

Catholic Group Meeting Today

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For many Roman Catholic dioceses across the country, financial crisis has followed closely the sexual abuse scandal. Voice of the Faithful - a lay Catholic organization founded in the wake of the crisis - will tackle ways to bring about greater financial transparency to the church in its first statewide conference this weekend.

Jayne O'Donnell, the Hartford Archdiocese coordinator, said greater lay involvement in church governance might have led to earlier detection that something was going wrong.

"There were settlements being made and priests being transferred," she said. "Had there been more openness and more lay people involved, that would have been a red flag that something was wrong."

A "National Campaign for Accountability in the Catholic Church" has been the group's focus for this past year, O'Donnell said. Today's conference, from 12:30 p.m. to 4 p.m. at St. Timothy's Church in West Hartford, will bring chapters from Rhode Island, Bridgeport, Norwich and the Hartford archdiocese. Mary Pat Fox, president of VOTF, will be the keynote speaker.

The organization, whose slogan is "keep the faith, change the church," grew out of a 2002 meeting at St. John the Evangelist church in Newton, Mass., where the Boston archdiocese was the epicenter of the abuse crisis. A centrist organization that has 200 chapters in 40 states with about 25,000 members nationwide, VOTF has clashed with local bishops in its quest to bring greater transparency to the processes of the Roman Catholic Church.

Today's gathering will also represent the first time members from the Norwich and Bridgeport dioceses will be able to meet on church property. Bishop William Lori of Bridgeport and Bishop Michael R. Cote of Norwich have both forbidden VOTF chapters from meeting on diocesan property.

But at the Hartford archdiocese, Archbishop Daniel A. Cronin allowed the group to meet at churches, and O'Donnell said that VOTF members have met informally with Cronin's successor, Archbishop Henry J. Mansell, several times.

"I think we are fortunate that Archbishop Mansell has not taken that approach, and we have had a series of dialogues with him that have been very helpful," O'Donnell said.

In Connecticut, financial scandal led to the resignation of the Rev. Michael Jude Fay of St. John's Church in Darien in May. A private investigator hired by the church found that Fay allegedly misappropriated as much as \$200,000 in church funds, according to press reports. In recent years, the state's three dioceses have paid settlements to sex abuse victims.

Churches vary widely in the amount of detail they give parishioners about church finances and one of the group's goals is to standardize the information Catholics receive about how their money is being spent, said Rick Lenz, a VOTF member who is the financial officer of St. Mary's Church in Simsbury.

"It shouldn't matter what church you go to; you should be able to get the same kind of information," he said. Receiving money from parishioners is a trust, Lenz said, and the parishioners are owed an accounting of how their money is spent. "My personal view is that, with what is going on in corporate America, the church should be leading the way, showing what full disclosure is all about."