

CONTINUING BON SECOURS'S MISSION

The Congregation Takes Steps to Ensure That Its Charism Will Flourish in a New Era

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“We commit ourselves to walk humbly with our lay sisters and brothers—mutually sharing our vision of participating in the struggle for a more humane world.” The 1999 General Chapter of the Sisters of Bon Secours, Paris, France, reaffirmed its commitment to collaborate with co-workers in ministry, a commitment already exhibited in the various ministries sponsored by the sisters, especially health care. Since its inception, Bon Secours Health System, Inc., (BSHSI), based in Marriottsville, MD, and sponsored by the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A., has—at both the national and local levels—demonstrated this commitment in governance, management, and operations.

DEVELOPMENT OF SPONSORSHIP STATEMENT

The primary purpose of the Sisters of Bon Secours is “to make the care of the sick more beneficial and consoling by taking it out of the hands of mercenaries and putting it into the hands of religion” (*First Constitutions*, Sisters of Bon Secours, 1824). This statement defined the ministry of the congregation at its inception. Today, the sisters in the United States wish to define the role and ministry of sponsorship in light of the times in which they are living and in light of the way they live out their Catholic identity and their relationship with the Catholic Church.

In 2000, the U.S.A. province initiated a conversation and study regarding the future of its sponsored ministries and the means through which the sisters could deepen their commitment to sharing responsibility and leadership with the laity. One result of that dialogue was the development and unanimous approval in 2002 of a sponsorship statement.

This statement has four dimensions: the ministry of the Sisters of Bon Secours, a definition of sponsorship, the structural components of the ministry of sponsorship, and an expression of the sisters’ long-term commitment to sponsorship.

SPONSORSHIP STATEMENT

The province’s sponsorship statement reads as follows:

The mission of the Sisters of Bon Secours is to respond, faithfully and creatively, to the call to carry forward the healing ministry of Jesus Christ in the name of the Catholic Church. This ministry to bring “good help” to those in need finds its unique expression in Bon Secours’ charism of compassion, healing and liberation.

For the Sisters of Bon Secours, sponsorship is the formal relationship between the Sisters, as expressed in the Bon Secours charism, and the ministry of the Bon Secours Health System. Co-sponsorship in some local systems extends this relationship to include other religious congregations. Fidelity, community, integrity and stewardship characterize this ministry of sponsorship.

Sponsorship ensures integration of the Sisters of Bon Secours’ designated mission interests, provides leadership in governance and assures faithfulness to the mission and Catholic identity of Bon Secours Health System.

Faithful to the desire to sustain this sponsorship for the present and the future, the Sisters of Bon Secours invite others to join this sponsorship ministry in order to promote justice in radical solidarity with people who are poor, suffering, dying and most in need.¹

THE CONGREGATION'S MINISTRY

Twelve women came together in Paris in the early 1820s. Their ministry was the care of the sick in their homes. The twelve lived in the midst of the sick person's family 24 hours a day for as long as the patient needed their care. Many of the suffering whom they cared for were dying. These women wished to bring to the sufferers the message of hope about the redemptive meaning of suffering and death: God loved them, died for them, and was waiting to welcome them upon their own death. They decided that the best way to do this was by becoming a religious congregation. They sought permission to do so from the archbishop of Paris. Three years later, on January 24, 1824, the members of the group made their first public vows and received from the archbishop the name of Bon Secours, "good help." Through this act, the Sisters of Bon Secours recognized their particular charism, given in order that they might continue Jesus' healing ministry in the name of the church.

The word *charism* comes from a Greek word meaning "gift." When used in a religious context, charism refers to a gift the Holy Spirit gives to individuals and communities, not for themselves but for the good of others. This special gift impels some people to respond to unmet needs in society. Their excitement and enthusiasm draw others to them to help respond to this need. The charism of Bon Secours is to enter into the suffering of others, bring them to wholeness, and liberate them from all that prevents this wholeness from happening. Those who embrace this charism see the Christ in his suffering members and are the Christ by their healing response to the needs of those who suffer.

DEFINITION OF SPONSORSHIP

Within the Catholic Church, formally recognized groups and religious institutes are able to initiate and maintain apostolic works as part of the ministry of the church. Apostolic works are services provided to others in order to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ. The church's *Code of Canon Law* describes these groups and religious institutes as "public juridic persons." Such organizations, by virtue of their role in the church, have authority to perform certain public ministries, and are held accountable for them. Particular ministries, although started and maintained by the particular organization, are part of the larger ministry of the Catholic Church. Resources gained from the organization's work are used to continue the specific ministry, in service of the overall ministry of the Catholic Church. The relationship between a public juridic person and a specific ministerial work is commonly referred to as "sponsorship."

The Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A., as a recognized province of a religious congregation in the church, have the status of a public juridic person and may, therefore, initiate and maintain ministries to further the church's work. BSHSI is one of those ministries. This ministry is carried out by all those involved in BSHSI through their generous contributions of time and talent to serve those most in need. Therefore, the Sisters of Bon Secours are the public juridic person through which BSHSI operates. The province exercises this ministerial responsibility through Bon Secours, Inc. (BSI), a corporate entity that holds civilly enforceable powers over BSHSI and through which the province exercises its canonical responsibilities relating to BSHSI. A representative of BSI serves as BSHSI's full-time chairperson, overseeing the sponsorship interests. In consultation with BSI and BSHSI's CEO, the system's chairperson appoints senior vice presidents of sponsorship to provide support and guidance to the local systems and to serve as partners with BSHSI's senior vice presidents for operations and local system CEOs. The BSHSI corporate office also has a Department of Sponsorship and Mission to provide support for the duties and responsibilities of the senior vice presidents of sponsorship and local system mission leaders.

The quality of the sponsorship relationship between the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A. and BSHSI is characterized by the congregation's uniqueness and its charism of compassion, healing, and liberation. All aspects of the BSHSI ministry—delivery of care, quality of service, relationships with employees and volunteers, the board's work, engagement with the local community—are filtered through the lens of this charism.

The ministry of sponsorship also carries with it certain civil responsibilities, including appointments to the governing bodies of BSHSI and its subsidiaries; approval of major corporate transactions, such as merger, dissolution, and alienation; approval of any changes to governing documents, including the clauses that describe the organization's purpose; appointment of presidents of subsidiary entities; approval of joint-venture relationships; approval of incurrence of debt above certain limits or expenditures of funds above certain limits; and approvals of the strategic plan and annual plan.

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The Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A. serve as BSHSI's sponsor. In some local systems, they share this responsibility with other religious congregations, in a relationship called "cosponsorship." Although only one of the congregations in a BSHSI cosponsorship arrangement is designated as the public juridic person in that local system or facility, the charisms of all the congregations involved are part of the sponsorship relationship. Sometimes the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A. are invited by another congregation to continue a ministry that the latter is unable to maintain. In such cases, the Sisters of Bon Secours help keep alive the spirit and traditions of the founding religious institute.

STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS OF SPONSORSHIP

The Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A. identify specific mission interests where particular influence is desired. These mission interests include, but are not limited to, leadership selection and formation, organizational and clinical ethics, holistic care, care for people who are dying, pastoral care, care for people who are poor and marginalized, education, community outreach, and strategic planning related to human and financial resources.

These mission interests form the background against which the role of governance is implemented. The governance role ensures that the sponsors have, through certain "reserved powers," the ability to exert their influence at the highest levels regarding policies and strategic plans. Reserved powers are those rights, responsibilities, and decisions that are retained by the sponsors and may overlap with the mission interests listed above. These powers include the right to change BSHSI's philosophy, objectives, purposes, and ethical and religious standards; to amend its articles of incorporation or bylaws; to appoint board members and other key leaders; to dissolve or liquidate BSHSI; to approve a merger or consolidation of BSHSI; to approve the conveyance or granting of mortgages or trust deeds; and to create other liens on any real property assets of BSHSI.

An essential function of the sponsorship role of the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A. is the operation of health care facilities and programs that remain faithful to the underlying call to carry forward the healing ministry of Jesus Christ. Along with the governance role, the sponsors, through BSHSI's senior vice presidents of sponsorship, relate to operations through the operations leaders, local system CEOs, and mission leaders. Through these relationships, the sponsors ensure that the local system policies, decisions, and strategic plans remain consistent with BSHSI's overall mission, values, and operating principles. BSHSI lives out

the mission and values by providing holistic compassionate care, seeking justice in the workplace, and giving attention to community needs with a special focus on people who are poor, dying, or marginalized. Through its leadership role in governance and its collaborative role with operations, sponsorship ensures a living faithfulness to BSHSI's mission and Catholic identity.

LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

BSHSI's health care ministry is shared among the sponsors and all who are part of the system. All are responsible for BSHSI's life, growth, and commitment to serve the needs of the local communities. This same vision of shared responsibility for ministry animates the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A. as they consider the ministry of sponsorship both in the present and in the future.

The current model holds the province as the sponsor for BSHSI, with cosponsorship in some local systems. Other possibilities may arise as the needs of both the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A. and BSHSI change. In a desire to create their future, the province has petitioned the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to designate a new public juridic person, called "Bon Secours Ministries," that would serve as BSHSI's sponsor. In establishing this new public juridic person, the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A. have specified its composition and function, thereby creating a structure that extends the ministry of sponsorship to include others who share the Bon Secours charism. As the sponsor, Bon Secours Ministries then would be responsible to the Catholic Church for the ministry of BSHSI.

JUSTICE IN SERVICE

No matter what model and processes are developed to implement the BSHSI sponsorship structure in the future, the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A., in fidelity to their charism of compassion, healing, and liberation, are committed to the same outcome—that justice in service to those most in need, especially those who are poor and dying, will always be a part of this work, this healing ministry of the Catholic Church. □

NOTE

1. "Statement of the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A. to the Ongoing Commitment to Sponsorship of Bon Secours Health System, Inc.," approved by the Sisters of Bon Secours U.S.A., October 30, 2002. The remainder of this article is based on the commentary accompanying the sponsorship statement.

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