



*Keep the Faith, Change the Church*

## Why Voice of the Faithful?

*Prepared by VOTF Voice of Renewal / Lay Education National Working Group*

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 other reform groups and yet is distinctive.

Church 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 help you decide whether the VOTF approach best matches your aims and intentions, we have prepared a brief history and overview of our work.

### ***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 more than 30,000 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.

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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 35 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" fosters 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 caused great human suffering and 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 impoverish 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.

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- ❖ 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 dialogue among bishops and laity.
  - ❖ We also are mindful of the observation of Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* (#102): “Lay people are, put simply, the vast majority of the People of God. The minority—ordained ministers—are at their service. ... in [some] churches, room has not been made for them to speak and to act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making.”

Our 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 as well as maintain programs that aim to protect our children and carry out the VOTF goals and mission.

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Members participate in VOTF working groups and committees, according to their own time and abilities, to help develop resources for carrying out our projects, supporting survivors, supporting priests of integrity, helping shape structural change, and educating ourselves to be responsible members of the Church.

Members also elect some of our trustees, who then elect the National Officers. The Officers spearhead VOTF efforts to reform and renew our Church, supervise day-to-day operations carried out by VOTF's Executive Director and national staff, and articulate for the public VOTF policies developed in conjunction with members and the Board of Trustees.

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. They also communicate directly with members and hear from them about actions that can promote Church reform.

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.