

FIVE YEARS OF SPONSORSHIP

Ministerial Juridic Person Cultivates Community

By THE PROVIDENCE MINISTRIES SPONSORS

In establishing Providence Ministries as a ministerial juridic person to sponsor Providence Health & Services, the Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province, launched a new phase in their 150-year journey with laypersons to provide leadership for the ministry. Our canonical bylaws call for at least five members — designated as sponsors — for PH&S, which is based in Renton, Washington. We form the official link with the worldwide Catholic community, assure the system’s faith-based identity and confirm its commitment to the healing mission of Jesus. We strengthen the Sisters of Providence heritage while creating a new legacy.

We are learning as we grow into this pioneering form of ministry in the church.¹ Our journey has not been a straight line; in ways, it’s been more akin to a crab walk. This article highlights key lessons learned during our first five years of service.

A SPONSOR COMMUNITY

When the six of us gather as the members of Providence Ministries, we are a community of three married laypersons, two sisters of Providence and one sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Michigan. Just imagine the medley of relationships we represent: three spouses, eight children and their spouses, 19 grandchildren and two congregations of women religious.

We believe that being a community is necessary for sponsoring Catholic ministries, primarily because our ministries themselves are commu-

nities. In the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, Directive 1 states, “A Catholic institutional health care service is a community that provides health care to those in need of it.” The high school and university we sponsor are learning communities in which faculty and students pursue truth and growth. Moreover our founding congregation is a community of vowed women religious.

We assumed our Providence Ministries responsibilities on Jan. 1, 2010. During our orientation period, we all intuited the essential importance of becoming a community of persons who accepted the call to sponsorship. We were convinced that only as a community could we strengthen the sisters’ heritage while creating our legacy as sponsors. So our initial priority was to fashion a web of relationships that connected us and those closest to us.

Creating a vibrant community requires prayer and checking in with one another, as well as assembling in person for our regular meetings 10 times per year, during formation sessions and major system events. Our monthly meetings sometimes include social time to which spouses and friends are invited; our budget incorporates a stipend to subsidize their expenses when they accompany us on our travels.

Our continuing commitment to be a sponsor

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community entails a substantial time commitment. The process of creating our sponsor community within a large, complex organization also entailed challenges. There were some difficult conversations as sponsors, board members and system senior leaders came to know one another, and we wrestled, sometimes painfully, with role clarity and boundaries. Together, we stumbled toward clarification.

The turning point for all three groups of leaders occurred during a facilitated ethical discernment process about an extremely important decision. It was as though a garbled pattern in a kaleidoscope snapped into clear focus. Since then, we've been nurturing a collaborative rhythm that is mutually satisfying and effective.

Like any community, our community of sponsors has known joys and sorrows: We grieved the death of an original member and gratefully welcomed two persons who answered the call to serve. We have rejoiced in a golden wedding anniversary and jubilee of religious profession, and we have mourned deaths of parents and dear friends. We experienced three leadership transitions in our founding congregation while accompanying those sisters who are adjusting to the change in sponsorship of the ministries they created and nurtured. We have celebrated increasing rapport with the system board after struggling to work out complementary ways to collaborate.

PRESENT TO THE PEOPLE OF PROVIDENCE

Our second priority from the outset has been to be present, in the places where the people of Providence provide compassionate service, with the women and men living the mission of revealing God's love for all.

Being with them in some consistent way is challenging. More than 76,000 persons make up Providence Health & Services, including affiliates, in more than a hundred facilities and agencies (not including approximately 400 physician clinics) from Alaska to the Mexican border.

We hold half of our monthly meetings at local ministries, combining business with tours, conversations with leaders and "fireside chats" (informal town hall gatherings) with staff. We regularly participate in the system's extensive Providence Leadership Formation programs. Just as the sisters were "sent on mission" to their min-

istries, we conduct a missioning ritual for all new chief executive officers and school leaders as they begin leading their local or regional ministries.

The power of presence cannot be overstated, especially because we assumed our responsibilities just as Providence Health & Services was entering into its most turbulent time in living memory. Many people of Providence feel wary about external forces that threaten our mission. Others worry about employment security due to the system's internal commitments to transformational change in the way health care is organized and delivered. Still others feel considerable anxiety about the depth of current commitments to ministry, especially whether important and essential affiliations with other-than-Catholic groups will overtake the Providence Catholic mission.

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We have a special responsibility to ensure the one constant is an adherence to mission. Hence, we have developed principles and protocols to evaluate potential growth opportunities in light of our mission. We have worked with governance and senior management to create criteria and processes for ongoing support and oversight of new relationships. Whenever we are with the people of Providence, we address their anxieties and offer assurances that senior leaders and board members share their commitment to the mission and are governing or leading ministries, not merely managing businesses.

The feedback we receive, whether from recently hired, general staff employees to executives with long tenure, indicates that our greatest impact comes from our supportive presence, encouraging words and constant attention to the mission.

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always, always come away from our interactions with the people of Providence inspired and edified by their extraordinary talent and passionate commitment for the mission.

FIDELITY TO OUR HERITAGE

As a gift to us and, subsequently, to all the people of Providence, the sisters gave us a legacy document called *Hopes and Aspirations for Providence Ministries*. Prepared through a province-wide process over weeks, the sisters distilled the spirit and wisdom they wanted us to recall. The document highlights Catholic theological and social teaching as handed on in the Providence tradition, and it emphasizes the sisters' spiritual heritage and long-standing ministry commitments to society, church and the people of Providence.

Hopes and Aspirations serves as our compass for remaining faithful to the mission and keeping our identity and heritage alive. It guides us to respond to the signs of the times as we reach out to others, especially through collaboration with other ministry leaders. We cannot overemphasize the document's powerful impact during the transition years into the new model of sponsorship. If we are to be faithful to the trust the sisters placed in us, we have to live and breathe its wisdom and hope. After all, their heritage is the wellspring of our legacy.

Initially, we disseminated the *Hopes and Aspirations* document throughout Providence Health & Services, and we were delighted as it spread like a savannah fire. Then we used it as the foundation of templates for exercising our reserved powers to approve the system budget and major acquisitions or affiliations and to appoint system board members and the system CEO.

The document also has been integrated into the Providence Leadership Formation curriculum. One important indicator of its impact is that the 2014-2016 system strategic plan is based upon its key sections. *Hopes and Aspirations* continues to be a bright lodestar influencing not only every level of leadership, but all the people of Providence.

We want to stay connected with the sisters as we carry forward their gift of sponsorship. We meet annually with the provincial superior and council to evaluate progress and areas for improvement, and the sponsor president regularly updates the provincial superior on significant events. We also present highlights of the ministry during provin-

cial chapters. We have made two pilgrimages to the international headquarters of the Sisters of Providence in Montreal and walked in the footsteps of Blessed Emilie Gamelin, their foundress.

Whenever we visit a local ministry where Sisters of Providence are living nearby, we share a meal with them. Each year we talk with the sisters in their largest retirement community. We send a quarterly newsletter, the *Sponsor Update*, to the sisters as well as system leaders. Finally, we encourage younger sisters to prepare for eventual Providence Health & Services leadership roles.

COLLABORATION WITH BISHOPS

One goal during our initial year as sponsors was to introduce ourselves to the bishops of every diocese in which we have ministries. It took us 16 months, and almost immediately we took to the road again as new diocesan bishops were installed in seven of the 10 dioceses.

As the sponsor community, we meet with each bishop and briefly describe our background and calling to Providence Ministries. In a conversational style, we discuss our canonical statutes and relationship with the Vatican Congregation for Religious. We present our most recent annual report to the congregation and point out highlights that might interest each particular bishop. We emphasize our priorities as sponsors.

Occasionally we meet with regional groups of bishops, along with sponsors and executives of other Catholic health care systems, for reflection and dialogue on pressing issues. These gatherings are not only valuable in themselves, but they have led to additional collaboration among participants. For instance, Providence Ministries and St. Joseph Health Ministry (sponsor of St. Joseph

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Health) jointly conducted an educational session for the secretary and staff of the Congregation for Religious as a forum to deepen understanding of the challenges Catholic health care faces in the United States.

All these meetings are crucial during this time of transformational change. The bishops notice changes, wonder about them, seek to understand

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them, and need to be assured that our fidelity to mission remains a constant. The local or regional CEO and chief mission officer accompany us on visits with the diocesan bishops. They deal with specific system activities in the dioceses and are prepared to discuss any particular interest the bishops may have.

We explain our desire to extend the healing ministry by expanding collaborative partnerships with parishes and diocesan agencies. We assure the bishops that we are always directly accessible, but we reinforce that the local Providence ministry leaders within the dioceses sustain ongoing relationships as they simultaneously engage with the wider church community.

The exception, of course, is the Archdiocese of Seattle, where Providence Ministries and Providence Health & Services are situated. There, the system CEO and senior mission executive accompany the sponsor community and serve as liaisons with the archbishop.

During our initial visits, the diocesan bishops generally seemed pleased to learn about the new ministerial juridic person. They inquired with concern about the sisters' feelings during the transition. They especially were attentive to descriptions about our interactions with the Congregation for Religious, and they were gratified by the content and format of the annual report.

Some immediately asked for assistance from the local ministries, ranging from providing managerial expertise for a diocesan housing ministry to developing a summer practicum in pastoral care for seminarians.

These introductory visits set the tone for our continuing collaboration. We review our formation and discuss ways we are addressing the enormous challenges facing Catholic ministries in fidelity to our heritage and Catholic teaching. We invite and encourage bishops to visit ministries in their dioceses both formally and informally; most have been quite responsive. We inform bishops of potential acquisitions or affiliations early in the discernment process, typically as soon as the outline of an arrangement is established. We present our expectations for canonical or moral due diligence and learn their priorities. So far, we sense a growing spirit of collaborative ministry leadership.

Our fledgling efforts are teaching us lots about sponsoring a complex, wonderful Catholic ministry in 21st century America. We hope to keep learning and improving as a sponsor community while fulfilling our responsibilities to those we serve. Our faith bolsters our confidence in the future.

At the conclusion of *Hopes and Aspirations*, the Sisters of Providence send us forth with the assurance that "compelled by God's providential love, you will be invited to do more than you ever believed possible because of God's goodness and love of all."

THE PROVIDENCE MINISTRIES SPONSORS are Sr. Anita Butler, SP, Sr. Juliana Casey, IHM, Johnny Cox, William "Bill" Cox, Barbara Savage and Sr. Barbara Schamber, SP.

NOTE

1. See the Catholic Health Association's paper, "Ministerial Juridic Person: A Growing Role for Laity in Canonical Sponsorship of Catholic Health Care," *Health Progress* 95, no. 5 (September-October 2014): 60-63.

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