

SPONSORSHIP'S BIBLICAL ROOTS AND TENSIONS

The Term May Be New, but the Function Has Existed since Apostolic Time

The term “sponsorship” is now firmly embedded in Catholic thinking, especially in our health care ministries, and our understanding of its meaning and purpose continues to grow.

Sponsorship is *the canonical stewardship of a ministry that is carried on in the name of the church*. This definition emphasizes the term’s legal requirement: that a particular ministry be officially or legally mandated by the institutional church. Thus, if a public juridic person is to be established in health care as a ministry, that establishment must be the result of an official mandate from ecclesiastical authorities.

However, a more pastoral and developmental definition says that sponsorship is simply *the devising of ways to guarantee or ensure that the healing and educating mission of Christ continues within the church through particular ministries, in light of rapidly changing circumstances in both society and the church*. This definition emphasizes the fact that sponsorship is a prophetic action—that is, a bridging of the gap between the Gospel and contemporary realities. Unless we first concentrate on the prophetic mission of Jesus Christ in response to the needs of society and the church, the structures we develop may well be irrelevant and lifeless, although canonically correct.

Though the term “sponsorship” is new in the church, sponsorship has in fact been a vital reality in the church’s life since apostolic times. It is in examining the term’s history that one sees the relevance of the above definitions well illustrated. In this article, I intend to look at several incidents in the life of the early church that should give us a deeper appreciation of what sponsorship should mean in our times.

The primary emphasis of Jesus’ actions and

preaching was to instruct people—primarily the apostles—in his mission. Structures and institutions intended to ensure that his mission would continue in authentic ways began to emerge only after his death.¹ In the Acts of the Apostles, we see that these structures and institutions required the official approbation of the elders of the faith community and that the bestowal of this approbation became customary in all subsequent centuries, including contemporary times.

The history of sponsorship, even in the apostolic church, has been somewhat tense at times. This tension is understandable since ministries of sponsorship require interaction between inseparably linked wings of the church—the institutional and the prophetic.² The wings are complementary, but it has never been easy—and never will be easy—for them to function smoothly together.

Yet despite the tensions, with their accompanying pain and misunderstandings, openness to the Spirit through dialogue has made successful decision making possible throughout history. As we will see later in this article, the poles of this tension are illustrated by the lives of Peter and Paul, the former symbolizing the authority wing of the church and the latter the prophetic wing. We also see the tensions creatively being worked through over the centuries in the relationships between congregational founders and hierarchical authorities. Sometimes this working through has involved significant pain as people struggled to discern God’s will.³

We may experience similar strains today as we search for new forms of sponsorship in health care in dialogue with bishops and in partnership with laypeople. The zeal for the Christ’s mission, however, provides the motivation and the “patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23) required for creative discernment with ecclesiastical authorities.

BY FR. GERALD A. ARBUCKLE, SM, PhD



Fr. Arbuckle is director, Refounding and Pastoral Development Unit, Sydney, Australia.

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

The Acts of the Apostles describes several incidents that throw light on the meaning of sponsorship and the evolution of new forms of sponsorship. The book tells the story of the church's growth under the impulse of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:31) and of ways the church became increasingly conscious of its central mission, namely to be "witnesses" of Christ's life and teaching, even "to earth's remotest end" (Acts 1:8).⁴ The Holy Spirit assumes a central role in the book, initiating and directing missionary activities at key turning points (e.g., Acts 8:26, 29, and 39; 10:19; 13:2; 15:28; and 16:6-9). Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who causes the church to emerge, thereby inspiring unity and dramatic missionary activity as new opportunities and challenges develop.

The story begins in Jerusalem, where the faith first became firmly established and the first Christian community flourished (Acts: 1-5). In fact, the picture given by Luke is an idyllic one, a community in which people lived in harmony and were deeply committed to living Gospel values. Luke writes that the disciples all "joined constantly in prayer" (Acts 1:14). He later develops this statement when he describes the four main qualities of the emerging church. The disciples, he writes, "remained devoted . . . to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

"Fellowship" or "community" meant not just that the early Christians were of one mind and heart but also that they acted in ways that proved this unanimity, especially in collecting and distributing money for people who were poor. Financial assistance was both a key way of uniting the community and evidence of authentic fellowship and commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ (cf., Acts 4:34-35).⁵ This community of sharing would have contrasted dramatically with the wider, non-Christian society in which the poor were neglected because of that society's ruthlessly selfish, quasi-capitalist values.

SPONSORSHIP

Luke proceeds to describe three forms of sponsorship. The first type of sponsorship is quite simple. Members of the community in Jerusalem "had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45). That is, the community was so small that the needs of those who were destitute were known to all members. So, believers dispensed funds readily and *directly* to the needy.

But with the rapid increase in the size of the community, administrative adjustments had to be made to ensure that needy people could be identified and assisted. A new sponsorship structure creatively emerged to cope with the situation. After receiving funds, the apostles guaranteed that they would reach poverty-stricken community members: "There was not a needy

person among them, for as many owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34-35). In this way, individual donors began to provide aid to the poor *indirectly*. The apostles ensured that the gap between mission and reality was identified and responded to by the appropriate authorities. This was the second form of sponsorship.

NEW NEEDS, NEW MODELS

This second form did not last long, however. It was not capable of coping with the increasing size of the Jerusalem community and its cultural complexity. In fact, it had become unjust.

So dissension erupted in the once-tranquil prophetic community. Greek-speaking Jewish Christians, called Hellenists, complained to the apostles that their widows "were being neglected in the daily distribution of food" (Acts 6:1). They accused Hebrews—that is, Palestinian Jews who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic—of disregarding the Hellenists's widows. Widows then formed a distinct group in society. In traditional Jewish culture, in which women depended on men for their identity, rights, and security, widows lived a precarious existence. The Hellenists who complained were prophetic people because they had identified just where Christ's mission to the marginalized was being overlooked. Their protest, in that time and place, was a brave act.

What had gone wrong? The problem was due not only to cultural tensions between these two parts of the Jerusalem community. There had also been a fundamental breakdown in administration. A serious gap had developed between the Gospel imperative to aid the poor, on one hand, and the reality of unresolved poverty within the Jerusalem community, on the other. The apostles had not noticed the gap because they had become too busy with their many other duties as leaders of the community (see Acts 6:1). What was needed was the development of a new model of sponsorship that took into account the rapidly changing scene in the church.

The apostles immediately responded to the prophetic intervention of the Hellenists by calling "together the whole community of the disciples" (Acts 6:2). They stated the problem and asked the community's help in solving it. If they continued distributing food to needy people in the rapidly expanding community, the apostles said, this would interfere with their primary task of governance and the correct formation of the church according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. "It is not right," the apostles said, "that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables" (Acts 6:2).

So they decided to establish a new sponsorship

The history of sponsorship, even in the apostolic church, has been somewhat tense at times. This tension is understandable since ministries of sponsorship require interaction between inseparably linked wings of the church—the institutional and the prophetic.

structure that would both free them from this burden and ensure that the mission of Jesus to marginalized people would continue. The apostles instructed the assembly to choose “seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” whom they would then “appoint to this task” (Acts 6:3). Delegating the work of feeding the poor in this way would free the apostles to devote themselves “to prayer and to serving the word” (Acts 6:4). This decision was well received by the community.

Seven men were selected according to approved criteria. Having been chosen, the seven were formally mandated by apostles to lead a new sponsorship model: “They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:6). With this mandate, the seven men were officially appointed to a ministry of the church.

Luke records the fact that the new sponsorship model did indeed operate successfully. The community was again living with internal harmony and the apostles were freed to fulfil their ministerial duties (see Acts 6:7).

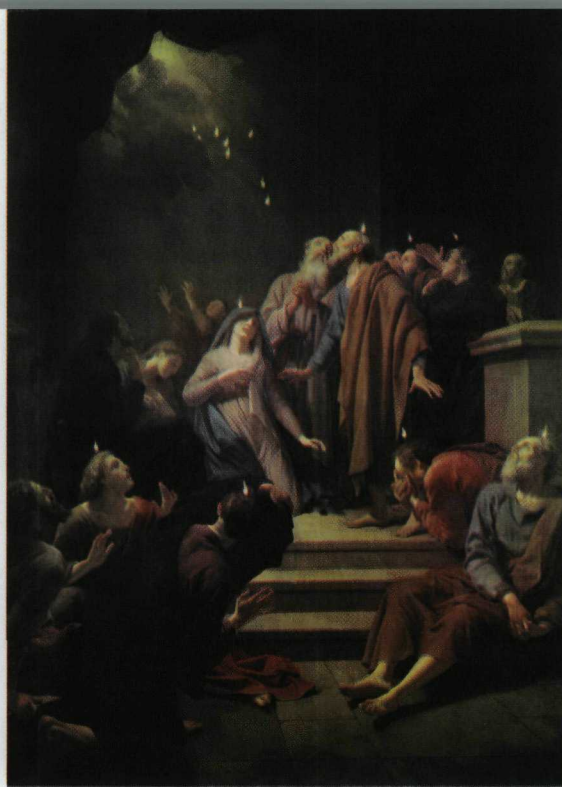
PETER AND PAUL: COMPLEMENTARY ROLES

The manner in which Peter and Paul interacted in the early church is particularly instructive in helping us to understand the tensions that may arise in developing new forms of sponsorship in health care today. In relating to the hierarchical church, the Catholic health ministry’s role is a prophetic one; and those of us who serve the ministry need to make our approach respectful but courageous, always keeping in mind the need to maintain openness to the working of the Spirit.

Although the biblical book is called Acts of the Apostles, it is in fact primarily about Peter and Paul. Their partnership is at the heart of what Luke wants to describe, because Peter symbolically represents the church’s authority structures and Paul represents the complementary prophetic wing.

In the book, Luke intends to show that the institutional and prophetic wings of the church are complementary. No bird can fly on one wing. So also the church. Thus the first part of Acts concentrates particularly on Peter, and the remainder of the text highlights the missionary activities of Paul. In Acts, Peter serves as the spokesman for the 12 apostles, and in the Gospel accounts he fulfills the same pre-eminent function.⁶ But it was particularly Paul who painfully identified the gap between the salvation message of Jesus and the emerging church’s neglect of the Gentiles. The mission of Jesus Christ demanded that there be action.

Paul recognized that Peter was the legitimate authority in the church, and he saw the need not only to present his case for the mission to the Gentiles but also to receive Peter’s approval (see Gal 2:2, 9). He needed the mandate of the institutional



© SuperStock, Inc.

church for this mission. Although Paul did not for a moment wish to question Peter’s right to make the final decision (see Gal 1:18), nonetheless tensions arose between them.

However, despite Peter’s support of the unrestricted conversion of the non-Jewish Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:34-48) and his public statement (see Acts 15:7-11) that he was against compelling Gentile converts to adopt Jewish customs (e.g., circumcision, dietary laws), in practice he timidly wavered at some point on the issue. Paul then vigorously protested against the efforts to require the Gentiles at Antioch “to live like Jews” (Gal 2:14). Paul writes: “But when [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned . . . And other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy” (Gal 2:11, 13). These are extremely strong words for Paul to use in speaking to Peter, whose preeminence he otherwise humbly acknowledged. Yet throughout this episode Paul was motivated, in discussing the issue with Peter and his companions, by love of Christ’s mission and the church, not out of “self-indulgence” (Gal 5:13). Peter and Paul mutually respected their different roles in the church and were united in their zeal for the mission of Christ.⁷

REQUIREMENTS FOR SPONSORSHIP

In light of these incidents, we can make the following conclusions about the development of any new sponsorship model in the church:

- It is a prophetic action to identify and bridge the gaps between the mission of Jesus Christ and contemporary realities.
- The primary task of governance in the church is to maintain order and unity based on sound doctrine; integral to this task is the discernment of new pastoral initiatives in the church.
- If it is to be a ministry of the church, a new spon-

In relating to the hierarchical church, the Catholic health ministry's role is a prophetic one; and those of us who serve the ministry need to make our approach respectful but courageous, always keeping in mind the need to maintain openness to the working of the Spirit.

sorship model will require the church's official mandate and due accountability.

■ There never has been, and never can be, a neat formula guaranteeing that the two wings of the church—the hierarchical and the prophetic—will always relate harmoniously with one another in their common search for God's will in ministry. As was the case with Peter and Paul and their followers in the church's first century, achieving harmony takes hard work and, at times, enormous patience and faith.

■ When, therefore, in imitation of the prophetic Paul, people propose in dialogue with the appropriate ecclesiastical authorities a new sponsorship model, they will require a similar passionate commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ, courage, patience, and openness to the workings of the Spirit.

■ Because development of new sponsorship models requires such qualities, everyone involved in that development must have undergone an adequate formation, thereby ensuring "a collaboration which is mutually enriching."⁸

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Over the centuries, the institutional church has mandated religious congregations to ensure that the founding story of Jesus' concern for justice—compassion particularly for people marginalized by society—continues. Men and women religious were commissioned to be gap-finders and gap-fillers, making sure that justice and compassion actually took place, that they weren't just qualities nice to read about in the Scriptures.

Religious were officially mandated, in brief, to be the official sponsors, or carriers, of Christ's healing holistic mission. In history, they have repeatedly taken bold and courageous steps to guarantee that the educational, social, and medical needs of people were being met. Hence Paul's successors down through the ages have been people like St. Vincent de Paul in the 17th century, who devoted his life to the relief of poverty in France; Mother Mary Aikenhead, foundress of the Irish Sisters of Charity; St. Elizabeth Seton, foundress of the U.S. Sisters of Charity; Blessed Mother Mary MacKillop, foundress of the Australian Sisters of St. Joseph; Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy; and countless others. All are famous for imaginatively responding to the most neglected people of their times.

Vatican Council II has reminded us that this prophetic task is a right and responsibility of laypeople, too. Laypeople have the right to be mandated by the church. Such happened in the early centuries of the church. And it is happening again in our time, a sure sign that "a new stage of the Church begins."⁹

As one ecclesial document notes, "The new phenomenon being experienced in these days is that some members of the laity are asking to participate in the charismatic ideals of Institutes. This has given rise to

interesting initiatives and new institutional forms of association," such as the collaborative search for new models of sponsorship in health care.¹⁰

"Whereas at times in the recent past, collaboration came about as a means of supplementing the decline in the number of consecrated persons necessary to carry out activities, now it is growing out of the need to share responsibility."

Those working to develop new sponsorship models in health care should focus on establishing structures (and appropriate formation processes) that encourage religious and laypeople acting in partnership (or laypeople by themselves) to be "witnesses" of Christ's teaching, even "to earth's remotest ends" (Acts 1:8), with due accountability to ecclesiastical authorities. These models have no other purpose but the ongoing maintenance and development of a prophetic or creative culture in which the core values of justice, compassion, respect for human dignity, excellence, unity, and particular concern for people who are powerless are integral in all decision making. This is the abiding lesson of the lives of Peter and Paul and their successors. ■

NOTES

1. See David A. Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church: Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, University of America Press, Lanham, MD, 1986, pp.7, 33.
2. See "Gaudium et Spes," in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, St. Paul Editions, Boston, 1988, para. 44.
3. For helpful comments on the relationship between charisms and the cross, see *Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church*, Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes and Sacred Congregation for Bishops, 1978, para 12.
4. See Justin Taylor, "Acts of the Apostles," in William Farmer, ed., *The International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1998, pp. 1,506-1,532; James G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1977; and Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1992.
5. See Taylor, p. 1,513.
6. See Raymond Brown, Karl Donfried, and John Reumann, eds., *Peter in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Catholic Scholars*, Augsburg Publishing, Minneapolis, 1973, p. 161.
7. See F. F. Bruce, "Acts of the Apostles," in Bruce M. Metzger and Michael Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Oxford University Press, New York City, 1993, p. 10.
8. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium*, May 2002, para. 56.
9. Pope John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, January 6, 2001, para. 1.
10. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, para. 31.