

A Brief History of Sponsorship¹

SPONSORSHIP BEGINS IN A CALL TO SERVE and a heartfelt response to that call. From a call marked by God's urging and recognition of need, responses have invariably taken form in service to those in need.

The original responses were most often carried out by individuals or small groups. As the number of persons grew, religious communities were established and small works developed into recognized ministries carried out in the name of and as extensions of the Catholic Church.

These ministries frequently took on the characteristics of the religious communities that had founded them. Thus, institutions were known as "a Mercy hospital," "a Franciscan orphanage," "a Jesuit school," and were characterized by the presence of religious in every aspect of the organization from the presidency, to the administration, faculty, pharmacists, care workers, and cooks. As such, no one really questioned who owned and operated the institution.

As community needs increased and care and educational methods became more sophisticated, Catholic institutions grew and developed. Cultural changes such as desegregation based on gender and race, population and economic changes; ecclesial changes such as the lay ecclesial movement; governmental policies and accountability, especially in terms of funding and tax exemption; and trends within each ministry, be they medical, clinical, curriculum related, or social service delivery oriented, led to profound changes.

Religious institutes adapted to meet the new challenges, changing health care, social, and education ministries -- especially the composition of leadership within these ministries. The Second Vatican Council affirmed the important role of the laity in the life of the church and recognized that there is one universal call to holiness that is received by all persons in Baptism. Consequently, the importance, participation, and leadership of laypersons in the church became more valued and important. Vatican II also challenged the faithful to a new conception of church which requires a greater involvement in a diverse and pluralistic society. The profound sociological, spiritual, and theological transformation of the church creates a call for re-visioning the mission of Catholic Ministries.²

Religious communities, faithful to the mandates of Vatican II, recognized multiple ways of responding to God's call -- some of which were not directly tied to the specifics of a ministry. At the same time, a majority of the communities experienced a

¹ From *Core Elements for Leaders of Catholic Ministry: A Reflection Guide*, The Catholic Health Association, 2007, 6-8.

² William F. Losito and Joseph F. Rogus, "Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice," Vol. 1, No. 1, September 1997.

loss of members and a diminishment in size. The decrease in numbers of religious within institutions led to increased concern about the control (and later, the influence) the founding communities exercised within the institutions. Concerns sparked dialogue about how the ministries would remain ministries, and how they could be recognized as faithful to their mission, to the intent of the founders, and to the church. The term *sponsorship* came into use as a way of recognizing the important role that founding communities must continue to play within the ministry. An awareness of a growing separation between the roles of governance and that of sponsorship also grew.

Although the Second Vatican Council provided a worldview for lay involvement in Catholic ministry, it is important to note that Catholic ministries in the U.S. particularly evolved in a multiplicity of ways much earlier than the council or the decrease in the number of religious. Higher education and health care are two particular ministries of emphasis in this reflection guide, so it is important to offer greater insight into each.

Health Care

A definition of the term, included in *Toward a Theology of Catholic Health Care Sponsorship -- A Work in Progress*, c. 2005 CHA, says that whatever else health care sponsorship includes at its best and most inspiring, it must at least include the following: *Sponsorship of a health care ministry is a formal relationship between an authorized Catholic organization and a legally formed system, hospital, clinic, nursing home (or other institution) entered into for the sake of promoting and sustaining Christ's healing ministry to people in need.* It goes on to explain that while sponsorship is a formal, legal relationship, those two adjectives cannot fully capture the purpose of sponsorship, the experience of sponsorship, or the accomplishments of sponsorship.

The Canon Law Society of America adapted the CHA definition in a way that makes it more applicable to Catholic ministry -- not just health care: *Sponsorship of an apostolate or ministry is a formal relationship between a recognized Catholic organization and a legally formed entity entered into for the sake of promoting and sustaining the Church's mission in the world.*³ In the introduction of the same publication, Sr. Sharon Holland, I.H.M., of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life in Rome, expands the historical concept of sponsorship:

“In the decades following Vatican Council II, ecclesial ministries, long in the hands of religious began to experience the impact of changing times. As the available number of religious declined, and the teachings of the Council were heard, laity came to be numbered increasingly among the key protagonists in Catholic institutions of health and of higher education. Educational institutions experimented with an expanded presence of lay trustees on their boards. In the face of increased cost, complexity and competition in the field of health care civilly recognized Catholic systems replaced stand along institutions.”

³ *Sponsorship in the United States Context: Theory and Praxis*, edited by Rosemary Smith, S.C., Warren Brown, O.M.I., and Nancy Reynolds, S.P. Alexandria, VA: Canon Law Society of America, 2006.

Past decades have witnessed multiple studies, efforts, methods, and practices that sought to ensure the effectiveness of the founding communities in maintaining fidelity of the organization to its mission and its heritage. However, the role of laity, as described by Vatican II, has increasingly been taken more seriously. Lay men and women now serve in significant numbers on boards of Catholic institutions and they are also being called to serve in greater numbers as sponsors.

Higher Education

Through the mid-1960s, colleges and universities showed a great diversity in the way that trustees were chosen and how they related to the sponsoring religious community or local bishop. Prior to the 1960s there were a minority of schools that had begun the transition to boards possessing the final institutional authority, but through the majority of this decade, the governance of most Catholic colleges and universities remained in the hands of religious communities. Religious communities controlled the property and “ran” the institution, though many schools had lay advisory boards.

During the late 1960s and early '70s, a majority of institutions and the sponsoring groups incorporated separately from one another. By 1979, it was generally assumed that an independent board of trustees carried out the commonly accepted functions of corporate boards in American higher education: the power to carry out the articles of incorporation and institutional bylaws, and to amend, alter, revise, or dissolve them; to select the president or chief executive officer and members of the board; to acquire new property or assets and to dispose of them; to dissolve the corporation; and to change the corporation's mission and purpose. In addition, the corporate authority exercised the fiduciary powers such as borrowing and lending money for institutional purposes.

The purpose for which governing boards were recognized to bring laity into roles of greater accountability are diverse and complex, but relate to the expertise, resources, and understanding of the secular world lay persons provided.

More recently, some sponsoring groups have chosen to rewrite bylaws and other documents to clarify the authority of the religious congregation. A few are implementing a two-tiered model of governance, the upper board being *ex officio* the council of the community. Another mechanism that has been introduced to foster the charism of the sponsoring religious community is an “office of vice president for mission” within the institute, a position often held by a member of the congregation.⁴

Today in higher education, while the leadership and trustee boards of many Catholic institutions are now lay women and men, the schools maintain their Catholic identity and subscribe to a Catholic mission and set of values. A diocesan institution may speak more directly about its commitment to “the Catholic Church;” a college founded by

⁴ Gallin, Alice, O.S.U. Excerpts from *Interdependence and a New Partnership in Catholic Higher Education*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1996, and “A Brief History of Trusteeship in Catholic Colleges and Universities,” *Mission and Identity: A Handbook for Trustees of Catholic Colleges and Universities* (2005).

a religious community, while not denying its Catholic affiliation, may speak more directly about its unique charism as Mercy, Benedictine, Jesuit, Franciscan, Marist, etc.

OVERALL, ALL DEVELOPMENTS -- all moments -- in the evolution of sponsorship within Catholic ministry have been and must continue to be grounded in the dynamic of call and response, and in the commitment of sponsorship to the service of the ministry.