

11-3-07 – Letter from M.P.Fox, President, National VOTF, Re: Convention, 2007

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Dear Friends,

The VOTF Convention “Disciples in Action” was a great success. More than 500 members gathered in Providence Oct. 19 and 20 to hear about the accomplishments of affiliates and working groups over the last five years and to take home ideas and inspiration they can forge into constructive action themselves.

We recognized one lay person and three priests of integrity for the outstanding work they have all done in supporting survivors. Each recipient was introduced by a survivor, a survivor’s family member or a close colleague who had been directly involved in their work.

I spoke about how we must move from anger to love – holding love and compassion for survivors; seeking to protect our children; and striving to make the church we love a healthy institution, free of secrecy and clericalism. This theme was echoed by many – it is time to move from angry rhetoric to constructive action.

We heard about possibilities such as electing our own bishops – a practice prevalent in the early Church – and we learned how the Episcopal Church actually accomplishes this today.

We heard about effective ways to reach out to priests -- getting to know them better and seeing how the laity and priests working together can accomplish so much.

Judge Michael Merz, chairperson of the National Review Board, was introduced by Jim Post who recalled his initial meetings with leaders of the NRB. Jim called for us to not only challenge the bishops but also the NRB. From Judge Merz, we heard how the laity play a key role in breaking down the clerical structure. He said, “Demanding things from the bishops or the Vatican *enacts* clericalism; it makes it stronger by treating the Church as something that belongs to ‘them’ which they must change because we demand it.” He challenged us to become the church we want and to take up the call of our baptism for co-responsibility of the Church. And he revealed to us that he is a survivor of abuse at his childhood parish by the church organist.

All of the plenary session speakers encouraged us to continue the work we are doing. We must address the underlying issues of the abuse crisis – the culture of secrecy and clericalism. There is still much to do.

Unfortunately, despite these positive events and the overwhelmingly positive responses we have received from attendees, and even despite the generally positive coverage of our convention in the media, one single event at the convention attracted the attention of the *Boston Globe* and was reported there in misleading terms.

If you read the report and did not attend the convention, or if you have received copies in emails, you too might think that the organizers of the small sidewalk demonstration (15-20 people) had broad support. Most of those attending the Convention did not even know these activities were going on until they returned home and saw the *Boston Globe* article.

In fact, several of the people standing on the sidewalk that day had been asked to stand in support of survivors – not, as the Globe reported, because they were protesting VOTF or thought we had “lost our way.”

"I was there to support survivors only," is what one VOTF member pictured in the Globe told us. He was never asked to protest VOTF or to claim that we had lost our way, as the Globe reported. He has made this clear in a letter he sent to the Globe editor as soon as he saw his picture and read the caption the Globe had assigned to it. We have heard this same complaint from others who have emailed or called.

You also may have heard that another complaint was made about the appearance of Bill Clark, S.J., as a panelist at a breakout session on faith communities. Fr. Clark has supported survivors and VOTF since 2002. Today he sits on the board of trustees at Cheverus High School in Maine where there was some history of abuse that was identified and addressed before Fr. Clark joined the board.

Despite the confusion generated by these incidents, Convention attendees are consistently reporting positive experiences – reports that lead us to say that we achieved our major goal for this Convention. The aim was to share what VOTF and our members have accomplished these past years, and to inspire people to return home with new tools and new energy. We accomplished this.

It is my hope that all of us will keep this inspiration in our hearts. It is an inspiration that will help us, as an organization, move into loving action -- not so that we leave our passion behind but so that we pursue that passion in ways that are positive and constructive.

At the same time, we must remain committed to our Mission Statement and our three goals. The mission statement calls us "To provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the Faithful can actively participate in the guidance and governance of the Church." It is through our three goals that we set out to achieve this Mission. Our enthusiasm for achieving each goal is what drove us to convene in Providence. It should drive us now to carry out the promise we heard there.

Keep the Faith, Change the Church,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary Pat Fox". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "M" and "P".

Mary Pat Fox  
President, Voice of the Faithful