

Understanding the MHS Alliance Sponsorship Covenant

Sponsorship – a word with many connotations

The word *sponsor* has many uses in everyday conversation. A church *sponsors* a refugee family. Adults serve as *sponsors* for their church youth group. A donor might *sponsor* a friend to walk ten miles in a local charity event. In all these contexts, the word suggests a shared interest and some kind of exchange between the sponsor and whatever or whoever is being sponsored.

The dictionary defines a sponsor as, “a person or organization with some sort of responsibility for another person or organization, especially where the responsibility has a religious or financial aspect.”

Sponsorship has been used widely within various religious traditions to define and structure relationships between established groups and the institutions that they support. In the Catholic tradition, local dioceses or religious orders sponsor schools, hospitals, and social service agencies. Sister Teresa Stanley wrote that sponsorship enables the church to animate, promote, and ensure the work of Jesus (*Health Progress*, Jan.-Feb. 2007). Other churches’ traditions, such as the Seventh Day Adventist and Lutheran groups, have formally sponsored institutions as ways to extend and support ministries in the world.

Anabaptist/Mennonite history

Across the US and Canada, church groups including the Mennonite Brethren, Brethren in Christ, and Mennonite Church USA have sponsored many health and human services ministries. Sponsors have included clusters of congregations, conferences/districts, and national agencies within these traditions.

Sponsorship is a dynamic relationship with four significant dimensions.

1. The theological dimension

Stewardship and corporate vocation

Sponsorship is rooted in stewardship. Just as God entrusted care of the earth and its creatures to humankind, so Christ has entrusted the mission of God’s reign to community of faith.

Sponsorship is a means through which the church or community of faith calls into being, blesses, and empowers the work of others to serve on behalf of the church and carry on the church’s work.

Source of grounding and core identity

Sponsorship provides a framework for how an organization understands its call to serve and provides the source of an ongoing sense of core identity and corporate values to shape every facet of the organization.

2. The relational dimension

If sponsorship is only a theological construct, it may offer perspective but little pragmatic value. If sponsorship is only conceived of and experienced as a legal and structural matter, that is oversight and control, the relationship can be distant and disempowering. Vital sponsorship is about real relationships of trust and the sharing of resources.

3. The resource dimension

Over the life-cycle of an institution, the nature of need between sponsor and sponsored organization inevitably varies. In the formative years of an organization, the organization understandably is more dependent upon the sponsor. As the organization matures, the relationship matures and becomes more mutual or inter-dependent. The shifting needs of the sponsoring or sponsored organization may also influence the relationship.

Fundamentally, the relationship should express the profound appreciation of the sponsor and be a source of encouragement and guidance to the sponsored organization.

The following are broad categories of resources initiated by MHS Alliance.

1. Developing organizational leadership at the executive and governance levels
2. Supporting the articulation of faith foundations, core mission, and identity
3. Making connections with the local and regional community of faith
4. Advocating on behalf of the ministry throughout the broader life of MHS Alliance and relating denominations
5. Providing a network for sharing in the development of promising practices and programs and services that enhance operations
6. Providing a network of ongoing peer support and encouragement
7. Facilitating the collective effort of other like-minded ministries in public policy advocacy or new ministry development
8. Periodically discussing mission, values, strategic direction, and affiliation work with the community of faith

The sponsored organization shares resources through activities such as:

1. Extending the work and witness of the church in practical ways
2. Demonstrating promising practices that can inspire the service of others
3. Networking with peer organizations to encourage each other
4. Joining with other like-minded organizations in developing programs and services to enhance operational performance
5. Participating in the collective effort of other like-minded ministries in public policy advocacy or new ministry development
6. Providing financial and other practical resources to support the work of MHS Alliance

The exchange of resources requires relationships between the executives and boards of MHS Alliance and sponsored organizations that are open, transparent, trusting, and accountable.

4. The legal dimension

Responsibility and authority - reserved powers

The legal characteristics of the relationship are reflected in a set of reserved powers. These are set forth in the corporate bylaws of both entities. "Reserved powers" means that the sponsor *reserves* the authority to review and approve or disapprove certain specific actions by the sponsored organization. Through these reserved powers, MHS Alliance provides broad oversight but focused authority over select matters. These matters usually include the appointment of board members, changes in bylaws and mission statement, disposition of assets if the sponsored entity is dissolved, and appointment of a chief executive officer.

Accountability and risk

Sponsorship through reserved powers clarifies the distribution of responsibility and authority between the two entities. The sponsored organization has full operational responsibility. The sponsored organization and sponsor are accountable to each other and the church that they both serve.

Durability

In most instances, the relationship between MHS Alliance and the sponsored organization or ministry is assumed to be long-term. This long-term horizon contributes to continuity of mission, core identity, and alignment between the service of the sponsored organization and the interests of those it serves. These features mitigate two dynamics: 1) the well-documented and almost inevitable secularization of institutions that have no mechanisms for accountability with a community of faith and 2) the risk of the excessive influence of a few strong-minded individuals who can dramatically influence the mission and direction of an organization if there are not accountability or influencing controls exercised by the broader community of faith.

Dynamic Sponsorship

Today's organizations must adapt *quickly* to market conditions while also maintaining a clear sense of their core identity, deepest held values, and their fundamental mission. They must know as much about *why* they do what they do as they know about *what* they do. MHS Alliance is committed to supporting this ongoing work on identity and mission while developing the network of resources that every organization needs.

Over time organizations change. Communities change. The church continues to change. There will likely be some circumstances emerge in which the nature of relationships and structures between the community of faith, MHS Alliance, and sponsored organization need to be evaluated and possibly modified. The sponsorship relationship must always be viewed as a means, not the end.

As a Mennonite organization with a long and rich tradition of sponsoring health and human services ministries, MHS Alliance is committed to ensuring that its sponsorship seeks to genuinely support organizations in carrying out their witness and service in the name of Jesus.

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