

## **Conference for Mercy Higher Education Board Talking Points: Site Visits**

### **SPONSORSHIP**

#### **Background and Introduction**

The term *sponsorship* was first used in the 1960s and made popular in the 1970s to describe the relationship between an apostolic work— such as schools, colleges, healthcare facilities—and the party who, in the eyes of the Church, is responsible for the institution’s faithfulness to church law, church teachings and directives as well as the institution’s own mission and values. While there is no foundation for this use of the term sponsor in either canon or civil law, the concept carries both civil and canonical responsibilities.

#### **Definition**

The Conference for Mercy Higher Education defines sponsorship as a formal relationship between an authorized Catholic organization (the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy) and a legally formed institution (college/university) for the purpose of carrying on the Church’s mission. Sponsorship can also be described as “a sacred trust, insuring the fidelity of an apostolic work to Catholic identity and Sisters of Mercy mission and values.” (*After We’re Gone: Creating Sustainable Sponsorship*, Mary K. Grant and Patricia Vanbenberg, CSC).

Inherent to sponsorship is the role of *public juridic person*—or PJP—a term roughly equivalent to *corporation* in civil law. In the eyes of the Catholic Church, the PJP has ultimate responsibility for a specific ministry and the assets used in that ministry.

The Conference for Mercy Higher Education is the formal relationship between the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy and each college/university. The Conference for Mercy Higher Education Board exercises its governance responsibilities through specific reserved authorities as outlined in the Articles of Incorporation and the Bylaws of the college/university.

#### **CMHE Structure**

Until 2006, individual regional communities sponsored Mercy colleges/universities. Most often, the public juridic person was the regional community and reserved authorities were exercised by the leadership team. When the Institute began the process of reconfiguring (a new organizational structure which empowers the Community to use its human and financial resources more efficiently for the Mercy mission), however, the Sisters of Mercy needed a new model of sponsorship for colleges and universities. A decision was made to bring together all Mercy-sponsored colleges and universities under the existing public juridic person of the Institute. Within this governance structure the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy will sponsor all Mercy colleges and universities.

As each Mercy college/university transfers its reserved powers to the Conference for Mercy Higher Education, the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas becomes its public juridic person. The Institute has ultimate canonical responsibility which is exercised through the Institute Leadership Team (ILT). The Institute holds the reserved power for alienation of assets of the ministry.

### **Responsibilities of the CMHE Board**

The Board of the Conference for Mercy Higher Education Inc. is responsible

- to preserve and develop the Catholic identity of Mercy sponsored colleges and universities;
- to preserve and develop the Mercy mission in Catholic higher education;
- to decide on requests from sponsored colleges and universities relative to powers reserved to the CMHE Board according to the by-laws of each;
- to provide a liaison from the CMHE Board to each college and university;
- to assist Mercy sponsored colleges and universities in collaborative efforts.

### **Responsibilities of the Canonical Sponsor Council**

The Institute Leadership Team delegates limited reserved powers to a Canonical Sponsor Council composed of Sisters of Mercy, appointed from and by the founding communities of Mercy colleges/universities, and one leadership team member from the Institute.

The Canonical Sponsor Council also appoints and removes CMHE Board members and approves changes to CMHE by-laws affecting mission, purpose and sponsoring authority as well as changes to CMHE articles of incorporation.

The Canonical Sponsor Council together with the CMHE Board is committed to fulfilling the mission of the Conference. Specifics of Catholic identity and the Mercy sponsorship and mission in higher education follow.

## **MERCY CATHOLIC IDENTITY**

### **Definition/Description**

All Mercy-sponsored colleges and universities are Catholic institutions, which situates the institution within the teaching mission of the Church. The Sisters of Mercy sponsor institutions to address their "enduring concerns"—service to persons who are poor, who are in need of education, health care, social services—according to the needs of the time, with special attention to women and children. Through direct service and through influence, those serving in mercy institutions seek to relieve misery and to address its causes.

The institutions sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy must embody justice and mercy. Justice requires that all persons are given what is their due according to their human rights and to the terms of their contract. As St. Thomas Aquinas teaches, "mercy is the fulfillment of justice, not its abolition." Merciful people seek to do as much as possible for the person in need without violating the rights of anyone. In practice, this will mean

that Mercy institutions are not guided by the minimum requirements of the law but by the generosity of God, which we have all received--wittingly or unwittingly.

### **Characteristics**

Mercy colleges and universities stand in the Catholic intellectual tradition. This tradition is characterized by deep commitment to the pursuit of truth and to a life shaped by gospel ideals and values. Mercy institutions of higher education strive to continue this Catholic intellectual tradition by offering a rich liberal education in tandem with excellence in professional preparation. Such an education will instruct students in reading the "signs of the times" with compassionate concern so as to undertake action that elevates the human spirit, alleviates human suffering, and advances human aspirations.

A theological anthropology grounds this education. It recognizes all persons as created and loved by God, and yet in need of liberation from the sin of the world and the effects of personal failings. Respect for the dignity of each person and reverent care for all creation follows from these beliefs about human beings, as does respect for the corrective power of sacred scripture and tradition.

### **Responsibilities of Mercy Catholic Institutions of Higher Learning**

The privilege of being publicly identified with the educational mission of the Sisters of Mercy carries with it the responsibility to be accountable to the sponsoring body. Such accountability will be called for and given to the Conference of Mercy Higher Education, which is responsible for the preservation of the Catholic identity and Mercy mission of each sponsored institution.

CMHE will ask for evidence of such things as the following:

- that the institution is forming students as thoughtful, informed individuals and Catholics for the present and preparing them for future leadership in church and civic organizations;
- that the institution is responsive to directives relating to Catholic higher education, such as *Ex corde ecclesiae*, and to the local ordinary;
- that the institution is responsive to the critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy as expressed in Chapter action.

### **Summary**

The Conference for Mercy Higher Education in no way supplants or replaces the local board of trustees. On the contrary, CMHE will seek to strengthen the local board and to preserve and develop the Mercy heritage in higher education for the common good of the local community, of the mission of the Sisters of Mercy and of the U.S. Catholic Church.

**January 12, 2007**