

Catholic Group Calls For Change

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WEST HARTFORD -- "We're not looking to bring down the church and build a new one. We're looking to fix this one," Mary Pat Fox, national president of Voice of the Faithful, told about 80 of group's members Saturday.

Fox spoke at the lay Catholic organization's first statewide conference, which was called to discuss the issues that prompted the group's formation - the sexual abuse and financial scandals that have rocked the Roman Catholic Church.

Those controversies, Fox said, "reminded us that it is our church, it is our responsibility and we need to take that on."

Members of the organization from chapters in Rhode Island and the Bridgeport, Norwich, and the Hartford archdioceses attended the conference, which was held in the gymnasium of St. Timothy Middle School.

A "National Campaign for Accountability in the Catholic Church" has been the group's focus for this past year. In recent years, Connecticut's three dioceses have paid settlements to sex abuse victims and, in May, the Rev. Michael Jude Fay of St. John's Church in Darien was forced to resign because of financial scandal.

One of the national group's goals is to standardize the way the church releases information to parishioners about how their money is being spent. Fox said the process of reaching financial accountability in the church will take time and collaboration.

"We should be concerned about what we are funding," she said. "It is more than imperative that our church deal with this honestly and with truth."

Fox moved around a lot as a child and as an adult, she said, but the church was always constant in her life. Fox said the organization is needed to "build a healthy and sustainable church that does provide us with the nourishment we so desire."

Voice of the Faithful, based in Newton, Mass., was formed in 2002 and now has about 35,000 members nationwide, Fox said. Each region's membership has grown in the past six months, and the organization's funds are growing, she said.

Saturday marked the first time members from the Norwich and Bridgeport dioceses were able to meet on church property. Many bishops across the country have barred Voice meetings on diocesan property, Fox said, including Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport and Bishop Michael R. Cote of Norwich.

"There needs to be a bit of a power shift and they choose to ignore us and they can't," Fox said later in the afternoon. Voice is a centrist organization, not a radical one, she said.

Throughout the afternoon conference, Voice representatives peppered their speeches with talk of being ignored by powerful members of the Catholic church.

"Part of being an outcast is being more faithful," said John Lee of the Bridgeport diocese. "We don't have horns, we don't have a tail, we're not the devil, yet we're still being demonized."

Jay Carbonneau, a representative of the Norwich diocese, said, "Our mere presence ... has an effect on the princes of the church. They are watching us warily and we are watching them."
