

June 1, 2007 - Money Crunch Hits Catholic Group

By JAY LINDSAY, AP, The Hartford Courant

BOSTON -- The lay group created to give anguished Roman Catholics a voice as the clergy sex abuse crisis unfolded five years ago is now in a crisis of its own, dealing with a budget deficit and infighting among its leaders.

Voice of the Faithful is projecting a \$100,000 deficit in the next fiscal year following a drop in the number of major donors, according to an account of a group leaders' meeting which is posted on Voice's Web site.

Board chairman William Casey said that the group has had trouble adjusting to a long-term strategy as the short-term anger over the scandal has subsided.

"When an emergency and a crisis occurs, people just want to help, they want to do something," Casey said. "But two years out, four years, five, 10 years out, how do you keep that going? ... Trying to struggle to figure that out is a real challenge."

The group is also facing what Casey called a "crisis in leadership" due to infighting, difficulty respecting each other's positions and trouble reaching consensus on decisions, according to the notes of his remarks at a leadership conference in April.

In an interview, Casey acknowledged the problems, but said his remarks should not be interpreted as "the building's on fire," but as part of a normal reassessment of Voice and its goals.

The Newton-based group was founded in 2002 amid outrage over the scandal, which began in Boston after documents showed church leaders for decades shuttled molester priests among parishes and concealed their crimes.

Despite resistance from church officials -- some refused to let Voice meet on church property -- the group established 120 chapters nationwide. It counts 35,000 members in the U.S. and worldwide, though anyone can join by simply filling out a short form on the group's Web site.

The anger that inspired new members and motivated contributors has since diminished, along with the frequency of news stories about the church's problems. Meanwhile, there are signs that Catholics are increasingly supportive of church officials. A recent poll by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate indicated about 60 percent of Catholics are "somewhat" or "very" satisfied with the leadership of the U.S. church.

Boston College theology professor Thomas Groome said that leaves Voice struggling to convince Catholics it is still relevant, though he believes it is. Another obstacle, he says, is the Catholic tendency to submit to the church hierarchy.

"There's a deep, ingrained instinct in Catholics that father still knows best, and father will do best," Groome said. "Some of that was disabused in the abuse crisis, but still, there's a lot of that still around. ... It could diminish (Voice's) support."

Despite its problems, Voice of the Faithful has drawn up an ambitious agenda -- outlined in its new "Campaign of Accountability" -- to bring broad child protection and financial reforms to the U.S. church.

Among its goals: Full and regular disclosure of financial records at dioceses nationwide, similar to reforms initiated in Boston, and the suspension or retroactive elimination of statute of limitations laws that prevent clergy sex abuse survivors from filing suits.

But the group has just two full-time employees, including an executive director position that's been vacant since February (an interim director is filling in), and some part-time employees for administrative tasks.

The rest of the organization is volunteer, including an 11-member board of trustees, a 26-member regional council and a four-person executive team.

Staffing's been part of its problem, said Mary Pat Fox, the group's president. As the furor over the scandal waned, the group's small work force had no one to cultivate the group's major donors, some of whom have fallen away.

Voice recently committed \$50,000 to hire a part-time development officer, and also will increasingly target its rank and file members in fundraising. In the meantime, it has roughly \$160,000 in reserves to cover the projected deficit.

Fox and Casey also said the passion of grass roots volunteers has been occasionally misdirected, sometimes at causes the group was not created to take up -- such as ordination of women -- or in focusing too much on how the group should be run and achieve its goals.

"You can spend all your time looking for perfection, and making less progress," Casey said.

A new "Statement of Identity" reaffirms the group's mission to support abuse survivors, faithful priests and reforms that will increase lay involvement and leadership accountability.

The group is poised to rebound, Fox said, but it needs to see some success in its initiatives, and it also needs to continually show Catholics why Voice of the Faithful is important.

"If the only voice that you heard on the Catholic church was from the hierarchy, that would be a problem," she said.