News



An intergenerational crowd prays together during a liturgy at the most recent Call to Action national conference held in San Antonio in November 2018. (Deborah Winarski)



by Heidi Schlumpf

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @heidischlumpf

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Chicago — May 6, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Editor's note: *Today, NCR begins a three-part series on Call to Action, which has fought for reform in the church since the late 1970s and provided an important community for "Vatican II" Catholics during a rise of conservatism in the church hierarchy throughout the '80s and '90s.*

Our first story takes a look at the challenges facing Call to Action, including an aging and declining membership and financial shortfalls. But a group of new, younger leaders are connecting with CTA through an innovative new program called Re/Generation, as our second story describes. These millennial Catholics may change the organization as they take over, however, and what such generational differences mean for the future of church reform is explored in our last story in the series.

About a mile west of Wrigley Field, in Chicago's trendy Roscoe Village neighborhood, sits a three-story, yellow-brick building, where those who can't afford the nearby million-dollar, single-family homes can get a three-bedroom condo for half that. The building's first-floor commercial occupants are a spiritual giftshop and bookstore run by volunteers and open only on the weekends, and Call to Action, the 40-year-old Catholic church reform organization.

Call to Action purchased the spacious, newly renovated office space — as an investment, some said — just before the recession of 2008. Before that, CTA rented decidedly less swanky digs in the basement of a parish in a predominantly Latino neighborhood.

Now, facing twin challenges of an aging membership and dwindling financial resources and after several changes in leadership, CTA is putting its Roscoe Village office up for sale and has laid off two long-time staff members, "due to declining revenues and increased operating costs," CTA's Vision Council announced in a recent email letter.

"These decisions were made in consideration of our anti-racism and anti-oppression principles, with a desire to be the most responsible stewards of our limited resources, in collaboration with those most directly impacted, and after much

prayer, conversation and discernment," the Feb. 20 email said.

Current CTA Executive Director Zachary Johnson, who works from Minnesota where smaller office space has been arranged, told NCR that the Roscoe Village building was too big and "assumed the size of an organization that we're clearly not."

Instead, Johnson wants to use Call to Action's resources to invest in younger leaders for the organization, through an innovative new program called Re/Generation. But those younger leaders may recreate the longtime Vatican II group into something quite different from the organization they have inherited.

Johnson, 30, is hoping his strategy will take Call to Action into the next 40 or 50 years.

"We're building for a longer-term future," he said. "I take church reform seriously, and if we're going to be serious, we've got to think in longer, bigger terms."

Advertisement

Two years ago, when Johnson was hired as executive director of Call to Action, he had never attended a national or regional conference, nor had he been a member. Given the organization's emphasis on anti-racism work, some expected a person of color to be named to the top spot. (Johnson is white.)

What Johnson brought — besides youthful enthusiasm and a decade of experience in service organizations and nonprofits — was fresh eyes. He knew the Catholic landscape, since he grew up Catholic, graduated from a Catholic university and had lived in a Catholic Worker community since he was 19.

A new perspective seemed especially valuable, as CTA had been bouncing through a rough transition since the departure of former executive director Jim Fitzgerald, who had been the first to take over in 2008 after the 32-year tenure of founding leaders Dan and Sheila Daley ended with their retirement.

In 2015 and 2016, after Fitzgerald left, the organization lost nearly a half a million dollars, according to tax records — this after years of a pattern of a widening gap between expenses and income. The 2017 financial picture looks rosier, in part because it was an "off" year for the national conference, said Johnson, who noted

that 2018 will not be as positive financially.

Last November's national conference drew only 300 people, down from about 1,000 in 2015 and 2,500 in 2008 (both earlier conferences were held in Milwaukee, which had become a regular location). In 2016, the organization decided to move the national conference around the country to better serve geographic diversity in the group, and to alternate the national conference with regional ones.



Zach Johnson, Call to Action's executive director (Deborah Winarski)

The year before, in 2015, CTA changed its governance structure from a traditional board of directors to a "Vision Council," which uses less hierarchal consensus decision-making. To make way for this new form of leadership, the entire board willingly resigned, though a few former board members were named to the new council.

In the past decade, Call to Action has lost about 5,000 members, and those who remain are older — despite some increases in membership after the Boston-based sex abuse crisis story in the early 2000s prompted a renewed interest in church reform. Still, with some 20,000 members, CTA still claims to be "largest church reform organization in the U.S. working for equality and justice in the Catholic

Church," according to its website.

The group's origins stretch back to a 1976 U.S. bishops' conference meeting in Detroit (part of the country's bicentennial celebration), in which 1,340 delegates from 150 dioceses adopted a number of controversial resolutions on everything from women's ordination to divorced Catholics. The New York Times called it "the most farreaching experiment in democratic process that the Catholic church in this country has ever experienced."

But many bishops thought the experiment went too far. In Chicago, in part in response to feet-dragging on the part of the church leaders there, a group of lay people formed an organization, Call to Action, with a dual focus on justice in the church and broader social justice. (Tension between those two goals has existed since the beginning, long-term members said, although it has resurfaced around the group's emphasis on anti-racism work lately.)

The movement went national after its 1990 Call for Reform in the Catholic Church, a statement that ran as a full-page ad in the New York Times on Ash Wednesday, with 4,500 signers. Observing decline and perhaps predicting more in the future, the statement said the institutional church "is crippled by its failure to address fundamental justice issues within its own institutional structures"' and had become "a stumbling block both to its own members and to society."

The statement called for greater decision-making for women, more consultation with the laity (on issues of sexuality and even in selection of bishops), academic freedom, due process, financial transparency and collaborative leadership. But, under the pontificate of John Paul II, the church grew even more authoritarian, not less, and CTA was often set as the opposition — a strategy some believe is less necessary today under Pope Francis or less effective for younger Catholics who put little stock in what church leaders say.

Earlier members of CTA were very involved in their parishes, dioceses and other church organizations. Some were former priests or nuns who had been laicized after Vatican II. Even as late as 2011, organizers estimated that about 30 percent of the members who attended the national conference were nuns and priests.



Longtime CTA member Rosa Manriquez anoints the hands of a conference participant during a CTA liturgy in November 2018. (Deborah Winarski)

Today Call to Action is not alone in facing a shrinking donor base, aging membership and difficulty attracting younger progressives who are not as institutionally connected as their parents or grandparents. The term "nones" has become so well-known that it no longer needs to be defined or differentiated from its Catholic homonym.

The challenges are felt even more acutely in the 50 or so Call to Action chapters around the country. The Western Washington chapter, which includes Seattle, its suburbs and Olympia, has about 250 names in its membership list, but only about 50-70 active members, said Betty Hill, who has been chapter president for more than a decade.

"Yesterday I got another letter about someone who is deceased, asking for them to be taken off our database," she said.

When asked if their membership includes any younger Catholics, Hill answered "virtually none" and noted that the chapter's 14-member board includes three people over 90.

"In another 10 years, we will be aged out," she said. "I can really see it. It's not that long into the future."

Hill got involved in Call to Action in 2002, not because of the sex abuse crisis, but because a well-loved pastor in her parish was replaced with a more authoritarian one. Another local parish facing a similar problem had invited a speaker from Call to Action, so Hill went. The next year she attended the national conference and has been active in her local group ever since.

"CTA really supported us in the past," she said. "I would go to the national conference and never want to miss one." The annual gatherings were "a wonderful opportunity to see a bigger picture" — and to find speakers for her local, thrice-yearly gatherings.

But older members are getting tired, said Hill, who eventually left her parish with the authoritarian pastor and got involved in an intentional Eucharistic community.

The national Call to Action conference — which had been so valuable for Hill — may not work for younger progressive Catholics. Travel, hotel and registration topping at $1,000 a person for a three-day weekend is not affordable for them, said Johnson, who would like to experiment with smaller, more focused gatherings as a way of offering more programs, activities and community to members and donors.

He also questions whether a nonprofit organization with a large headquarters and an expensive national conference is necessary. What the organization does need, he believes, is younger leaders.

In his opening address at last November's conference in San Antonio, Johnson closed by describing Call to Action, with the words of Swiss theologian Hans Kung, as the "loyal left opposition" in the church.

Younger Catholics may have different ideas about what it means to be "loyal," "left" or in "opposition." But Claire Hitchins, CTA's JustChurch program organizer, believes that while much is dying among church institutions, new growth is happening too.

"I think we may be headed back toward the roots of CTA as a movement," she said.

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf. She was a keynote speaker at the 2018 national Call to Action conference.]

A version of this story appeared in the **May 17-30, 2019** print issue under the headline: Call to Action confronts an uncertain future.