

Remarks of Margaret L. Behm
Chair, Tennessee Access to Justice Commission
April 3, 2009

Thank you, Chief Justice, and the Tennessee Supreme Court, for your confidence in the Access to Justice Commission and the opportunity to serve in this vital role.

The concept of “justice” has been around for a long time. For centuries, people have tried to define it and to attain it.

Recently, author, Thomas Cahill, was asked to recommend six great works about justice and injustice. The works Cahill listed are: The Hebrew Prophets, especially Amos and Micah, *The Apology* by Plato regarding the trial of his mentor Socrates, *Martin Luther’s Bible*, *The Declaration of Independence* and other inspired declarations such as Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* and Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, the play *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens and the most recent work, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter From Birmingham Jail*.

Thinking about these works, we see how long the concept of justice and the ideal of equal justice under law have been with us, and the many ways we strive to attain it. Although lawyers are not the only persons involved in the quest for justice, they generally lead the effort and ensure our civil liberties. Many go to law school and devote their careers just for that purpose alone.

That’s why I’m so excited to be part of this Commission at this time and place. Much has already been accomplished by many individuals, organizations, the courts and lawyers to advance the access to justice in Tennessee. There is a vibrant and powerful access to justice community in our state.

What is unprecedented, however, is the Tennessee Supreme Court’s drive and commitment to make sure that “access to justice” is the legal

community's top priority, and the Court's directive to the Commission in Supreme Court Rule 50 to come back with an overall plan to make it so.

There are a lot of issues to tackle. Developing such a plan is a huge undertaking, and the Commission will need and seek the help and advice of the many constituencies in the days and months ahead to further the work of the Commission.

The Commission is charged with developing a strategic plan to be submitted one year from today. This will require the Commission to explore in greater depth specific types of unmet legal needs and to identify priorities to meet these needs. The Commission will recommend to the Court projects and programs to enhance access to justice in our state along with strategies to increase resources and funding. Most importantly, however, in order to reduce barriers to access to justice, the Commission will develop and recommend initiatives and systemic change.

Regarding change, Margaret Mead said:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

The Tennessee Supreme Court by this initiative has proven itself one such small group of thoughtful, committed citizens. The Tennessee Access to Justice Commission will strive to be another. Each one of us has committed to seek the change the Court desires, and on behalf of all the Commissioners, I thank the Court for giving us, with a lot of help from the community, the opportunity to do so.