

## **Voice of the Faithful supports victims of clergy abuse**

By Christopher Rocchio  
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At the beginning of weekly meetings for the Winchester chapter of the Voice of the Faithful (VOTF), Bob Morris asks those in attendance at St. Eulalia's Church in Winchester how many were from different parishes and communities. Several weeks ago he stopped this practice, mainly because so many people were raising their hands.

"Even though we're here at St. Eulalia's, we have always drawn people outside the parish," said Morris.

The Winchester VOTF affiliate recently celebrated its three-year anniversary. Like their weekly meetings, the event had a good turnout of people reminiscing about what the organization has meant to them. The VOTF is centered around three goals: To support survivors of clergy abuse, support priests of integrity and shape structural change in the church.

"The mission statement is to provide a prayerful voice attentive to the spirit through which the faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the church," said Morris.

The VOTF originated in January 2002, when Boston-based newspapers began running articles on a daily basis about the burgeoning Catholic church sexual abuse scandal. Morris said many of the cases involved priests and bishops who allowed abuse to happen, finding quick-fixes, like shuffling the offenders to different parishes or dioceses. While it was not known as the VOTF at the time, the first meeting occurred at St. John the Evangelist in Wellesley Hills.

"We started talking about how upset and anguished we were, and tried to find what could be done about it," said Morris. "A few weeks after that meeting, the VOTF was formed, and it spread like wildfire to other parishes in the surrounding communities."

Suzy Nauman, a member of the Winchester VOTF, is also involved with the national organization as a parish voice assistant chairperson. She said as soon as the folks from Wellesley built a Web site, it began to receive hits from around the country. Since then the organization has grown internationally.

"People were planting seeds everywhere and the organization just grew," she said.

Morris said the first "listening session" was held at St. Eulalia's on May 13, 2002. Jan Dolan, also a member the Winchester VOTF, said the laity were fortunate to have the listening sessions as a precursor to the VOTF. Member Clare Keane said many parishes had listening sessions because there was such an undercurrent of dismay and distress among parishioners about the scandals, and if priests didn't offer these sessions, the laity got together and formed them on their own.

"People found their voices, and belted out their passion, anguish and love of the church," said Nauman.

Keane said people who attended the listening sessions did so because they wanted to stay in the church, and identified themselves as "faithful, mainstream" Catholics. Basically, she said, these people wanted a reason to stay in the church, and also to help it heal.

"They treasured the church and knew something was wrong," said Marie Doyle, a member of the Winchester VOTF.

Morris said each week, the Winchester VOTF have a different format for the meeting. They always begin with a prayer or a hymn, followed by an introduction of any guests or new members. There have been many small group discussions, which are usually centered around the three goals of the organization.

Foremost, Morris said the VOTF supports survivors of abuse. He said they have had dozens of survivors come in and speak, and it's obviously difficult for these folks to tell their story.

"It's one thing to read about it in the newspaper or see it on television," said Morris. "It's another thing to see someone and experience them telling their story."

Nauman has been told by several survivors that speaking is a way of healing, and it's important that their stories be told and heard. Morris said many tangible things are also done to help survivors, including coffee houses with entertainment and raffles to raise money.

Another suggestion for a fund-raiser was to sell Christmas cards. Morris said it sounded like a good idea, but was unsure how to go about it. Fortunately, three people in the Winchester VOTF, Jean Kellen of Medford and Frank Baratta and Harvey Cote of Arlington, were artists, and two had previous experience designing Christmas cards. The last two holiday seasons, the cards have been designed and produced in Arlington, raising more than \$6,000. Morris said some of that money was used to fund scholarships for people to attend the annual SNAP (Survivor's Network of Those Abused by Priests) conference.

"We had one of the people who benefited from the scholarship come and talk to our group," he said. "It was really powerful."

The VOTF also focuses on education, and brings in a wide variety of speakers and panels. Morris said while the VOTF brings people together, it also raises the consciousness of issues people in the church have taken for granted. Doyle and Dolan said panel members have included theologians, authors, priests, pastoral associates, deacons and their wives, parish council members and even youth.

"The last session we had, there was open dialogue between two panels of priests and the laity, and it lasted for over an hour," said Doyle. "The rapport and mutual trust was wonderful."

The Winchester VOTF also held a priest support working group from July through September in 2002. Doyle said a survey was constructed, and 30 priests from across the Archdiocese of Boston were interviewed in a one-on-one setting with a parishioner they were comfortable and familiar with. Doyle said the survey touched upon three issues: Objective and background information on the priest, the priest's individual response to the crisis in the church and if they were personally affected by it. While the interviews were anonymously done, the information gathered was processed and is available on the Winchester VOTF Web site.

"The response from the priests was spectacular," said Doyle. "It really showed honesty about the reality the church is facing."

Despite being around now for three years, the Winchester VOTF is still evolving. For example, member Bill Murphy recently began holding small faith sharing groups on a monthly basis. He said it is important to be praying together in an active way, and sharing faith with one another. Whether based on scripture or current events, Murphy said the faith groups try to foster what he referred to as "adult conversation."

"It's frustrating that the church leaders are acting like children, and the laity are acting like adults," he said. "We don't have the answers, but if we get together as a community, we can get the answers."

Doyle said the Catholic church most people are used to is designed like a pyramid, with the pope at the top and laity at the bottom.

"The VOTF is much more circular," she said. "There's a sharing of power, and it feels different and empowering."

Dolan said because the Winchester VOTF feels blessed to be able to use St. Eulalia's as a meeting place, they recently presented a check to the parish in the amount of \$3,300 as a way of saying thank you.

"We all initially came because we were outraged and wanted to help save the church," said Nauman. "We stayed because we found a sense of community, and our faith was being enriched on a weekly basis."

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*The Winchester VOTF services Winchester, Arlington, Belmont, Medford, Stoneham, Lexington, and Burlington, with other members coming from Billerica, Melrose, Somerville and Cambridge. For more information on the Voice of the Faithful, visit [www.votf.org](http://www.votf.org), which also contains a link to the Winchester affiliate's site.*

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