



Why Voice of the Faithful?

Having decided that you want to participate in an organized way in the reform and renewal of the Church, the next question is whether to join one of the groups already organized for such purpose.

Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) is one of those groups, but not the only one. We have a particular approach to Church reform and renewal that is similar to some of the approaches adopted by such groups and yet is distinctive.

These reform groups cover a wide spectrum and an array of methods. There are groups determined to bring back the Latin Mass, and groups aiming to expand prayer options and use of the vernacular in liturgy. There are groups devoted to particular prayers, lay groups associated with religious orders, groups calling for the ordination of women, groups calling for the excommunication of anyone calling for the ordination of women, and on and on.

To decide whether the VOTF approach best matches the aims and intentions of your group, you should have some understanding of VOTF's mission and goals as well as how we differ from some other groups.

Mission and Goals

VOTF had its beginnings in January 2002, in the basement of St. John the Evangelist Church in Wellesley, MA. Small gatherings of 25 to 30 people met there in “listening sessions” to speak of their heartbreak and outrage over revelations that priest sex abusers had preyed upon our children and that members of the Church hierarchy had—through both actions and inactions—enabled and covered up those crimes. These small gatherings grew each week, from dozens to a few hundred, from crowds of 700 in spring 2002 into a movement and organization that by 2004 numbered thousands. Today VOTF has numerous affiliates and more than 40,000 members in the United States and other countries. Support for survivors and a desire to make accountable those who enabled sex abuse by the clergy remain animating forces.

Equally important to VOTF members is addressing the causes of that sex abuse, and the practices that permitted so many abusers to remain hidden for so long. We believe that adopting safety standards and policies to prevent abuse and to protect our children are

critical, but they will ultimately fail unless we also address the practices and habits that led to this abuse. If we, as Church, cannot reform the structural defects and excesses that allowed priest predators to harm our children, the abuses revealed in the past 25 years will once again assault us. If we, as Church, cannot renew our commitments to the faith that so nourishes us, then we will not inspire the reforms our Church so desperately needs.

VOTF's organizing principles remain today, as they did at the start, grounded in prayer and focused on our Mission Statement and three goals. Participating in VOTF, as an individual or an affiliate, requires support of those goals and adherence to the mission statement:

Mission Statement Our mission is to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can actively participate in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church.

Our Three Goals:

- Support survivors of clergy sexual abuse
- Support priests of integrity
- Shape structural change within the Catholic Church

Carrying Out Our Mission and Goals

VOTF's mission and three goals commit us to working within the Church. We do not seek to redefine dogma; we do not seek to create an alternative church. But our mission and goals clearly do not call for the Church to remain "the same."

The Church of "the same" has fostered a climate where sexual abuse of our children can proceed unchecked by accountability; where the decisions of bishops to protect the abusers and forsake the abused has caused great human suffering and has sapped the moral authority of the Church; where the mechanisms that should have checked this abuse are not open and transparent to the People of God; and where the divide between clergy and laity impoverishes our efforts to live out the mission of Christ within the world.

To address these excesses, to renew and reform the Church we love, we believe that participation of the laity is essential.

- We believe that the laity have the graced dignity, intelligence, responsibility and obligation to cooperate in Church governance in a meaningful way, according to the norm of canon law (cf. Canon 129).

- We believe that meaningful lay participation is the only way to correct the profound flaws that have been revealed in the human institutional life of our Church.
- We believe that the council documents of Vatican II illuminate the pathway for lay involvement in the Church.
- And we urge that the openness and mutual respect advocated by Pope John Paul II in *Ut Unum Sint* (“That All May Be One”) be the model for meaningful dialog among bishops and laity.

This philosophy is centrist, and it is inclusive. We are committed to providing an open and safe forum for ALL Catholics to freely and respectfully discuss the challenges of our Church, regardless of their views on specific issues.

This inclusiveness commits us to a collaborative and collegial method of operating, and to an organization that develops its actions “from the bottom up,” with attention to all members of the organization and in communion with our Church.

Participating in VOTF requires a commitment to these principles. We seek to model the behavior that we ask from our Church: centered in Christ, open to the gifts of all, inclusive and loving towards all, accountable to all members, and transparent in actions.

VOTF Structures

The expression of collegial action in VOTF flows in all directions.

Our members, both individually and in affiliates, work locally within their parishes and dioceses to enhance lay participation in the governance of the Church, to make accountable those local Church entities that benefit directly from our contributions (both financial and personal), and to install programs that aim to protect our children and carry out the VOTF goals and mission.

Members elect National officers, who spearhead VOTF efforts to reform and renew our Church, who supervise the day-to-day operations carried out by VOTF’s Executive Director and national staff, and who articulate for the public VOTF policies developed in conjunction with members, elected Representatives, and the Board of Trustees.

Members may participate in the VOTF National Working Groups, which develop the resources needed to support survivors, support priests of integrity, and shape structural change, and educate ourselves to be responsible members of the Church. Members also participate in our *Voices in Action* projects, which focus on practical actions that carry out our mission and goals.

The Board of Trustees, which is responsible to the entire organization for its financial health, works with the National Officers and the Executive Director to develop policies and ensure project financing.

Finally, VOTF's Executive Director and the national staff provide the framework needed for daily activities within VOTF and the communications infrastructure necessary for an internationally dispersed membership to work together.

Within and through each of these elements, VOTF members commit themselves to working in a collegial and collaborative manner and to working within the Church to attain our goals.

For more information on what we are doing today, in our projects and campaigns, please check the Web site (<http://www.votf.org>). One excellent source of information on that site is the latest issue of *In the Vineyard*, our electronic newsletter that goes to all members.

Other Organizations

As you consider the prospects of VOTF affiliation for your group, our Mission Statement and our goals should be primary factors in your discernment, as should commitment to collaboration and to the principles we espouse.

These goals are similar but have a different emphasis than those pursued by other Church-related reform and renew groups. You should explore these other organizations also, on the chance that your group may find their goals to be closer to what you seek.

The following list of reform groups is by no means exhaustive. But it is representative of the types of organizations and associations you may find. A Web link URL is included with each so that you may review the group's literature yourself.

The groups are listed in alphabetical order, with one exception. Listed first is SNAP, the Survivors' Network of Those Abused by Priests (<http://www.snapnetwork.org>). SNAP is a support group for men and women abused by religious authority figures. They work on helping survivors to heal, educating themselves and others about the effects of abuse on people and on communities, and bringing about changes that prevent such abuse in the future. Their web site also includes links to numerous other survivor support groups.

Those organizations that focus more directly on reform within the Church itself are:

Adoremus (<http://www.adoremus.org>) is a lay association established in 1995 that seeks "to promote authentic reform of the liturgy of the Roman Rite ... to rediscover and restore the beauty, the holiness, the power of the Church's rich liturgical tradition." The group sees "genuine liturgical reform" as the way to reverse "declining Mass attendance, dramatic decreases in priestly and religious vocations, diminished belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and in other core doctrines of the Catholic Church, and a widespread loss of the sense of the sacred."

The Association for the Rights of Catholics in the Church (ARCC; <http://arcc-catholic-rights.org>) organized in 1980 to develop a Charter for the Rights of Catholics in the Church. The charter is based on the rights expressed in the United Nations Charter and supplemented by the common rights and freedom of Christians bestowed at baptism—which are based on the priesthood of all believers, the fundamental equality of believers, and the prophetic role of all believers.

Call to Action (CTA; <http://www.cta-usa.org>) is a Catholic movement working for equality and justice in the Church and society. CTA grew out of a 1976 U.S. bishops' conference and is now an independent national organization with more than 25,000 people and 40 local organizations. The CTA vision is of a progressive, engaged Catholicism and it supports annual conferences, various publications, and a network of regional groups and joint programs with other Catholic renewal organizations.

Catholics for a Free Choice (<http://www.catholicsforchoice.org>) conducts research, policy analysis, education, and advocacy on issues of gender equality and reproductive health.

Corpus, The National Association for an Inclusive Priesthood, was established more than 30 years ago and “promotes an expanded and renewed priesthood of married and single men and women in the Catholic Church” (<http://www.corpus.org>).

Dignity/USA (<http://www.dignityusa.org>) is a progressive national lay movement of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) Catholics, their families, and their friends.

FutureChurch (<http://www.futurechurch.org>) is a national coalition of parish-centered Catholics who seek the full participation of all baptized Catholics in the life of the Church. Founded in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1990, FutureChurch has called on U.S. Bishops to reconsider opening ordination to women and the married, both men and women, so that the Eucharist can continue to be the center of the spiritual lives of all Catholics. The organization was incorporated in 1993 and supports a national network of parish-based activists.

The Latin Liturgy Association (<http://www.latinliturgy.com>) is based in New York state, with several chapters elsewhere, and devotes its efforts to “actively support the use of Latin in liturgies” in the Church.

Opus Dei (<http://www.opusdei.org>) is a personal prelature of the Catholic Church that aims to help individuals live their daily lives in holiness. Members attend morning and evening recollections under the guidance of a counselor, attend retreats, take various courses on spirituality, support the many not-for-profit endeavors of the group, and encourage others to adopt similar practices.

Roman Catholic Womenpriests (<http://www.romancatholicwomenpriests.org/index.htm>) aims “to bring about full equality of women in the Roman Catholic Church” and to create a new model of priestly ministry. The movement leaders say they want neither a schism nor a break from the Roman Catholic Church, but rather want to work positively within the Church.

We Are Church/USA (<http://www.we-are-church.org/us>) is a coalition of Catholic groups in the U.S. who seek, as part of an international movement, to “infuse a new Spirit into this ancient institution, which we love, by working for a church which is inclusive, egalitarian, affirming and democratic.” Their *Manifesto for the International Movement* was presented to the Vatican in 1997.

Women’s Ordination Conference (<http://www.womensordination.org>) seeks to regain from the early Church the variety of ministries available to all, “to promote inclusive spiritualities that are liberating and feminist; support ministries that meet the spiritual needs of the People of God; celebrate our diversity of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, language and symbol.”