

Sponsors Set Steadying Course With Eye on the Horizon

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Catholic health care has been blessed by the ministry of sponsorship. Sponsors have guided, nudged, accompanied, encouraged and, yes, sometimes redirected the ministry through many moments of “thick fog.” We are tempted to believe the uncertainty of our time is unique, but the veterans among us remind us that low visibility and headwinds have always been part of our story.

Each generation of sponsors must grapple with the uncertainty of its present reality. Uncertainty has always been the vocational space, the threshold space, where sponsors serve. When the ministries navigate through the thick fog, sponsors are the sentinels who, with sharpened senses and sight fixed on the horizon, trust that there is more ahead and challenge the ministry to keep sailing and to cross thresholds.

When we entertain questions about sponsorship in the quiet corners and busy hallways of our ministries, “What do sponsors do? What is sponsorship? Why do we have sponsors?” we must remember this faith-filled role, which calls us to a future full of hope.

After all, human flourishing is a long-term commitment! Sponsors hold space for the long view. The transformation of society is rarely achieved in a generation. That makes the sponsor ministry unique, the stubborn conviction that we must strive to do our best. The sisters, in my early years in community, described this as doing more: “Always more, always better, always with more love.” The “perpetuity” expected of a ministry of the Church is deeply related to this constant

striving.¹ We need institutions committed to the long-term reweaving of a society where human beings can flourish.

The Church celebrates a jubilee every 25 years, and a pope can call an extraordinary jubilee more often, but why, I wondered, would the late Pope Francis open a Jubilee Year of Hope? These times are not just uncertain; they are breaking our hearts. We have witnessed human suffering on a scale that has only happened with the two world wars. We are tribalizing and fragmenting along political and theological divides. More people are on the move than at any other time in history.²

Calling for a Jubilee of Hope, Pope Francis’ magisterium finished his pontificate on the same note he started. He preached in the homily when he assumed the papacy that “amid so much darkness, we need to see the light of hope and to be men and women who bring hope to others.”³ Ours is precisely the time for hope. Hope is at the heart of the sponsor vocation. Sponsors remind us why we serve. Christian Brother Salvador Valle once explained that sponsors serve as “heart, memory and warranty” for the ministry. Sponsors serve from the heart of the ministry. Sponsor conver-



sations, discernment, prayer and direction flow from this deep connection to the heart. Sponsors remember for the future, ensuring the mission of the ministry continues unfolding true to its core identity.

Sponsors challenge us to listen to our better angels because they know with their heart and trust God's promise. Pope Francis opened the jubilee door he would not close. Providence would have it this way; now it is up to us to finish the journey. Sponsors need to be the guides for our Catholic health care pilgrimage of hope.

SPONSORS AS HOPE SENTINELS

Sponsorship is a future-focused, God-trusting and hope-building ministry. The DNA of Catholic health care is hope for the future. Clinics and hospitals opened because God hoped for human flourishing through our founders. The very existence of the ministry reminds us that those who came before us hoped them into being. Our ministries were created to trust in the transformation that happens through active hope. Sponsors steward this dream of a better future for each generation. Even as religious congregations projected fewer members, they knew the mission was bigger than them and that lay men and women, people of goodwill, all participated in this mission.

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The mission's horizon of hope transcends any period of history, religious institute or individual's attributes. Sponsorship, as the ministry we understand it today, evolved from this grounding. Religious institutes could have been tempted to think only men or women religious could steward the ministry. Instead, they trusted the relationships they had built and the commitment they had seen in the lay people of the ministry. This is why lay leadership has been so organic to Catholic health care and serves as proof that the synodal call for greater participation in the mission of the Church is prophetic and possible.

Sponsors are "cathedral builders." They understand the horizon of hope is beyond themselves. Founders of religious institutes dreamed of us; they knew others would come after them to keep building a society of hope. Cathedral thinking is magnificently understood in the Basilica of the Holy Family in Barcelona. When Antonio Gaudí, a devout and recently named venerable Catholic, was interviewed about why he began a project he could not possibly see finished, he responded, "I know the personal taste of the architects that follow me will influence the works, but that doesn't bother me. I think the Temple will benefit from it. Great temples have never been the work of just one architect."⁴

When the light from the afternoon sun shines through the multicolored stained glass flowing through the basilica with pure majesty, you appreciate Gaudí's vision. He trusted those who would come after him, and today, we find beauty and joy in this vision. The most intimate call of a sponsor is to believe in what is to come, in the infinite and incredible ways Catholic health care will promote human flourishing.

Sponsors are not the "historians" of the ministry; they are storytellers of the Gospel. They honor and embrace the founding stories, but more importantly, they embrace the future mission story. A sponsor explores the whole story, beyond the years of stagecoaches and frontier railroad hospitals, and they find in the unfolding story of Catholic health care that there are always amazing men and women engaged in the mission.⁵ They are lovers of the story of what has been, but they do not stay there.

Sponsors take inspiration from what has been and then challenge the ministry to weave new narratives.

Sr. Nancy Shreck, OSF, has challenged generations of women religious to visualize the "not yet" of their mission. She often asks, "What if the most important contribution of religious life has not happened yet?" Sponsors need to heed her advice and, in turn, ask their ministries, "What if the most important contribution of Catholic health care has not happened yet?"

Sponsors need to challenge the ministry to appreciate and honor the journey that got us here,

to listen to the whispers of those who came before, and then to turn their gaze to what still needs to be done, to the creative and amazing possibilities of what can be. Sponsors today are challenged to have the courage, vision, sacrifice, creativity and perseverance of their forbearers so that a yet-to-be-seen response of compassion and mercy can be realized in ways we cannot even imagine today. Sponsors believe in the future of the ministry.

SPONSORS AS CULTIVATORS OF ECOSYSTEMS OF HOPE

Sponsors are stewards of the future of our ministry, but what are the practical ways in which they exercise this responsibility? Nature, I believe, offers a glimpse into what is possible. Our ministry has been turning to creation for inspiration for several years now. We celebrate a Jubilee of Hope the same year that the call to care for creation in *Laudato Si'* completes its first decade. We hope and care for creation because we care for future generations.⁶ Sponsors should urge our ministry to heed that call.

Has our culture shifted to embrace the diversity God has created? Have our decisions been influenced by concern for our common home? Have we been nourishing healthy ecosystems? Ecosystems of hope require more than ecological responses; they require integral approaches that sponsors must promote. We need to connect, listen and move! The Jubilee Year flows from the culture of encounter, the call to synodality and the invitation to pilgrimage that shaped Pope Francis' papacy and guides the sponsor role as sentinel of hope.

Healthy ecosystems are communities of interactions. Sponsors ensure the ministry fosters healthy connections and an authentic culture of encounter. No one can hope alone. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han writes in *The Spirit of Hope*: "Fear and love are mutually exclusive. Hope, by contrast, includes love. Hope does not isolate. It reconciles, unites and forms bonds."⁷ Gathering, convening and fostering connections is the first way we can live into the Jubilee Year of Hope.

Pope Francis, in the Papal Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee Year, *Spes Non Confundit*, wrote that "the Christian community should be at the forefront in pointing out the need for a social covenant to support and foster hope, one that is inclusive and not ideological."⁸ The most resilient ecosystems are the most diverse, where difference is harmonized in interaction, respected and valued. Hope

is the gift of communion. Sponsors need to foster their own interactions and connections, building a community of trust because of their shared commitment to the mission.

Listening strengthens communities. The Jubilee Year of Hope opened as the Synod on Synodality entered the implementation stage. The final document concluded: "Practiced with humility, the synodal style enables the Church to be a prophetic voice in today's world."⁹ Listening is at the core of a synodal church. Sponsors need to call the ministries to embrace this synodal journey. Synodal listening lies at the heart of a community willing to discern the voice of the Spirit for our time:

The willingness to listen to all, especially those who are poor, stands in stark contrast to a world in which the concentration of power tends to disregard those who are poor, the marginalised, minorities and the earth, which is our common home. Synodality and integral ecology both take on the character of relationality and insist upon us nurturing what binds us together; this is why they correspond to and complement each other concerning how the mission of the Church is lived out in today's world.¹⁰

Cardinal Michael Czerny, SJ, Prefect for the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, presenting remotely to theologians at the Synodality in America: People on the Move, Dialogue, and New Context conference in San Diego held earlier this year, explained that if we think we know how to listen, we have probably never truly listened before.

Ecosystems are constantly changing. The Jubilee Year is a pilgrimage of hope. Pilgrims first gather and build community through listening, but then they have to move. Sponsors are called to foster hopeful action, the movement and creativity that kindles the Spirit in the ministry. Han reminds us that "active and strong hope ... inspire people to creative action."¹¹ Sponsors serve as guides for this pilgrimage. First, they must kindle their own hope and then encourage the movement:

Hope is a searching movement. It is an attempt to find a firm footing and a sense of direction. By going beyond the events of the past,



beyond what already exists, it also enters into the unknown, goes down untrodden paths, and ventures into the open, into what-is-not-yet. It is headed for what is still unborn. It sets off towards the new, the altogether other, the unprecedented.¹²

When sponsors commit to the future in hope, they challenge the ministry to search for, create and imagine what has not yet been.

A FORMATION JOURNEY FOR HOPE

The uncertainty we are living through will require new competencies for sponsors, both spiritual and practical. While uncertainty has always been part of the sponsor journey, the speed and liquidity of this time require spiritual alertness and a commitment to communal discernment that are unique.

This is probably why Pope Francis, in his final encyclical, *Dilexit Nos* (He Loved Us), reminded us that “In this ‘liquid’ world of ours, we need to start speaking once more about the heart and thinking about this place where every person, of every class and condition, creates a synthesis, where they encounter the radical source of their strengths, convictions, passions and decisions.”¹³ Sponsors will need an ongoing formation journey to deepen their commitment to serve as sentinels of hope and master the art of discerning in real time.

Conversations during CHA’s Sponsorship Institute in Albuquerque earlier this year made that quite clear. The findings from CHA’s recent sponsorship survey sparked the conversation. Consultants identified key areas where CHA and those interested in sponsorship should engage, including the recruitment and formation of new sponsors, the importance of a formation itinerary beyond initial orientation and preparation programs, as well as the increased need for sponsors to ensure their voice is effectively influencing the ministry.

The sponsor vocation requires a discerning disposition to serve as an effective sentinel for hope. A strengthened spiritual core, the ability to convene for communal discernment and deep listening, and the appreciative attention to what is emerging are all components of a sponsor’s ongoing formation journey. CHA will develop a framework for sponsor formation that accompanies individuals called to sponsorship from the

initial discernment to assume this role through the maturity arc of their service as they become wisdom mentors for future sponsors. At the same time, we will partner with members to create assessment opportunities and tools to help sponsors understand how effectively they are fulfilling their responsibilities.

We are grateful for the charism conversations during the Sponsorship Institute, where, reflecting on the legacy of Mother Frances Xavier Cabrini, we explored how the Holy Spirit inspires a future of hope. Fr. Joseph Driscoll, director of ministry formation and organizational spirituality for Redeemer Health, helped us remember that sponsors need to be alert to notice how the Spirit moves among us: “Every organization has a mission, only a ministry has a charism — charism animates what we do — it is invisible, real, active, alive. Moving and mysterious — it isn’t static — the Holy Spirit initiates, sustains, promises and is still moving.”

Uncertainty requires prophets of hope. Sponsors need to find their collective prophetic voice to remind our ministry that human flourishing is God’s still unrealized dream we are called to incarnate. Sponsors conspire with the Holy Spirit to ensure leaders and collaborators continue striving to make it possible and move this human pilgrimage another few steps closer to the Reign of God.

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NOTES

1. The Code of Canon Law states in canon 114 that juridic persons in the Church “are aggregates of persons (*universitates personarum*) or of things (*universitates rerum*) ordered for a purpose which is in keeping with the mission of the Church and which transcends the purpose of the individuals.” More generally, a juridic person is to canon law what a corporation is to civil law. It is an entity within the Roman Catholic Church that enables a ministry to relate directly to the Church.
2. Kathleen Kingsbury, “To Understand Global Migration, You Have to See It First,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/04/17/opinion/global-migration-facebook-data.html>.
3. Pope Francis, “Homily of Pope Francis, The Holy See, March 19, 2013,” <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa->

francesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html.

4. “Antoni Gaudí. Humanism and Spirituality,” *Basílica de la Sagrada Familia*, <https://sagradafamilia.org/en/antoni-gaudi-humanism-and-spirituality>.

5. Zeni Fox, “Whose Ministry Is It? The Role of the Laity in the Story of Catholic Health Care,” in *Incarnate Grace: Perspectives on the Ministry of Catholic Health Care*, ed. Charles Bouchard (The Catholic Health Association of the United States, 2017), 231.

6. *Laudato Si’* explains, “We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths and meeting the needs of the present with concern for all and without prejudice towards coming generations.” See: Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, The Holy See, section 53, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

7. Byung-Chul Han, *The Spirit of Hope* (Polity, 2024), 11.

8. Pope Francis, “*Spes Non Confundit*,” The Holy See, section 9, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit-bolla-giubileo2025.html.

9. Pope Francis and XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission—Final Document,” USCCB, 2024, https://www.usccb.org/resources/ENG---Documento-finale_traduzione-di-lavoro.pdf.

10. Francis and XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “For a Synodal Church.”

11. Han, *The Spirit of Hope*, 23.

12. Han, *The Spirit of Hope*, 5.

13. Pope Francis, “*Dilexit Nos*,” The Holy See, section 9, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/20241024-enciclica-dilexit-nos.html>.

Upcoming Events

from The Catholic Health Association

United Against Human Trafficking Networking Call
July 22 | 1 – 2 p.m. ET

Faith Community Nurses Networking Call
July 30 | 1 – 2 p.m. ET

Global Health Networking Call
Aug. 6 | 1 – 2:30 p.m. ET

Mission Leader Seminar — Embracing Hope: Our Courageous Path Forward
Tuesdays starting Sept. 9 | 1 – 2:30 p.m. ET weekly

Community Benefit Networking Call
Sept. 18 | 1 – 2 p.m. ET

Community Benefit 101
Oct. 21 – 23 | 2 – 5 p.m. ET daily



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