

Lay group marks five years of battling Boston Archdiocese

By Ken Maguire, Associated Press Writer, The Boston Globe, January 6, 2007

WELLESLEY, Mass. --Leo Troy recalls five years ago when the pastor of his church invited parishioners to the front pews to discuss published revelations that the Boston Archdiocese had covered up decades-long abuses by pedophile priests.

The Roman Catholic church, he said, didn't usually air its problems publicly. So along with feelings of anger because of the scope of the abuse against children, Troy also felt empowered.

"It really moved a lot of people to talk about it more," Troy said. "It's a worldwide problem. That's why this organization came together."

That group, Voice of the Faithful, is marking its fifth year anniversary this weekend. What started as a handful of outraged parishioners at St. John the Evangelist Church in Wellesley has grown to an international organization, claiming tens of thousands of members in the United States and elsewhere.

It was initially seen as a rebel group, calling for the resignation of Cardinal Bernard Law, who initially refused to meet with the group, then refused to accept a donation from it. But Voice of the Faithful has since evolved into a more buttoned-down organization.

Voice leaders are preparing for their second meeting with Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who succeeded Law after he resigned under pressure in 2002, and who has been praised for his efforts to help sex abuse victims. O'Malley helped negotiate an \$85 million settlement for more than 550 victims shortly after arriving in Boston in 2003.

"What we're trying to do is set up a system for collaboration on issues of mutual concern," said Dorothy Kennedy, president of the Boston Voice of the Faithful council. "We're both concerned about the protection of children. We're both concerned about justice for survivors. We're both concerned with rebuilding the church."

But critics say Voice has become too cozy with the church that it claims it is trying to reform. Skip Shea of Uxbridge, who says he was abused by a former priest of the Worcester Diocese, said church leaders will exploit the meetings with Voice members here and around the nation for public relations.

"Each diocese can use lip service to say they're moving forward with this. I don't see the point in sitting with them," said Shea, 46.

Shea and a handful of other people held signs in remembrance of abuse victims Saturday outside St. John's, where Voice of the Faithful held a "Mass of Remembrance and Rededication." He and others said Voice should devote more time to helping victims, some of whom can't go in a church because it triggers too many painful memories of abuse.

Voice's stated goals are to support abuse victims, support priests of integrity and shape structural change in the church, such as more community control of parishes. The last goal has been controversial with some in the church. O'Malley, for example, has refused to lift Cardinal Law's ban of the use of most churches for Voice meetings.

Kennedy defends Voice's tactics, arguing that direct negotiations with O'Malley are the best hope for changes. Voice and sex abuse survivor groups recently have pushed O'Malley to develop a public list of archdiocese priests and employees dismissed for sexual misconduct and to publicly support the elimination of the statute of limitations for sex crime laws.

"The last meeting was productive in that we began a conversation," she said. "If that turns into structures so that we can have ongoing dialogue and work together ... that would be terrific."

Kennedy, a retired history teacher, acknowledges the momentum from the early years has slowed as some Voice members branch out to separately fight the archdiocese its widespread church closings. But, she said, there is a "strong, steady core."

It was five years ago that The Boston Globe began a series of stories that exposed the scope of the sex abuse crisis. The nation's fourth-largest Roman Catholic archdiocese was shaken when court documents released in lawsuits showed church leaders protected pedophile priests by transferring them from parish to parish, rather than removing them and alerting police.

The Rev. John Connolly, special assistant to O'Malley, said the revelations had a "traumatic and devastating effect" on the archdiocese, which experienced declines in financial donations and attendance at Mass.

Barbara Thorp, director of the archdiocese's office of Pastoral Support and Outreach, said her office coordinates mental health counseling for about 300 victims. Last month, the office began a monthly Mass at a Boston chapel for survivors.

"The breach of trust was so profound that the task of rebuilding that trust is daunting," she said. "It can't be bought. It's going to take some time."

Other groups are holding events this weekend, both on their own and in coordination with Voice of the Faithful, in 50 cities around the nation. The Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, is organizing candle vigils outside churches on Sunday.