the world have not enacted laws to anticipate what the Church would like to do." Atkin believes an unseen hand guides the work done by ALC and AALC. "We don't always know the legal issues an area will face but often find that we have assigned the perfect attorneys for those particular issues," Atkin explains. "We look for good attorneys who can use their legal skills to identify issues and work with outside counsel to resolve them locally."

Steve believes it was no coincidence he and Kate were sent to Guatemala. "An issue

came up early in my service as AALC that lasted until the end of our mission," he says. "It was a complex legal matter tied to the Quetzaltenango Guatemala Temple, the second temple built by the Church in Guatemala." This particular matter had been brewing for several years, occupying the attention of not only the ogc but the Presiding Bishopric's Office and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Steve was asked to work on the project, and, after a deep dive into case records and several months of meetings and discussions with each of the parties involved, he was inspired with a solution that was acceptable to all. "I derive enormous satisfaction from the fact that there was a specific project in Guatemala that needed my skill set and to which I could dedicate so much time and energy and have it come out the positive way that it did," Steve says.

Eric clerked for Judge J. Clifford Wallace of the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit and Justice Lewis Franklin Powell Jr. of the US Supreme Court. Eric later worked for Vinson & Elkins LLP in the firm's Washington, DC, and London, England, offices before accepting a teaching position in 1984 with the University of Iowa Law School, where he eventually became associate dean. Catherine earned a teaching certificate and divided her time between caring for her family, community service, and teaching.

Shortly before Eric and Catherine retired, they began looking into opportunities for senior missionary service. In June 2017 they received a call to the Pacific Area Office in Auckland, New Zealand, where they assisted the ALC on legal matters in Australia, New Zealand, French Polynesia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, and Tonga.

Prior to arriving in Auckland, Catherine had planned to do humanitarian aid work for the Church in New Zealand. Once there, she found that her legal skills were needed. "The Pacific Area ALC, Douglas Matsumori, told me that he needed another lawyer," she remembers. As AALC, both Eric and Catherine carried a full legal load, with Catherine focusing primarily on compliance issues and Eric on contract work. In spite of their busy work week, Catherine made time weekly to do temple work in the Hamilton New Zealand Temple, and Eric explored a unique family connection to the area. His paternal grandfather, Blane Steed, and a second great-grandfather, Thomas Joseph Steed, both served missions in New Zealand.

Mark and Barbara Taylor

AALC, WEST AFRICA AREA OFFICE, ACCRA, GHANA, 2012-14

"Our experience in a corporate law environment turned out to be extremely relevant to the legal work we did for the Church," says Mark Taylor, '79. Mark and Barbara both worked as legal counsel for State Farm Insurance prior to receiving their call to serve as AALC. The centerpiece of their missionary service was facilitating the first seminar for the BYU International Center for Law and Religion Studies in Ghana. "We had experience in setting up legal conferences, and our skill set meshed with what needed to be done," Barbara says. "The conference is still happening each year, and it's growing." The Taylors say they came to know through AALC missionary service that the Lord leads and guides His work. Barbara says, "We realized that everything in our lives prior to that point had been preparing us for this type of service."



Pioneering the Activities of the Church

Like his older brother Steve, Eric G. Andersen, '77, pursued a career in law. During his first year at BYU Law he met Catherine Hardy, '76, one of 12 women in BYU Law's first graduating class and one of the first 100 women admitted to the Utah State Bar. The two married, and after graduation, Catherine worked for BYU's Office of General Counsel and

Gary and Elisabeth Smith

AALC, EUROPE EAST AREA OFFICE, MOSCOW, RUSSIA, 2014–16

Gary and Elisabeth Smith practiced law together in Southern California for most of their married lives; however, their experience as AALC brought them even closer together as a couple. “We often felt the strength and lift of the Spirit from diligently doing the job we were called to do,” Elisabeth shares. Gary had specialized in securities and exchange litigation; Elisabeth had negotiated commercial leases and transactional contracts, working part-time or full-time as the needs of their family changed. The couple relates that while serving in Moscow, they often felt the hand of the Lord guiding them. “There were times when we felt prompted by the Spirit to know exactly what to say or do when faced with an impasse,” says Elisabeth. “The legal work of the Church can be very complex; it takes prayers, miracles, and hard work to keep the Church alive in many countries of the world.”



Paraphrasing Doctrine and Covenants 44:4–5, which he views as a lodestar for his assignment as general counsel, Elder Wickman says, “God gives to the elders of the Church power to organize according to the laws of man in order that His people would be able to obey His laws, that the enemy may not have power over them. The work of ogc is to pioneer the activities of the Church with the institutions and agencies of government, and in this endeavor, the law stands as a bulwark between an ordered civilized society and a society governed by power.”

“AALC are incredibly helpful in managing the legal affairs of the Church,” says Richard Page, ’82, ALC for the Europe Area and former ALC for the Europe East and Asia Areas. “The ALC can’t do it all themselves. Working with the AALC is like having a small, close-knit law firm of

extraordinarily committed and gifted colleagues with whom you can counsel and solve problems.” Page notes that AALC come from a variety of practice backgrounds—small firms, boutique firms, general practitioners, government lawyers, judges, senior in-house

counsel, and big-firm transactional and litigation attorneys. “AALC are seasoned lawyers from all walks of life who come with a wealth of experience and judgment,” Page says. And their contributions often extend beyond legal matters. “AALC have developed sound business judgment over their careers and become seasoned advisors to various departments of the Church in the areas to which they are called,” he says. Tanner agrees: “I have been amazed so often with our AALC. They are all capable lawyers who have lived worthy of getting divine guidance that they need.”

A Need for AALC Missionaries

Reflecting on his time as an AALC, Steve says, “There was hardly any area of the law that I was not involved with. It was unique, interesting, and challenging work. It was satisfying to put to service for the Church skills that I had learned in my profession.” Kate came to recognize the crucial need for talented ALC employees and AALC missionaries. “We had no idea, prior to our mission, what it takes to run the Church internationally,”

she says. “The Church must navigate beyond reproach the varieties and complexities of legal systems around the world. To build temples and chapels, provide welfare relief, and establish and maintain harmonious relationships with governments is a seemingly insurmountable challenge, but one that can be accomplished with inspiration, requisite skill, and finesse.”

Eric and Catherine look back fondly on the opportunity they had to work as AALC and highly recommend this type of missionary service to other couples. “Those who have legal training should be aware that this is a need the Church has—it can be very rewarding to bring some of your background to bear on forwarding the work,” says Eric. “We felt that in spite of the obstacles we faced and the inadequacies we brought, we were helped and blessed to be able to make a contribution.”

NOTE

- 1 “The Purpose of the Church,” *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2020), 1:3.

Timothy and Joyce Cory

AALC, ASIA AREA OFFICE, HONG KONG, CHINA, 2016–18

“Legal affairs are often adversarial, but that isn’t the way the Lord conducts His kingdom,” says Timothy Cory. “The temporal affairs of the Church are administered in accordance with the principles of the gospel.” Timothy practiced law in Las Vegas, Nevada, specializing in debtor and creditor rights, business restructuring, and international real estate transactions. Joyce worked at BYU before devoting herself to raising the couple’s three children. In Hong Kong she taught self-reliance classes to female domestic workers who traveled to China to find work. “It was fulfilling to teach skills that would enable these women to return to their families instead of working abroad,” Joyce says. Regarding their service, Timothy says, “There are members of the Church in countries throughout Asia where the Church is in its infancy and is striving to become better established. We were privileged to participate in that striving.”

