

## Voice of the Faithful: hoping to begin anew

Beth Griffin | Nov. 10, 2009



Women recite the Lord's Prayer during Mass at the Voice of the Faithful national conference in Melville, N.Y., Oct. 31. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

MELVILLE, N.Y. -- Four months after financial woes threatened to shut its doors, Voice of the Faithful has emerged with cash in the bank and a new strategic plan that its leaders say will sharpen the organization's message and shift its efforts from mostly words to mostly actions.

The stated mission of this church reform and advocacy group, formed in 2002 in the wake of clerical sex abuse revelations in Boston, is to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the church.

The organization has struggled to clearly define its issues and approaches. Some early members became frustrated by glacial progress and dearth of action. Some developed ennui and stopped attending meetings. Others, slowed by age and health issues, focused their energies elsewhere.

Many of the more than 500 members who attended Voice of the Faithful's national conference Oct. 30 and 31 at the Huntington Hilton on Long Island laughed heartily when a 64-year-old participant asked for a show of hands of people younger than him in the Grand Ballroom. Gray heads swiveled, but most hands stayed on the tables.

The summer financial crisis hit during a period of organizational soul-searching in which new leadership commissioned an extensive study of the members and an analysis of Voice of the Faithful's strengths and weaknesses. The insights gleaned were hammered into a strategic plan that was rolled out beginning in May.

In July, the organization announced that it needed an emergency infusion of \$60,000 to remain operational. Treasurer Kevin Connors told *NCR* that the group's funds were down to less than a two-month reserve at that time. He attributed the shortfall to the general economic recession and waning public support after the sex abuse scandal faded from view. Annual revenues fell from an average of \$700,000 as recently as 2008 to \$450,000 in the fiscal year ending in May 2009.

Connors said the appeal generated \$120,000, which was enough to get Voice of the Faithful back on its feet and

also give it an emotional boost. He said the immediate and generous response of the members "showed us that people out there were ready to support us."

The new strategy, called Voices in Action, focuses on clarifying the organization's "brand" and encouraging specific action by the members. It embraces a bottom-up approach to church reformation, acknowledging that the hoped-for dialogue with local bishops has rarely happened. In some places, including Rockville Centre, N.Y., the diocese where the conference occurred, the bishop has forbidden the group to meet on church property and Voice of the Faithful's relationship with local church leadership has become adversarial.

The group's president, Daniel Bartley, said, "Voice of the Faithful has moved beyond dependence or reliance or expectation with regard to the bishops. It could be wonderful, and we're prayerful and hopeful that someday engagement will happen, but we accept the fact that it may not and as faithful Christians, followers of Christ, we're going to do what we need to do anyway."

He said, "It's pointless to be angry. We're embracing our own baptism. We're changing the focus from trying to influence the bishops to directly influencing grass-roots Catholics."

Nonetheless, Bartley said it would be nice if "the bishops would realize we're good, faithful Catholics and we're trying to help."

The fuzziness of Voice of the Faithful's message is due, in part, to its multiple goals. Vice president Janet Hauter said, "Because we have a mission statement and three goals, people found it difficult to define our issues in elevator speak." The goals are to support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, to support "priests of integrity" and to shape structural change within the church.

Hauter and other leaders said the goals have not changed, but there has been a shift in attitude and methods. "We were critical in the past and pointed out what's broken. But now we have the tools and we're not howling at the moon," Hauter said. "We're connecting incremental changes in parishes with a national effort so we can see change in our lifetime. There's an immediacy now. We're not just doing it for our children and grandchildren."

Member Francis Piderit said, "We've reached a critical point. We talked about change for seven years. Enough with the talk. Let's begin to model the church we want to see." He said the modeling includes dialogue among the Catholic laity on child safety, parish structure, financial accountability and best practices. Piderit leads the "local action platform" of the new strategic action plan. Each of the plan's five "platforms" has measurable targets.

Hauter quipped that the actual measure of the plan's success will be the dissolution of the organization, because the reform of the church will have been accomplished through the action of the laity.

The features of Voices in Action were described in detail at the conference and warmly received by the participants. Carol Bongiorno, leader of a Voice of the Faithful affiliate on Long Island since 2002, welcomed the initiative to energize her 150-member chapter. "Voices in Action is clearer and more specific. There's always the question of how to reach people who don't really want to hear about sexual abuse in the church. Our membership was growing until about a year ago, but people didn't think we were getting anywhere with church leadership."

Bongiorno said meetings dwindled to once every two months and there are fewer members whose age and physical condition allows them to attend meetings, which are held in a Protestant church. "We still send the minutes to our members, 18 pastors and the bishop," she said.

The strategic plan streamlines the organizational structure by eliminating one level, maintains the two-person, full-time staff, and calls for extensive involvement of volunteers and use of electronic communication among members. Voice of the Faithful has 25,000-30,000 members, according to public relations director Jessica Lillie.

Bartley said the commissioned survey confirmed that members are bright, well-educated Catholics with a desire for action. He predicted that defining the organization and putting a clear structure in place will increase membership and contributions. "If we execute well, people will financially support us," he said.

The two-day conference featured spirited addresses by Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister and Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese and a report by Margaret Smith, leader of an ongoing research study at John Jay College on the causes and context of sexual abuse. "Priest of Integrity" awards were presented to Fr. Joseph M. Fowler of Louisville, Ky., and Fr. Donald B. Cozzens of Cleveland. Reporter and author Jason Berry accepted the St. Catherine of Siena award given by Voice of the Faithful to a distinguished layperson.

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