

Catholic reformers pondering next steps

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In 2003, Jim Post, a co-founder of Voice of the Faithful, a Catholic reform group, asked a scholar whether the group might merit a footnote in the 2,000-year history of the church. "Maybe even a paragraph," Post recalls the scholar telling him with a smile.

Five years after Voice of the Faithful took root in the basement of a church near Boston, the group's place in Catholic history remains unclear.

Voice leaders say they have 120 affiliates and 35,000 members. The lay-led, grassroots group says it has achieved significant feats - tougher sex-abuse laws, increased transparency in some dioceses, and more lay involvement in parish governance.

But Voice also promised to promote "structural change" in the Catholic church - an institution that takes pride in standing firm on shifting cultural sands. Some Voice members, frustrated with the pace of reform, want to confront the Catholic hierarchy with broader demands and sharper criticism. Others counsel patience and cooperation, said the current Voice president, Mary Pat Fox.

Meanwhile, polls suggest that lay Catholics' anger at church leaders over sex-abuse scandals and coverups may be subsiding. After a deep dip in 2002, the laity's satisfaction with bishops' leadership has rebounded to pre-scandal levels, according to a poll released last year by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

As Voice passes the five-year milestone - an accomplishment rare among social movements - it faces crucial questions about the church reform it lobbies for, as well as the younger Catholics and momentum the group will need after the headlines and anger are gone.

"I think you have to move from anger to love," Fox said. "Anger can get people riled up, but it's not sustainable. People get tired of being angry."

Voice's founders set three goals: to support survivors of sexual abuse; to support "priests of integrity;" and to push for "structural change in the church."

The group says it has made progress toward the first two goals, joining successful efforts in six states to reform statutes of limitation on child-sexual-abuse laws and prodding legal officials to censure a California bishop last year who had delayed reporting an abusive priest to law enforcement.

Achieving "structural change" in the church has proved more difficult. Voice leaders said that the sex-abuse scandal resulted from a lack of lay involvement in decision-making. Problems could have been detected and stopped far earlier, they say, if power had not been concentrated in the hands of clerics.

But "the Catholic Church in the United States, as elsewhere, is not easily reformed "from below," said R. Scott Appleby, a professor of history at the University of Notre Dame. Lay Catholics, he added, are congregational and remain rooted in their local parishes. While noting that Voice "remains one of the two or three lay reform movements still alive, barely," Appleby said that Voice "has been tenacious but not sufficiently national in scope and scale."

Fox and Post said that Voice has built up a national infrastructure, with a 26-member council representing 14 U.S. regions and affiliates in every state. Members are linked through a monthly electronic newsletter, In the Vineyard, as well as by nationally coordinated working groups and projects.

Donations, however, have been up and down. After peaking in 2002 at about \$825,000, they fell to about \$550,00 in 2005 before creeping up to \$760,000 last year, according to Fox. The national staff, working in Newton, Mass., cut three part-timers and one full-timer in early 2006, Fox said.

And though membership in Voice has increased, it is a constant challenge to keep all members working toward the same goals. The group's leaders are determined centrists and refused to stake positions on such controversial issues as women's ordination and mandatory clerical celibacy, said Fox and Post. But Fox said she often gets calls from members about advocating for a hot-button issue.

"We're a group that has some people who think the only thing we should do is help survivors. Others think we should be an umbrella group for every reform anyone ever wanted to make in the church. The truth is, we're somewhere in the middle," Fox said.

Voice's call for changes in the church has spooked some bishops and conservative critics. About 20 percent of the 186 U.S. dioceses ban Voice affiliates from meeting on church property, Fox said.

James Goodness, a spokesman for the archdiocese of Newark, N.J., said that the group is banned from church property there because "the goals of the organization are in complete contradiction with the Catholic Church."

"At the national level and even at the local level, it seems like the kind of changes they're seeking - like marriage for the priesthood and the end of celibacy - are not in agreement with the teachings of the church," Goodness said. He acknowledged that the organization itself may not take such positions, but said many people serving in Voice positions of responsibility do.

The Voice affiliate in Brooklyn, N.Y., however, was able to persuade the Diocese of Brooklyn to overturn its ban. Ed Wilson, 70, a retired lawyer who heads the affiliate, said that it now works with diocesan officials on parish administration, finances and Catholic schools. The Brooklyn diocese even called Voice for help on setting up parish councils, a key piece in Voice's accountability project, at every church in the diocese, according to Wilson.

"We don't get everything we want," Wilson said, "but we have a seat at the table now."

Like many Voice members, Wilson is a longtime, active Catholic. More than 85 percent of Voice members are college educated and registered in a parish, according to a 2004 survey by William D'Antonio and the Rev. Anthony Pogorelc of the Life Cycle Institute of the Catholic University of America.

They also tend to be products of Catholic schools and active in their parishes. "These are people doing what the church would dream of until they rose in anger," D'Antonio said in an interview.

Voice members, however, also tend to be older than the average Catholic, with 89 percent over age 44. That's a trend Fox and Post said they're trying to turn around. But it can be hard to persuade young Catholics with families to find time, Post said. "My fear is that every generation has to have its own crisis in the Catholic Church to learn hard lessons. I hope we don't have to have another one for this younger generation to learn about how to be committed and engaged Catholics."