NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Symposium discusses future of Catholic health care

Alice Popovici | Apr. 10, 2012

As Catholic health care systems struggle to survive in a competitive industry, some leaders of the traditionally nonprofit organizations are considering the for-profit model as an alternative.

But how would a change in corporate structure impact the Catholic mission and identity at the core of these organizations?

The question came up again and again as experts in health care, finance and law met with others interested in the future of Catholic health care at Seton Hall Law School in Newark, N.J., March 26-27 to study the issue at a symposium titled, "Is for-profit structure a viable alternative for Catholic health care ministry?" [1]

Ascension Health Care Network, which describes itself as "the nation's first for-profit Catholic healthcare system," may learn the answer to this question before long. The system was formed last year as a joint venture between Ascension Health, the country's largest Catholic health care system, and Oak Hill Capital Partners, a private equity firm, and is now in "exclusive negotiations" to buy seven Catholic hospitals in New Jersey, said Leo Brideau, the Ascension Health Care Network's president and CEO.

Brideau said the Catholic hospitals that will come under the management of Ascension Health Care Network -- after New Jersey, the system plans to expand to other regions -- will be operated exactly as their nonprofit counterparts, and Ascension Health, the parent company, will retain "sole authority in perpetuity" over elements of Catholic identity, mission and ethical and religious directives.

" 'For-profit' describes our tax status; it doesn't describe our purpose," Brideau said at the Seton Hall symposium, stressing that in this type of partnership, an equity partner would not have the authority to pressure the Catholic hospital to abandon its mission to care for the poor. "Our purpose is continuing the healing ministry of Jesus."

"I think there are still lots of questions," said Mary Ann Dillon, senior vice president for mission and sponsorship at Mercy Health System. But, she said, there seems to be a great deal of interest in this type of venture within the Catholic health care community.

"What Ascension is trying to do," Dillon added, "is provide the necessary capital to rescue some of these small Catholic hospitals that are not going to make it on their own."

Editor's note: For more on the symposium, read the April 27-May 10 issue of NCR.

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