



## Chapter 3 SPONSORSHIP

### Good Sponsorship Is Vital to Emmaus

While most church related functions take a “ya’ll come!” approach to participation, Emmaus relies on a method that is more consistent with the message of the Walk: sponsorship. The personal character of sponsorship underlines God’s personal care and commitment to each pilgrim. The fact that the Emmaus experience passes from person to person reflects the relational nature of God and the manner in which God reaches out to people through people. Sponsorship is integral to some of the unique features and strengths of the Emmaus experience—a discerning approach to recruitment, personal agape and prayer for the pilgrims, sponsors’ presence at Candlelight and Closing, and follow-up.

Sponsorship is an important reason that communities rarely cancel Emmaus Walks for lack of participants. Emmaus pilgrims want to share the gift of the Emmaus experience with others. God’s gift of grace continues to be passed on through the Emmaus movement. Sponsors help make Emmaus an act of sacrificial love from beginning to end—something more than the usual retreat or religious education function.

Good sponsorship is vital to the Emmaus movement in every community. For this reason, every Fourth-Day community faces the ongoing challenge of educating pilgrims on the role and importance of good sponsorship. *Day Four: The Pilgrim’s Continued Journey* provides an excellent chapter on sponsorship that every community should discuss. In addition, community members will be helped to follow through with their intention to sponsor by having sponsorship workshops as part of monthly Gatherings a few months prior to each set of Walks. Sponsorship should also be discussed at the follow-up meeting with the pilgrims after their Walks. One of the resource books in The Emmaus Library series is titled *Sponsorship*. This book provides a detailed explanation of the whys, whens, and hows of effective sponsorship.

An evening workshop on sponsorship can include a talk on sponsorship by a leader (see following outline), group discussion and group responses to the talk, individual time in groups to reflect upon and share with one another the names of persons whom God is prompting each pilgrim to sponsor, and Communion where persons offer themselves to give the gift of Emmaus to those whom God has brought to mind. This type of meeting will broaden the base of those in the Emmaus community who choose to be intentional sponsors from Walk to Walk.

To encourage discussion of sponsorship in Emmaus communities, the following review of sponsorship is presented in the form of a talk outline. This outline can be presented as a whole or successively as a series. An interpretation of the “equal commitment” rule for sponsoring married persons and an interview with a model sponsor follow.

### **Sponsorship: The Most Important Job of All**

Most communities take sponsorship for granted; they assume that everyone knows the how and why of sponsorship. Unfortunately, often sponsorship is not discussed except in reference to the number of pilgrims signed up for a Walk or to a conflict over an issue like the husband/wife rule. Yet sponsorship is the most important job in Emmaus. It is more than “signing up people.” The importance of an Emmaus community’s being educated about the value of good sponsorship cannot be overemphasized. The quality of sponsorship influences the pilgrim, the health of the Emmaus movement, and the church affected by the movement.

First, good sponsorship is the first act of agape before a Walk ever begins; the experience of the Walk for a pilgrim really begins with how we handle sponsorship.

Second, good sponsorship undergirds the whole weekend with sacrificial love on behalf of each pilgrim. Sponsors use discernment in recruiting pilgrims, embody the personal commitment of the community to each pilgrim, and provide personal acts of agape during the three days for the pilgrims. These acts of agape include prayer, agape letters, presence at Candlelight and Closing, and follow-up.

Third, good sponsorship is the foundation for a healthy, effective Emmaus movement that is fulfilling its true purpose: the development of Christian leaders and the renewal of the church in ministry. Wood and Roy write in *Day Four: The Pilgrim’s Continued Journey*, “The strength of any Emmaus Community is a direct result of that community’s recruiting practices. If the community is committed to recruiting strong church leaders for the purpose of strengthening the local church, then the community will be a strong vital force in the renewal movement.”

#### **Why do we sponsor? What is our aim?**

The aim of a sponsor should not be “to get all my friends to go,” to fill up the three-day event, to fix people’s problems, or to reproduce one’s own religious experience in others. Rather, the aim of the sponsor is to bring spiritual revitalization to Christians who, in turn, will bring new life and vision to the work of the church in the congregation, home, workplace, and community. The aim of sponsorship is to build up the body of Christ.

#### **Whom do we sponsor?**

One’s awareness of and commitment to the purpose of Emmaus influences who is sponsored and how they are sponsored. Emmaus is for active Christians and members of churches whose own renewal will mean new energy, commitment, and vision in the church and everyday environments for Christ’s sake. Those sponsored could include the following:

- church leaders (pastors and laypersons) who will bring new vision, commitment, and understanding to their congregations and who need the renewal and grace Emmaus channels;
- dependable church members who are the quiet backbone of the church;
- less active members who need their awareness of grace rekindled and their commitments renewed;
- Christians who are hungry for “something more” and who want to grow spiritually;
- members and leaders who represent a cross section of the church and who will help Emmaus remain theologically sound, centered on the essentials of our common faith, and open to different perspectives;
- respected laypersons and clergypersons whose participation, support, and leadership will encourage others to take the Walk and will build a sound, balanced leadership base for the movement in the community; and
- members of diverse congregations, denominations, and ethnic groups.

Emmaus is right for many people—but not for everyone. The religious background or emotional condition of some people may make Emmaus an improper discipleship tool for them. Other persons may be unsuitable choices for sponsorship to Emmaus because of the negative effect they might have on an Emmaus Weekend or the divisive influence they might bring to the church. Sponsorship requires sensitivity to these factors. Some examples of questionable sponsorship are as follows:

- Non-Christians;
- Christians whose theology and/or practice is notably different or incompatible with the traditional theology and practice represented by The Walk to Emmaus: Christians who have specific dietary restrictions and Sabbath celebrations that the Emmaus experience cannot provide, members of groups who will feel a need to defend the uniqueness of their beliefs throughout the Walk, or persons who do not share belief in traditional doctrines of the faith basic to the major denominations of the church and to Emmaus;
- persons undergoing an emotional crisis (for example, family breakup, job loss, severe grief) or who are psychologically unstable;
- persons who decide not to make a Walk after being presented the opportunity. A potential sponsor need not feel like a failure if a prospect says no. Perhaps the timing is not right. Perhaps God will renew the person in another way. Remember, The Walk to Emmaus is not the way to renewal for every Christian;
- “church hoppers,” members who always have an axe to grind against the church; persons who will use Emmaus as a tool to divide the body, to further their own theological agendas, or who will create an “Emmaus church”; and

- persons who are always looking for another spiritual high or another experience to help them “arrive.”

### **Two Kinds of Sponsorship: Wise and Unwise**

Wise sponsorship is purposeful and prayerful; unwise sponsorship is haphazard and undiscerning. Wise sponsorship eventually will produce a balanced, theologically centered movement of the Holy Spirit, which is integrated into the life of the church in the community and which is honored by a variety of churches as an effective instrument for conveying God’s grace, the call to committed discipleship, and our unity in Christ.

Unwise sponsorship eventually will produce a harvest that becomes more of a burden than a blessing for the church, a movement that has become a “religious fringe group” or a parachurch apart from the established church in the community. At best, such groups benefit the individuals involved, having no impact upon or relationship with the churches in the community, thus forfeiting the purpose of the Emmaus movement. At worst, such groups benefit themselves at the expense of the church, breeding division instead of unity within the body of Christ and intolerance instead of tolerance among Christians of different religious expressions.

### **How do we sponsor?**

*Day Four: The Pilgrim’s Continued Journey* has an excellent chapter on “The Next Generation: Sponsorship,” which elaborates on these ten steps in sponsoring a prospective pilgrim:

1. Pray for the person’s openness to God’s call to discipleship, not for how to get him or her to go on a Walk.
2. Make an appointment with the person or couple for the purpose of discussing participation in Emmaus.
3. Extend an invitation. Invite the prospective pilgrim to attend for the sake of a more vital relationship with Jesus Christ, not just an event to go to. Share your faith; explain the basic elements of the Walk, its purpose, and follow-up dimensions that help us live in grace for the rest of our lives. Take the attitude that you are giving the person a wonderful gift rather than that he or she needs to go.
4. Ask the person to make a commitment by filling out the registration form. If the person is married, speak with both partners and encourage an equal commitment by both.
5. Continue to pray for your prospective pilgrim, prepare agape letters, and enlist the support of their pastor. Collect eight to twelve personal agape letters. Do not ask the team to deliver personal gifts during the three days.
6. Support the Walk through your prayers during the 72-Hour Prayer Vigil and your presence at Send-Off, Sponsors’ Hour, Candlelight, and Closing. Support the pilgrim’s family by house-sitting, baby-sitting, watering plants, picking up mail, feeding pets, or just checking in with a spouse to see if any help is needed.

7. Encourage the pilgrim in his or her Fourth Day involvement. Give your friend an opportunity to talk through and appropriate the experience. Help the pilgrim find a group, or be prepared to start a group with him or her for a period of time until others join the group. Take the pilgrim to Gatherings as your guest for a couple of months.
8. Help the pilgrim reenter his or her church and consider ways to act out new commitment and enthusiasm.
9. Inform the pilgrim of ways to serve the Emmaus community and future Walks.
10. Help the pilgrim sponsor others.

Sponsorship is an act of love for God, for the pilgrims, for the Emmaus community, and for the church. It demonstrates agape love, making us instruments of prevenient grace.

### **Who can sponsor?**

Any persons who have participated in Emmaus can sponsor another person to Emmaus so long as they understand the aim and responsibilities of sponsorship and can fulfill them for the person they would sponsor. Persons who have participated in Chrysalis can also sponsor adults to Emmaus under the same conditions. The same conditions for sponsorship apply also to persons who have participated in Cursillo, Tres Dias, or another valid expression of the recognized fourth-day movements.

Given the importance of sponsorship, Boards of Directors may develop local guidelines and reasonable expectations to ensure responsible sponsorship. For example, Emmaus application forms may have a provision that potential sponsors are to give evidence that they understand and accept the responsibilities of sponsorship for the person being sponsored. Registrars may expect and ask potential sponsors to indicate that they have attended a sponsorship training session, so long as such opportunities are accessible throughout the year at Gatherings, community education days, or in other ways. Young persons who have participated in Chrysalis may be asked to find adult cosponsors who will share or assist with the duties of sponsorship. Potential sponsors who have participated in some other valid expression of Emmaus may need to confirm a degree of contact with, or involvement in, the local Emmaus community along with an understanding of Emmaus and sponsorship.

Sponsors should not serve as team members on Walks with persons they are sponsoring. If persons choose to serve as team members, they should find others who will sponsor the particular persons they would otherwise sponsor. Sponsors must be able to fulfill the responsibilities of sponsorship for any person they would sponsor. Team members cannot support a pilgrim during the three-day event in the manner intended, such as Sponsors' Hour, the 72-Hour Prayer Vigil, and Candlelight. Confusing the roles of team member and sponsor in one's relationship with a pilgrim diminishes the value of both roles. On the one hand, team members who also sponsor are often incapable of serving without anticipating, hovering, or being distracted by a special interest in the responses of "their" pilgrims.

On the other hand, the hopes and expectations of their ever-present sponsors on the team may limit pilgrims' freedom to respond, a likelihood that is antithetical to the principles of Emmaus. Not only should sponsors not serve as team members on the same Walk, but the pilgrims should not see their sponsors during the event. The absence of the sponsor gives the pilgrims the space they need for their own special interaction with and experience of God during the 72-hour Walk.

## Interpreting the Equal Commitment Rule

### The Reason for the Rule

The Letter of Agreement states that "husbands and wives are encouraged to make an equal commitment to participate." How are communities to interpret this? The rule does not mean that Emmaus primarily focuses on married persons. Single persons are as welcome to participate in Emmaus as married couples. However, the rule does reflect a concern and hope about the effect of Emmaus on marriages and families.

First, the equal participation rule guards against the Emmaus experience becoming a divisive influence in a marriage. As part of our heritage from Cursillo, the rule is based on years of experience with the potential effects—both positive and negative—of these short courses in Christianity on marriages. Emmaus can be the occasion for commitments to new life directions that one's spouse may not understand or appreciate at the time. Disregard for the rule may not result in marital tensions. But the Emmaus movement attempts to strengthen marriages and to avoid practices that may have the potential to affect a marriage adversely.

Second, when the rule is followed, Emmaus can indirectly strengthen the spiritual bond in a marriage and family. So sponsorship of married persons involves approaching both husband and wife together and encouraging them to make an equal commitment to participate. In this way they can grow together as a Christian family while actively supporting the Emmaus movement and the church as families, not only as individuals.

Third, the equal commitment rule results in increased participation of many grateful husbands and wives (usually husbands) who probably would not have attended an Emmaus weekend otherwise but did so in order to make it possible for their spouse to participate. While their initial motivation for going on a Walk may not have been personal, they came to realize in the course of the Walk that the three days was meant for them.

### What the Rule Does Not Mean

The equal commitment rule does *not* mean a wife can never go to Emmaus unless her husband has gone first. It is always best to schedule spouses' participation in the same set of Emmaus events so they can share their experience and support each other. However, circumstances may arise when husbands or wives must take their Walks at different times or places. In these cases, the order of participation is secondary and is a practical matter.

### **The Rule Is Wisdom, Not Law**

It is important that the wisdom of the rule be honored in Emmaus communities. The equal commitment rule represents a practical ideal toward which Emmaus communities strive and toward which sponsors work in all cases. Remember, however, that the equal commitment rule represents wisdom, not law. There is a place for reasonable exceptions. Boards of Directors can make exceptions when there is no possibility of the participation of both spouses and reasonable assurance that the participation of only one spouse will not adversely affect the marriage.

In some cases, spouses have never shared their religious lives and have learned to deal with this fact as a reality of their marriage. Clergy and their spouses have often dealt with a disparity in theological education and participation in spiritual growth events. Furthermore, the importance of clergy involvement in Emmaus will often warrant exceptions. Other exceptional cases may include persons who want to attend Emmaus but the spouse refuses to participate. The Board of Directors for each community must prayerfully decide how to handle these cases in grace and to establish the guidelines for exceptions in view of a person's and family's spiritual welfare. The book *Sponsorship* has additional helpful information.

### **Why Men's Events Precede Women's Events**

Men's Emmaus experiences do *not* precede women's Walks for theological reasons. This scheduling pattern does not reinforce a belief that men are the spiritual heads of the household and that wives should follow their lead. The reasons for this scheduling pattern are historical and practical. Cursillo's original intent was to reclaim men for Christ as committed members of Christ's church; women's weekends were a later development.

The pattern of scheduling sets of three-day short courses with the men's events preceding the women's also encourages more men to participate than might otherwise and to break the machismo inclination to leave the business of religion and church to the women. Early on, Cursillo leaders observed that husbands were less likely to attend a religious weekend than their wives and, in some cases, less likely to participate if their wives had gone first. They also observed that husbands would go on a weekend if their participation enabled their wives to participate. Women, on the other hand, seemed just as likely to participate after their husband's weekend as before. These generalizations do not characterize all husbands and wives today. But in families where these generalizations are true, the likelihood of those husbands participating increases when the men's Walk precedes the women's.

### A Model Sponsor

The following is an interview with Jean Johnson Green, a member of the Nashville Upper Room Emmaus community. She went through Cursillo in 1979 and has been the registrar for the Emmaus community, has served on the Board of Directors, is a past Weekend Lay Director, and has served in The Upper Room Emmaus Office as Assistant Lay Director. Her practice serves as a good model for us all.



Sponsorship is like being a godparent. A godparent doesn't just stand with a person at the front of the church but helps him or her grow in the spiritual life. One time a woman couldn't go to the Walk because she had a one-month-old baby. She said, "There's no way I can go because I have no one to keep the children." And I said, "Oh, yes, you do!"

During the three days, I always try—if family's involved—to let the family members know that I've seen the pilgrim, who is doing well and having a good time. Sharing information about the spouse is especially important to the wives when the husbands are going through, because the wives haven't been through yet and don't know what it's all about. I took one lady out to dinner that Friday night.

After a Walk, I strongly feel that you should call the persons you sponsor. Sometimes people are excited to change the world, but the fire can die down if it's not fed. As a sponsor my job is to see that the fire is fed and grows. It doesn't take that much—a phone call, an invitation to Gathering. Maybe instead of my going to Candlelight, I keep the kids so the couple can go or so they can work in the kitchen on an Emmaus weekend.

I also try to get my pilgrim together with some other new pilgrims to get started in a group reunion. I meet with them several times and show them what it's all about. I have my own group, but I help the new group get started. When I don't see the persons I've sponsored at a Gathering, my responsibility isn't to pester them but to maintain contact, offering to go with them the next time and maybe having dinner with them afterward.