

Pilot Program Is for Potential Sponsors

The “Sponsorship Pilot” Helps People Decide Whether They Should Join the Ministry



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In Catholic ministry, there is a need to examine what is necessary today in order to ensure the fidelity and vitality of the church’s sponsored works for tomorrow. Across the nation, congregations of women religious are discussing ways of perpetuating the work of the organizations they founded. In recent years, many of these congregations have seen laypeople move into the executive leadership, governance, and even sponsorship of those organizations.

As congregations continue preparing for the future, they focus particularly on the identification and development of potential new sponsors. My own congregation, the Sisters of Mercy Regional Community of Chicago, launched an initiative to identify persons who might be appropriate for the sponsorship ministry.

AN INTRODUCTORY PROGRAM

Early in 1999, the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago began working to understand the changes that would be necessary in continuing our sponsorship of health care, education, and housing facilities and in the ways we exercise it. We looked at a number of things—at ministries we had started, at some ministries we discontinued, and various other topics.

We began by discussing changing forms of sponsorship with the sisters in the region. We sensed that we would continue to see other-than-sisters—laypeople—in positions once held by women religious. We saw that other-than-sisters would serve not just on leadership teams and in governance but in sponsorship roles as well.

We realized that if we were going to be inviting laypeople to consider such roles, we would first need to sit down with some laypeople and discuss the possibility. We needed to give them some time to live with the idea, think about it, and pray about it.

In 2005, select board members from the various institutions sponsored by our congregation attended a series of workshops related to sponsorship. After that, congregational leaders met with the workshop participants (and with several people who had been unable to participate for one reason or another) to discuss their experiences and plan next steps.

We decided to conduct a brief introduction-to-sponsorship program that would run from January to May 2006. The program would be for persons who might be interested in assuming the sponsor role and willing to be prepared for it. This program would, we hoped, offer such persons a “taste” of what it means to be a sponsor. It would be conducted on both an intellectual level and a discernment/spirituality level and would include opportunities for community building. Those attending could then discern whether the sponsorship ministry was something they would like to pursue—whether, that is, as positions became open in sponsored works, they would like to be contacted and offered an opportunity to fill such a position.

This introductory program, which we called the “Sponsorship Pilot,” included two in-person meetings and other activities.

WHO WOULD PARTICIPATE?

We made it clear, in discussing the program with those we invited, that the pilot was not itself a step toward a nomination for a sponsorship position. Rather, what we hoped to do was identify a pool of persons who had some understanding of

the sponsorship ministry and were interested in “growing” in that direction.

As we pondered how best to identify persons to invite to the pilot, we felt a need to focus on specific organizations in which, we were confident, there would be opportunities to serve. One of these was Provena Health, Mokena, IL. In addition, as the Sisters of Mercy were reorganizing, there were emerging new sponsorship roles in higher and secondary education. For this reason, we decided to first consider persons with board experience in health care, secondary education, and higher education.

In considering people to nominate for participation in the Sponsorship Pilot, we looked especially for persons with:

- Experience on a health care, university, or high school board
- A personal sense of spirituality
- A basic understanding of church and comfort with church structures
- A basic understanding of the nature of a ministry
- A basic understanding of the social justice tradition
- A commitment to Gospel values
- Willingness to sponsor for the sake of the Gospel
- Willingness to struggle with balancing the demands of the mission with the demands of the marketplace
- An ability to share prayer and faith life
- Sensitivity to the Mercy tradition

Fourteen people were selected to participate in the Sponsorship Pilot, along with the four members of the congregation’s leadership team. The participants’ understanding of and experience with sponsorship varied. Two people—a businessman and a woman banker—were board members of a high school. Two were business executives who had experience as members of Provena Health’s board. Among the others were university professors, board members, and executives from the Mercy health care ministry.

THE SPONSORSHIP PILOT

The Sponsorship Pilot had four components, all of which were financed by the regional community. The components were:

- Reading of a selection of written materials,

including *After We’re Gone: Creating Sustainable Sponsorship* and *Partners in the Between Time: Creating Sponsorship Capacity*, both of which were written by Sr. Patricia Vandenberg, CSC, and the late Mary Kathryn Grant, PhD.¹

- Attendance at one of three identified ministry conferences on sponsorship or the viewing of the DVD presentation *Toward a Theology of Health Care Sponsorship—A Work in Progress*.²

- Attendance at two group discussions at the Mercy Regional Center in Chicago (see “Session One” and “Session Two” below). These three-hour discussions were held on April 10, 2006, and May 22, 2006.

- Keeping a journal throughout the experience

SESSION ONE

We had two sessions that brought all the participants together in one place. Since most participants were from the Chicago area, travel was minimal. Because most of the participants were employed, the sessions were held in the evening.

In Session One, we focused on the Sisters of Mercy. We did this because we realized that many participants, having been associated with the congregation, would come to it thinking that sponsorship is largely about carrying on the sisters’

Agenda for the First “Sponsorship Pilot” Session

We suggest that each participant be allowed to share his or her experience; however, no more than five or six minutes should be permitted for each report and any discussion it inspires.

- 4:30 pm Gathering and introductions
- 4:50 pm Overview of the pilot and the evening
- 5 pm Pick-up supper
- 5:15 pm Stories of the conferences
- 5:45 pm Small/large group discussion of questions in the journal, concluding with directions for reflection time
- 6:45 pm Personal reflection
- 7 pm Prayer service
- 7:15 pm Wrap-up and adjournment

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work. We knew that, before moving on to a discussion of the larger picture—the ministry of the church itself—the participants would want to reflect on the Sisters of Mercy.

In this session, we suggested that the group think of three key relationships in the context of sponsorship:

A Relationship to the Founding Congregation and Its Particular Charism When they discuss possible new forms of sponsorship, people tend to focus on the founding congregations and the fact that those congregations have dwindling numbers of sisters. However, might it not be possible that large numbers of sisters are the exception in church history, not the norm? Might not today's situation be an *opportunity*, rather than a dilemma?

A Relationship with the Church This relationship is somewhat less comfortable for some of us to discuss because it involves challenging material. For example, it is difficult—but necessary—for Catholic-sponsored institutions to discuss the various types of services a community needs, competitive challenges from other Catholic providers, and the need for freedom in the search for truth within a Catholic environment. However, although such conversations can be difficult, we who serve those institutions speak in the name of the church—and doing so carries a responsibility that is a sponsor's duty to fulfill.

A Relationship with the World Each ministry has a mission that continues some aspect of Jesus' efforts to create a just society and to be an effective sign of God's faithful love. Institutions are a major way we live out the social justice teachings of the church, address unjust systems, and become part of the new creation.

Prior to Session One, participants received the two books noted above, a journal guide, and other relevant materials and information (see **Box**, p. 23). During the session, they had an opportunity to discuss and reflect on selections from the books and on their experiences in one of the optional ministry conferences on sponsorship (two had been held before Session One).

In the prayer service for Session One, we conducted a ritual involving water, which symbolized the baptismal source of our sponsorship ministry. By taking several small amounts of water, each signifying a Mercy ministry and institution, and pouring them together into a bowl, we demon-

strated the way a variety of streams make up the ministry of the church.

SESSION TWO

Session One focused on the ministry in relationship to the religious congregation, and most of the examples discussed in it were from Mercy's education ministry. Session Two focused more on the church and the world, and the examples tended to come from the health care and housing ministries.

We discussed canonical relationships and the fact that they often appear somewhat mysterious to those who know little about canon law (indeed, they can make us nervous). However, we noted that canon law has little to do with the *reason* we sponsor institutions. We sponsor institutions because we want to make a difference. Institutions give us a way to perform direct service.

But, in giving us a way to perform direct service, they also give us power and visibility. And power and visibility are qualities that potential sponsors need to reflect on. A lot of sponsorship is about using the power of the institution for the common good. We therefore discussed the care that sponsors must take in dealing with power and visibility. The selections from the books addressed the issue in several ways, directly and indirectly.

Session Two was designed in much the same way as was Session One. As with the first, this session was only three hours in length and included personal and group reflection. The prayer service for this reflected on the work of Catholic ministry in the world.

NEXT STEPS

Toward the conclusion of Session Two, we asked participants to complete two statements about it:

- I have found this experience . . .
- If I were invited to continue preparing for the ministry of sponsorship, I would probably . . .

The participants' responses varied. Only a few indicated this might not be the right time to continue to prepare for a possible sponsor position. One of our congregation members said the program offered her a venue for discussing sponsorship of the ministries that she had not found in the congregation itself. A lay participant said that she had gained clarity concerning the larger pic-

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ture of sponsorship. She wrote: "More than a parish, a diocese, or the Vatican, sponsored ministries are the Catholic faith as seen by the rest of the world. It is important to understand the significance of this mission."

As noted earlier, the Sponsorship Pilot was not intended to recruit sponsors. Rather, it sent forth a call to people interested in joining the ministry. Then, having sent the call, the program allowed time for those who answered to discern what it would mean to join. Since the conclusion of the program, the congregation has undergone a change in its executive leadership. The new leaders are determining whether or not to host another such program. They are also considering how to proceed with those participants in the last program who said they were interested in becoming a sponsor.

LESSONS LEARNED

One important overall lesson learned from the Sponsorship Pilot has to do with the types of people invited to participate in it. In our early discussions, we focused on the development of lay sponsors. However, in later feedback from the congregation at large, we were asked why no sisters had been considered to participate. It was a valid point. Accordingly, we opened the nomination process up and requested the nomination of sisters or associates.

Fewer than 10 sisters and associates were nominated, so all were selected to participate. As a result of the Sponsorship Pilot, even some congregational members made a mental shift, com-

ing to see that Jesus' healing ministry, rather than the congregation's charism and work, should be our chief concern. As for those of us who led the Sponsorship Pilot, we will admit that our original focus on laity alone was a mistake. We should seek the best people—not just the best laypeople—to serve as sponsors. We also learned that it is important that the key leaders of our ministries increase their understanding of sponsorship through experiences such as that provided by Sponsorship Pilot, even if they do not become sponsors. It is encouraging to know there are persons who are willing to learn to be sponsors. As sponsors of ministries, our role today is to provide the means for sponsorship into the future. ✨

For more information, contact Sr. Terry at 708-712-6323 or terryrsm@aol.com. For a copy of the journals for Sessions One and Two and the accompanying prayer services, go to www.chausa.org/mercy pilot.

NOTES

1. Mary Kathryn Grant and Patricia Vandenberg, *After We're Gone: Creating Sustainable Sponsorship*, Ministry Development Resources, Mishawaka, IN, 1998; and *Partners in the Between Time: Creating Sponsorship Capacity*, Ministry Development Resources, Michigan City, IN, 2004.
2. *Toward a Theology of Health Care Sponsorship—A Work in Progress*, Catholic Health Association, St. Louis, 2005.

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