

Voice of the Faithful' influence questioned years after inception

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NEWTON, Mass. --Rain threatened, but Catholics by the hundreds still streamed to Boston Common for a Mass organized by a lay church reform group to protest the closing of dozens of area parishes.

The turnout for the Aug. 15 event demonstrated Voice of the Faithful's continuing power to mobilize Catholics. Two and a half years after the group emerged from the wreckage of the clergy sex abuse scandal in the Boston Archdiocese, the church closings have given Voice's members a new cause to rally behind.

But the group's influence on the church it aims to change remains uncertain. Catholic leaders in Boston have paid little heed to the group, and some observers, criticizing a lack of focus, question how long it can survive.

"So far, I think they've been sort of reactive and opportunistic," said Phil Lawler, editor of the Catholic World Report, a monthly news magazine.

The archdiocese has long questioned the group's motivations, citing links to people who oppose church teachings. And a ban that keeps new chapters from meeting on church property has remained in place through three leaders of the archdiocese, despite repeated pleas by the group's leaders.

The Rev. Richard McBrien, a University of Notre Dame theologian, said Voice of the Faithful has emerged as an important representative of the laity with a key role to play in the church's future, despite the church's resistance.

"It will not peter out. That's wishful thinking," McBrien said. "The issue on which they were ultimately founded is going to continue for a long time."

Voice of the Faithful was started by Jim Muller, a Harvard Medical School cardiologist, amid grief and anger over the abuse scandal, which began in Boston in January 2002. Documents showed church leaders shifted pedophile priests from parish to parish, rather than remove them from ministry, and concealed their crimes.

The archdiocese's leader at the time, Cardinal Bernard Law, delayed meeting with the group for months, then declined to accept a donation from it, setting an icy tone that has persisted. Voice of the Faithful grew as the sex abuse scandal spread to other dioceses. It now counts about 200 national and international affiliates, but its biggest base remains in the Boston area, home to 44 chapters and half its membership.

Voice of the Faithful claims about 30,000 members, but the number of active members is likely far lower. The number is tabulated from a list of people who gave a name and said they agreed with the group's goals through e-mail or other media. The group employs just three full-time workers and nine part-timers. Executive Director Steve Krueger, a former investment banker, pulls in the largest annual salary at \$48,000. Voice of the Faithful has gotten steady financial support, even with decreased media attention on clergy sex abuse after the \$85 million settlement with victims last fall. The group had revenue of about \$663,000 for the first 11 months of fiscal 2004, according to unaudited figures. Voice reported about \$687,000 in revenues for all of fiscal 2003.

The group has been energized by anger over the scheduled closure of 82 parishes, which the archdiocese says are needed in the face of declining attendance and financial woes.

Parishioners have complained they had little say in the process and have accused the archdiocese of stalling the appeals process -- just the kind of complaints about a marginalized laity that Voice of the Faithful exists to address.

The group's three stated goals are to support abuse victims, support priests of integrity and shape structural change in the church.

Its slogan -- "Keep the faith, change the Church" -- has long raised concerns among church leaders, says the Rev. Christopher Coyne, spokesman for the archdiocese.

From its beginning, Coyne said, the group has associated with people who oppose church teachings on issues like abortion and gay rights. For instance, Debra Haffner, a well-known pro-choice activist, spoke at its first summer convention.

Coyne also noted a May incident in which Voice of the Faithful president Jim Post publicly scolded archbishop Sean O'Malley for what he called a "divisive" stand against gay marriage. O'Malley has said he was simply articulating the church's view that marriage is between one man and one woman.

"It doesn't quite jibe with them saying, 'We believe what the church believes,'" Coyne said. Lawler said Voice lacks influence because it hasn't adequately defined its theology or purpose beyond its three goals, which are so general, everyone agrees with them. "They're not coherent," he said. "They've got to figure out why they exist."

The Rev. Robert Carr, parochial vicar at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, said Voice of the Faithful seems to be obsessed with its own grievances, rather than with the broader issues facing the Christian faith. "I think they will peter out," he said. Krueger said the group is getting stronger and rejected doubts about its motivations, saying Voice has unequivocally stated that it accepts church teachings. He pointed Mass on Boston Common as an emphatic statement of the group's commitment to Catholicism.

"The running joke around here is, 'If you find the hidden agenda, would you let us know where it is?'" he said.

Krueger said the group's associated with people of differing views in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the 1962-65 meeting that modernized aspects of the Roman Catholic Church and envisioned a respectful dialogue between opposing viewpoints.

"It doesn't say you'll only talk to Catholics who pass some sort of litmus test," Krueger said.

Though the group has struggled to sway church leaders, its proven public influence makes it important, Krueger said. The church is losing membership, and can't afford to alienate the public and the parishioners it depends on for funds.

From the start, Voice of the Faithful envisioned a more collaborative relationship with the church because the laity has such a huge stake in its future. That could still happen, Krueger said.

"At some point, the bishops will realize that Voice of the Faithful are the best friends that they have," he said.