

Catholics find a voice: A call for democratic reform

by [Richard Higgins](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

Six months ago Voice of the Faithful didn't exist. Now it is one of the most turbo-charged Christian movements in the country. About 14,000 Catholics from 40 states and 21 countries have registered their support for this centrist, lay-led effort to democratize the Catholic Church. About 240 Catholic parishes—150 of them in Massachusetts—have begun or are starting a Voice of the Faithful chapter, organizers say.

Many of the new groups were started by visitors to the jam-packed and often emotional sessions that until this month were held in a church basement in the Boston suburb of Wellesley. The meetings have been part therapy session, part revival meeting and part revolutionary planning cell.

“What is said is often spontaneous and very moving,” said Donna Salacuse of Concord, Massachusetts, who helped start a chapter in her town and is working on a national convention in July. Salacuse, who describes herself as a moderate, said she joined because the reports of sexual abuse, followed by the slow and defensive response of the church's hierarchy, left her “shattered.”

Through the group, she said, “I have found my voice. Laypeople like myself have been too willing to be passive, but as I listened to others, I've become more willing to speak myself. It's as though we've come to understand that those of us who were not physically abused were also abused in a sense.”

Victims of abuse by priests are welcome at the group's meetings. For Salacuse, their presence adds an element of spiritual transformation. “It isn't just the words, but being with those who have been abused, listening to their stories,” she said. There have also been liturgies. “We had a mass of healing in late April, and I felt I experienced healing. I could move on after that service.”

The weekly meetings sponsored by the so-called Wellesley “mother group” have split into three meetings and have moved to various Newton parishes, partly because of planned renovations at the original site, St. John the Evangelist in Wellesley. Organizers admit that they also want to ease church pressure on the pastor at St. John the Evangelist, Thomas Powers.

Last month, Powers was called in by an archdiocesan auxiliary bishop, acting for Cardinal Bernard Law, who explained that Law does not want priests to “join, foster or promote” groups like Voice of the Faithful.

But Voice of the Faithful continues to gain steam—enough to lease a convention center in Boston for a national meeting next month that it expects to draw 5,000 Catholics and representatives from Protestant traditions. The group’s senior leaders have even announced the ambitious goal of getting half of the nation’s 57 million Catholics to become involved.

“This is a defining crisis, perhaps the greatest crisis in the history of the Catholic Church in modern times,” said Richard McBrien, a Catholic theologian and professor at Notre Dame University. “It’s related to a whole lot of other issues, such as the way bishops get appointed and exercise their power, the absence of meaningful participation of the laity. I don’t think it is overdrawn or disrespectful to say that, for the church as an institution, this is analogous to September 11.”

Voice of the Faithful seeks to develop a church “constitution” that will give more governing rights to the laity. “The power structure of the Catholic Church is deeply flawed,” said James Muller of Wellesley, a 59-year-old cardiologist who helped start the group following a “personal crisis of faith” after the sexual-abuse scandal broke.

The alternative to pushing for reform, he said, was to leave the church. “I felt almost ashamed to be a Catholic,” he said. But he stayed, a decision reflected in the group’s motto: “Keep the faith, change the church.”

There have been official efforts to increase the role of the laity in Roman Catholicism since the Second Vatican Council, such as the formation of lay boards or pastoral councils in each parish, but these have been widely regarded as ineffective groups relegated to housekeeping issues. More radical reform movements have arisen, most notably A Call to Action, but conservatives have succeeded in keeping them on the margins of the church.

Voice of the Faithful says it is different. It says it will succeed for two reasons: it has the discipline to avoid hot-button issues that have derailed other groups, and it welcomes conservative as well as liberal Catholics.

And it says it is the first mass lay movement to arise entirely out of the broad middle of the Catholic laity without being sponsored or selected by church officials.

“We’re heartbroken and angry, but we’re also very mainstream,” said Luise Dittrich of Wellesley, one of two dozen people who formed the group’s nucleus after church one Sunday. “We’re little old ladies in tennis shoes and nuns and religious educators. That’s why we think we have a better chance of succeeding. We’re the people in the pews, and they can’t ignore us forever.”

Muller and other parishioners at St. John the Evangelist met on Monday nights in the basement of the parish school to talk about their anguish over the priest sexual-abuse crisis. As angry as they were about that, they were more upset over evidence that the church has sought to cover up the problem by moving allegedly abusive priests around and by striking confidential settlements with victims.

After the Vatican meeting of American cardinals in April to discuss the crisis, a Voice of the Faithful statement faulted the church for failing to deal with the complicity of the hierarchy in the scandal and broader “institutional failures in responding to the crimes of abuse.” Dealing with the role of the hierarchy, it said, is essential for the “redemption . . . of a severely damaged church.”

“My church didn’t feel safe,” said Dittrich, a marketing executive who has a ten-year-old son. The Wellesley parish borders the Weston parish where the defrocked priest John Geoghan once served. Geoghan, who is serving a jail term for molesting a boy, faces scores of abuse suits. His transfers from parish to parish despite a history of abuse allegations kicked off the scandal.

“We were at the mercy of this terrible system,” said Dittrich, who said the galvanizing moment for her was the realization that her son could easily have become a victim as well. “I came to realize that we, the laity, were like victims of abuse ourselves.”

At one recent meeting of the Voice of the Faithful, Stephen Pope, chair of the Boston College theology department, stirred applause when he said, “I love the Catholic Church, but our fatal flaw has been the passivity of the laity. This event is finally

getting laypeople off the stick, and that is valuable.”

Mary Jo Bane, a professor at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, belongs to a parish in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston. She urged Boston-area Catholics not to respond to a recent fund-raising drive sponsored by Cardinal Bernard Law and is working to create a coalition of lay boards or pastoral councils of Boston’s parishes. Cardinal Law has come out strongly against efforts to link the parish councils.

“What’s happening with groups like Voice of the Faithful is exciting,” said Bane. “To succeed, it has to be perceived as genuinely moderate, and it has to get established in many, many more parishes.”

But it has a chance. “This is a turning point for the church,” she said. Never before, she said, had a crisis “challenged so many of the assumptions of the institutional church and brought out so much anger and such a sense of betrayal from the laity. Nevertheless, I think most Catholics are committed to voicing what needs to be voiced rather than exiting the church.”

Muller said the group’s focus is on democratizing the power structure of the church. He has said that he hopes Voice of the Faithful can serve as a kind of “congress” to “counterbalance the power of the hierarchy.”

He is inviting delegates from other churches, including Lutherans, Episcopalians and those from more reform-oriented Protestant traditions, to participate in a workshop at the meeting in Boston in July. “We seek to learn from other Christian churches,” he said. “In the long run, we want the Voice of the Faithful to be an ecumenical voice.”

Muller compared the role of the laity to the flying buttresses of a cathedral and said that Vatican II had provided the “theological articulation points” for where to put them. The question is how to build them. Previous efforts to enlarge the role of the laity were ineffective because “they didn’t come from the bottom up,” he said. “They were people appointed by the church hierarchy. That’s not the case with us.”