



A MORAL QUANDARY FOR SPONSORS

The Sisters of Mercy have in recent years been giving much thought to the concept of sponsorship. We have asked ourselves: How can we, as an institute, most effectively use our sponsorship capability to address our enduring concerns in ministry?

In addressing that question, we have found ourselves raising others, such as:

- Who are we, as an institute and as the subgroups we call "regional communities"? How inclusive shall we make that "we"? Do we include associates? Colleagues in ministry?
- How extensive is our agreement about the meaning of sponsorship? Can we invest sufficient shared meaning in the term to have a reasonably fruitful conversation about it?
- How much—or how little—common ground would we find in the phrase "sponsorship capability"? How many of us would see that glass as half full? How many would see it as half empty?
- Where shall we focus our attention when questioning the effectiveness of our sponsorship? On the quality of service delivered? On our ability to advocate systemic change? On the priority given to unmet needs?

I realize, of course, that other religious institutes are asking themselves similar questions. In the hope that others may find them useful, I offer the following thoughts on sponsorship and institutions. I will begin by turning the usual

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BY SR. HELEN
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phrase on its head: Let us discuss, not the *sponsoring of institutions*, but the *institution of sponsorship*.

SPONSORSHIP AS AN INSTITUTION

In taking this tack, I draw on the work of Robert Bellah and his associates, especially their book *The Good Society* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York City, 1991). Bellah et al. write:

Summary Nowadays many religious institutes are asking questions about sponsorship. The issue is usually phrased as the *sponsoring of institutions*. But it might be useful to ask about the *institution of sponsorship* instead.

In *The Good Society*, Robert Bellah and his associates say that, on one hand, institutions are created by human beings; on the other hand, because we draw our sense of identity from them, institutions create us too. Bellah et al. also say that institutions, being human creations, are susceptible to corruption, especially when great wealth and power are involved.

Since hospitals and healthcare systems obviously do involve wealth and power, we sponsors now have many questions, as well as some ambiguity about our sponsorship capability. One might even say that a moral debate is raging in our collective subconscious: Is loss of corporate influence something we would do something about if we could, or have we chosen some other value, such as ministerial diversity, instead?

My institute, the Sisters of Mercy, has decided to continue our sponsorship of such organizations. As an institution, sponsorship is an essential bearer of our ideals and meanings. We need this institution to announce, to the world and to ourselves, that whatever power and wealth we possess are committed to mercy and justice.



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There is an ambiguity about the idea of institutions that is hard to avoid but that we will try to be clear about. Institutions are normative patterns embedded in and enforced by laws and mores (informal customs and practices). In common usage the term is also used to apply to concrete organizations. Organizations certainly loom large in our lives, but if we think only of organizations and not of institutions we may greatly oversimplify our problems. . . . Individual corporations [for example] are organizations that operate within the legal and other patterns that define what a corporation is. If we do not distinguish between institution and organization, we may think that our only problem with corporations is to make them more efficient or more responsible. But there are problems with the way corporations are institutionalized . . . with the underlying pattern of power and responsibility. . . . [To solve those problems,] we have to reform the institution itself. . . .

While we in concert with others create institutions, they also create us: they educate and form us. . . . [Institutions] are the substantial forms through which we understand our own identity and the identity of others as we seek cooperatively to achieve a decent society. (pp. 10-12)*

Now, if we conceptualize sponsorship as it is evoked in the phrase "sponsored institution" or "sponsored ministry," we shall surely find many valuable questions that are focused on the organization, the work, the ministry. Does it have a relevant mission? Is it true to its mission? Is it expressive of Christ's mission? Is its structure stable? Is it fair? On the other hand, if we conceptualize sponsorship as it is evoked in the phrase "the institution of sponsorship," we shall want to raise and pursue other questions.

If we think of sponsorship as itself an institution (a normative pattern embedded in and enforced by rules, informal customs, and practices)—if we think of sponsorship the way we think of the family or public education or religious life—then we shall want to ask, for example:

- Whether and how we can make sponsorship the sort of force in our works that can hold them to their purpose of relieving misery and addressing its causes
- Whether and how sponsorship can provide

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for our works stability but not rigidity—that is, just enough structural shape to hold up through chaotic times but not so much as to hasten their obsolescence

Furthermore, if we believe (with Bellah et al.) that to understand what institutions are is to know that we form them and they in turn form us, then we shall also want to ask:

- Whether and how the institution of sponsorship is for us an enabler of life and progress
- Whether and how the sponsoring of works is for us a source of both organizational coherence and flexibility and adaptability
- Whether and how the sponsoring of works (and not just the works themselves) gives sense and purpose to the lives of our members and to our life as institute

Yet, even this growing list of questions does not present the whole picture. Bellah et al. remind us that "all institutions . . . are necessarily involved to some degree with wealth and power. These means all too easily become ends in themselves. Institutions become corrupt" (pp. 40-41). In *The Good Society*, the authors employ institutionalized sports to exemplify the moral drama of institutions:

The enormous amount of money at stake in professional sports has introduced an element of corruption so profound that many fans are deeply cynical about the sport that at the same time they also deeply love. Indeed, it is just at the point where the relative clarity of the game is clouded over by purely business considerations and power conflicts that disillusionment sets in. Suddenly an institution we thought we understood well begins to look like the institutions we don't understand at all.

What seemed morally clear is now morally ambiguous. It is no wonder that Americans have an often-noted allergy to large institutions—though, as in the case of sports, even in our cynicism we continue to depend on them. (p. 41)

A MORAL DRAMA

There are elements of our tussle with the notion of sponsorship that have this character of moral drama about them. Certainly, we have raised questions about the institutions we sponsor. In the healthcare arena, for example, we vacillate between seeing ourselves as part of the problem and seeing ourselves as, potentially at least, part of the solution. We worry about the extent to which assets amassed in hospitals and health systems represent a kind of corporate greed. We worry that our resultant power may be more attuned to

*From *The Good Society* by R. Bellah et al.

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maintaining the institutions themselves than to serving the medically underserved. Most of all, we question whether we have the will and the wisdom to apply our institutional power to help solve our society's dilemma over the costliness of healthcare.

What I see, though, in addition to all those questions, is a moral quandary with respect to the institution of sponsorship itself. This quandary is fed in part—but only in part—by the diminishing presence of women religious in institutional settings. It is also fed—but still only in part—by the desire of many women religious to be more clearly identified with works that serve the poor directly. A November 1994 survey of my own institute, for instance, showed that members were experiencing a “loss of influence” within large complicated organizations, a sense of loss growing larger and more complicated with the emergence of systems and megasystems. Yet, at the same time, survey respondents decried our “lack of clear vision about mission, diversification of ministries, individual ministries, and desire to do new ministries.”

Such responses suggest an ambiguity in our collective consciousness about sponsorship capability. Perhaps, one might even say, a moral debate is raging in our collective subconscious—a debate that might be illustrated by just one question: Is loss of corporate influence something we would do something about if we could, or have we chosen some other value, such as ministerial diversity, over influence?

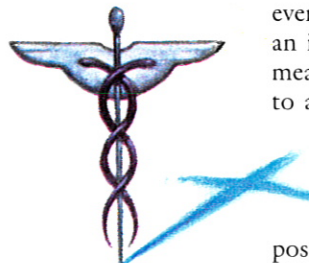
Most of us recognize, at least from time to time, that ambiguity about the use of power is a central moral dilemma—maybe even *the* central moral dilemma. Thus Paul wrote to the Romans: “I cannot even understand my own actions. I do not do what I want to do but what I hate. . . . I do, not the good I will to do, but the evil I do not intend” (Rm 8:15ff).

In our individual lives, we are sometimes so afraid of our power to do a harm we do not intend that we are inhibited from acting at all. But is this not true of our collective life as well, perhaps even more so? Do we name our concerns about the degree of influence over works we sponsor more readily than our concerns about gathering our power, or, to use the phrase of the day, our concerns about institutionalizing our sponsorship? The extent of our sponsorship capability is not even a known quantity. But, whatever it is, exercising it makes demands on us not only individually but corporately as well.

SPONSORSHIP AND THE SISTERS OF MERCY

Once again, let me offer as an example my own institute. It was not until 1991 that the Sisters of

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Mercy, previously a loosely linked confederation of religious institutes, became a single institute. This was not an easy decision. In considering the prospect of coming together, the question we asked most frequently was why. Virtually none of us wanted to discuss “how” to do it until we could be persuaded “why.”

We showed some corporate wisdom in our insistence on phrasing the question in this manner. We realized that tinkering with our existence as separate institutes could conceivably do all sorts of harm. On the other hand, we were willing to take that risk, but only if creating a single institute promised some greater good—if, above all, it seemed to strengthen the sponsorship role of the Sisters of Mercy. In the end we *were* convinced that the institute would strengthen our sponsorship, and so we formed it (leaving a certain amount of autonomy to the regional communities). The “why” was answered, even though the “how” was not yet entirely clear.

We Sisters of Mercy continue to struggle with the “how” of sponsorship. That is because we do not fully know how being an institute that sponsors ministries (rather than a collection of individual ministers) shapes, forms, changes *us*. But the sense that sponsorship does change us grows clearer and more demanding. As it grows, so too will our need for a sense of purpose equal to the pain of whatever is being exacted from us.

Is there a purpose that large, that motivating? I can only say, I think so. I am thinking now not only of the Sisters of Mercy, but of all sponsors of Catholic ministries. If we did not sponsor ministries, what would take the place of the “institution of sponsorship” as a shaping influence over us, molding us into a people—a people of God, a people for God, a witness to Christ’s mission?

I believe that sponsorship as an institution is an essential bearer of our ideals and meanings—even if it is (like the works themselves) inevitably an imperfect embodiment of those ideals and meanings. We *need* this institution. We need it to announce, to ourselves and the world, how and for what we mean to hold ourselves collectively accountable. We need it to announce, to ourselves and the world, that whatever wealth and power we possess are irrevocably committed to mercy and justice. Without the sort of bold statement that is made by founding, organizing, and taking long-term responsibility for specific works of mercy, how would we make moral sense of our corporate life?

We need the institution of sponsorship because the world of our service and our striving is replete

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The search may be its own reward.

with evidence of dysfunctional and coercive institutions—from the family, to capitalism, to organized religion. We shall either take an institutional stance ourselves or yield the territory. And we need not only to take an institutional stance, but to review and revise that stance constantly, so that sponsorship evokes responsible participation—and makes such participation fulfilling as well as demanding.

THE STRUGGLE MAY BE THE GOAL

Henry Van Dyke's *The Story of the Other Wise Man* features a fellow named Artaban, who never caught up with the three Magi who were traveling to Bethlehem. Instead, he spends 33 years searching, meanwhile using his wealth to care for the sick and needy. Even the jewel he had meant to give the King of the Jews, even that goes to help poor people. As Artaban dies, he envisions Jesus, with welcoming arms, saying, "You fed me when I was hungry." "Not so, my Lord," Artaban replies. "For when saw I thee hungry and fed thee? Or thirsty and gave thee drink? . . . Three and thirty years have I looked for thee; but I have never seen thy face, nor ministered to thee, my King."

John Shea, in a commentary on the story, suggests that this is a theme instructive for all searchers (*Starlight*, Crossroads Publishing, New York City, 1992, p. 138). The search may be its own reward. The struggle may be the goal. The task may be, not to gauge the distance we still have to travel, but to be attentive to what is happening on our journey. □

JOURNEY OF COMMUNITY

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an opportunity to participate and to contribute. In light of the recent changes proposed in Washington, DC, and state capitals, we are challenged to offer people a stake in society, to welcome rather than exclude, to accept rather than fear, to share rather than withdraw.

We cannot build a healthy system of care in an unhealthy society. The anger, the fear, the violence, the meanness, and the pitting of class against class, society against government, and citizen against immigrant are evidence of an unhealthy environment. The deterioration of the family—society's most basic unit—should sound an alarm that wakens us to the social and economic forces that are destroying the fabric of community in the United States. The task of reforming healthcare requires a vision that takes into account the sickness that pervades our culture, its radical individualism, its myopic self-interest, its social injustices.

In Sr. Mary Concilia Moran, RSM, we have the paradigm of the leader of the future. As Sr. Angela Mary Doyle, RSM, of Brisbane, Australia, commented in 1990, Sr. Concilia "had the skill in connecting—organizations, people, ideas; the seriousness of purpose and humor, reality and hope, resources and needs. . . . She had insight and a unique ability to translate very realistic and pragmatic solutions in light of the Gospel message and her own deep faith. She was the embodiment of warmth, hospitality, gentleness and strength. She challenged us all by her belief that we would achieve all that was good by God's support and guidance."

In 1985 Sr. Concilia posed this question as a challenge: "Will the depth of our mercy and compassion so influence others that they will keep alive our mission beyond their time and place into tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow?" □

WITHOUT SISTERS

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"O"utreach is taking us back to our roots."

But the market pressure toward consolidation will grow even stronger in the future, he said:

There are still a lot of two-hospital towns where both hospitals are doing pretty well. Then one day the leaders of one hospital learn that—*whoops!*—the other has joined a management network. That's when inquiries about new sponsorship or cosponsorship start coming in to us.

Despite the earthquake-like changes of the nineties, Harkness is optimistic about Catholic healthcare. "Outreach—helping hospitals stay Catholic—is taking us back to our roots," he said.

As for the diminishing number of women religious—the "models" of the Catholic health ministry—they are being replaced by laypersons, both Catholic and non-Catholic, who are not lacking in spiritual motivation, Harkness said. "Bon Secours and other Catholic systems get a lot of job applications from people who don't want to sell things, not even healthcare. They don't want to work for for-profits.

"When I was first hired, in 1984, a sister told me, 'You'll know you've done your job well if one day there are no longer Bon Secours sisters but there is still a Bon Secours Health System,' Harkness continued. "There is no danger of us running out of religious people to run our hospitals. We've simply got to take the time to find them." —Gordon Burnside