

Story of 'Voice of the Faithful' told by its founder

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A little over two years ago, Voice of the Faithful, a Catholic organization that came together in response to the revelations of sexual abuse in the church and the ensuing cover-up by the hierarchy, began meeting in the basement of St. John the Evangelist Church in Wellesley.

What began as a group of about 40 wounded Catholics who still loved their church and couldn't begin to think about leaving it, despite feeling disenfranchised, has turned into a world movement, according to Voice of the Faithful's founding president, James E. Muller, M.D.

Muller, a cardiologist, along with Charles Kenney, author, former reporter for the Boston Globe and a communications consultant, have written a book together called "Keep the Faith, Change the Church," to tell the story of Voice of the Faithful. The book is being sold throughout the country in book stores and on Amazon.com, according to Muller.

"I believe it's a very important message about how to improve the Catholic Church, and I wish more people would read it," said Muller.

The authors began their collaboration when a mutual friend, Peter Osnos, told Kenney that Muller was going to write a book about VOTF and suggested they write it together.

Muller said, "It was a great pleasure to write with a professional." He drafted four chapters of the book, and Kenney drafted eight of them. They critiqued each other's chapters.

Kenney found Muller's story fascinating. "It's further confirmation of how far off track the church is," he said.

He said VOTF went to the hierarchy, saying, "We want to help you," and the church told them it didn't want the help. Kenney said that this revealed as much about the church and its power as the sexual abuse matter.

Except for what he had read in the Boston Globe, Kenney said he knew nothing about VOTF before he started to collaborate with Muller on the book. Having interviewed many of its members for "Keep the Faith, Change the Church," he was impressed with the experience and qualifications VOTF's members had to offer, to help the church get through this dark period.

"There is amazing talent in the town [Wellesley]," Muller said.

Muller, who moved to Wellesley in 1973 and lived here until 1996, until he moved to Kentucky, now lives in Newton. He's a longtime parishioner of St. John's. He is also a founder of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, an organization that was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985.

He said that there are 200 chapters of VOTF all over the country, as well as in New Zealand and Australia, and that word of the organization spread over the Internet.

The laity is divided, he said. "There are some that want a very authoritative church, there are some who want a democracy for the laity."

According to "Keep the Faith, Change the Church," VOTF has three goals: to support the survivors of abuse; to support the priests of integrity; and to improve the church.

Improving the church is the most controversial of VOTF's goals, but it's greatly needed, said Muller. He explains that "the structure of the church has led to the abuse scandal."

"How can a church who does so many good things also contain such evil?" he asks. "How can that happen? How can that church be made more relevant to young people?"

Kenney said that "the empowerment of the laity is the most important component of strengthening the church going forward." He thinks that people he's talked to who have read the book are greatly surprised by the enormous gulf that exists between the laity and the hierarchy.

In describing "Keep the Faith, Change the Church," Kenney said, "It's the story of a group of people who come together because they love the church; because they are horrified by the scandal and they want to help get the church pointed in a more positive direction."

Published just this year, the book is selling OK, Muller said, but he doesn't think enough people have had a chance to see it. He said there has been only one book review, so far - in Indianapolis, where he grew up. He said "it [the book] has been greeted with silence around the country."

Muller has been heartened lately, he said, because two months ago, two people, one in Boston and one in New York (who are not relatives), read the book and thought it was so important that they committed to buy 1,000 books each to be mailed to 2,000 church leaders.

He said that the paradox is the fact that more than 7 million people have read the "The Da Vinci Code." "But it's fiction," he said. "Ours is the real thing. It's nonfiction and it's controversial."