

Rooted in Church Teaching

Call To Action is an organization of Catholics based on the teaching of the universal church in the second half of the 20th Century. It is a response to the challenge of the Second Vatican Council, held between 1962 and 1965, for all members to "scrutinize the signs of the times" and respond in the light of the gospel. The council provided a wake-up call for lay Catholics who had tended to defer initiatives entirely to the clergy.

Then in 1971 Pope Paul VI emphasized that it is the laity who have received the primary "Call To Action" to create a more just world. That same year the international synod of the bishops issued an unusually brief and clear document. It declared that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world appears to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel." And, cautioned the synod, "The church recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to people about justice must first be just in their eyes; hence, we must undertake an examination of the modes of action, of the possessions, and of the lifestyle found within the church itself."

The 1976 Detroit Call To Action

Following up on this mandate, the U.S. bishops on their return home from the synod launched a creative consultation process. Over 800,000 Catholics testified during two years of hearings, which culminated in the U.S. bishops' Call To Action Conference in Detroit in 1976, held in conjunction with the American Bicentennial. More than 100 bishops were among the 1,340 voting delegates and the 1,500 observers. At the end of three momentous days of discussion and debate, the assembly declared the church must stand up to the chronic racism, sexism, militarism and poverty in modern society. And to do so in a credible way the church must reevaluate its positions on issues like celibacy for priests, the male-only clergy, homosexuality, birth control, and the involvement of every level of the church in important decisions. The Detroit conference recommended that each diocese take the recommendations home and act upon them.

CTA Chicago Born

Subsequent to the 1976 Conference the leadership of the U.S. Bishops Conference gradually distanced themselves from the event because of some of the church-justice issues raised. In Chicago, however, where Cardinal John Cody's autocratic style had created a high level of tension, several organizations of nuns, priests, Catholic school teachers and concerned laity urged an on-going follow-up to the Detroit initiative. A conference of over

400 people was held in October 1978, and Chicago Call To Action was launched as a local organization.

"From its inception, CTA had a dual focus," says Dan Daley, CTA co-coordinator and a founding member. "One eye was on church institutions which needed reform and renewal, and the other eye was on the larger society and issues of justice and peace that ought to have church involvement. The emphasis has shifted from time to time."

The first projects in 1978 and 1979 were local: criticizing Cardinal Cody's lack of financial accountability, lobbying for more effective parish councils and improved benefits for Catholic school teachers. Membership grew, but for years the annual conferences, featuring reform-minded speakers, drew fewer than 600 people. In 1981 CTA got a major boost when the speaker was Hans Kung, the Swiss theologian who had become a kind of Catholic folk hero though his call for a more democratic church and his skirmishes with Vatican authorities. Some 1,800 attended the conference that year, held at McCormick Place. The event is still recalled as a kind of Woodstock for many local Catholics.

After Cardinal Cody's death, CTA in the early 1980s focused largely on societal issues--involving Catholics in the nuclear disarmament movement and the campaign against U.S. policy in Latin America. The organization cooperated with the Quixote Center in the Quest for Peace program, gathering tons of clothing and other supplies for the people of Nicaragua. The style of Cody's successor, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, was in such marked contrast that there was comparatively little to fret about in the local church. In the middle and late 1980s, Call To Action's Performing Arts Ministry sponsored a group of young, talented members in creating musical productions based on the U.S. bishops' pastoral letters regarding peace and economic justice. The group toured nationally and won a Vatican World Communications Day Award for their efforts.

The 1990 Call for Reform

But while the Chicago church remained calm, dark clouds appeared elsewhere. Pope John Paul II repeatedly dashed hopes for any internal liberalizing during his lifetime, and he prepared for the future by appointing as bishops only men who upheld his views on contraception and the ordination of women. Meanwhile, there were crackdowns on theologians like Kung and an insistence from Rome that diversity of opinion was not to be tolerated.

In 1990 the CTA board developed a Call for Reform in the Catholic Church, a pastoral letter capsulizing the organization's cry for a church responsive to the world's needs and therefore willing to examine its own

record on issues of justice, equality and participation. There was considerable discussion on how--or whether--to disseminate the letter. On their way to a national church conference in Washington, Dan and Sheila Daley decided to ask Hans Kung, a speaker at the affair, to read the document and give his opinion. "We stopped on the road and Dan called Kung's hotel room, catching him as he was walking in," says Sheila Daley. "He agreed to look at it and told us to leave it under his door when we arrived. We arrived close to midnight and followed his instructions."

The next morning as the climax of his talk to the 800 people assembled, Kung read the CTA **Call for Reform** verbatim and said he had never seen a better declaration of the motives and goals of the progressive church. Suddenly CTA was swamped with requests for copies and inquiries from around the country about these unknown Chicago reformers. The statement was printed as a full page ad in the New York Times on Ash Wednesday, in March 1990, along with the names of 4,500 signers and an invitation for more signatures.

A National Movement

Within a few months, the document had 25,000 signers, and CTA had become a national entity. The Call for Reform remains the organization's basic platform:

"We appeal to the institutional church to reform and renew its structures. We also appeal to the people of God to witness to the Spirit who lives within us and to seek ways to serve the vision of God in human society. "We call upon church officials to incorporate women at all levels of ministry and decision-making.

"We call upon the church to discard the medieval discipline of mandatory priestly celibacy and to open the priesthood to women and married men...so that the Eucharist may continue to be the center of the spiritual life of all Catholics.

"We call for extensive consultation with the Catholic people in developing church teaching on human sexuality.

"We claim our responsibility as committed laity, religious and clergy to participate in the selection of our local bishops, a time-honored tradition in the church.

"We call for open dialogue, academic freedom, and due process.

"We call upon the church to become a model of financial openness on all levels, including the Vatican.

"We call for a fundamental change so that young people will see and hear God living in and through the church as a participatory community of believers who practice what they preach."

In 1993 the annual conference drew 2,800 people; in 1994, 3,100; in 1995, 4,000. More than 5,000 participated in the 1996 conference in Detroit, on the 20th anniversary of the original conference. Three quarterly publications are sent to the current 18,000 CTA members. **ChurchWatch** marks the progress of the reform movement and links the organizations and communities in the struggle. **CTA News** contains fuller analysis and readers' views on church and social justice matters. **Spirituality /Justice Reprint** shares inspiration from present-day prophets such as **Sr. Joan Chittister**, **Archbishop Rembert Weakland**, **Charles Curran** and **Rosemary Ruether**. Taking advantage of developing communications technology, CTA established a web site during 1995 at <http://call-to-action.org>.

Where the Church is Moving

The **Catholic Organizations for Renewal (COR)** forum, which CTA staffs, has grown to 34 U.S. groups since 1991, and CTA established formal links with **European reform groups** at meetings in England in early 1996. The organization has also been a major supporter of the growing number of small faith communities all over the country: little groups which meet regularly in homes or other locales for prayer and scripture discussion because they do not believe they are being adequately "fed" at the local church. Over 450 church renewal groups and small faith communities were listed in CTA's 1998 **Church Renewal Directory**.

Regional CTA chapters and affiliates, which began to sprout up in the early 1990s, numbered almost 40 by 1998. It was the formation of one such chapter, in Lincoln, Neb., in March 1996, that triggered the wrath of Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz. He **excommunicated the members**, which, in turn, stimulated national publicity and a sudden growth in CTA membership. Several canon lawyers and theologians called the bishop's action invalid, and the **chapter** has continued to grow.

"It's almost as if we've become mainstream," says Linda Pieczynski, CTA president, who has given numerous interviews to newspaper and broadcast outlets in the past 12 months. "People are beginning to realize this is where the grass roots church is today. This is where tomorrow's church is developing."

Projects developed by Cleveland, Ohio-based **FutureChurch** in partnership with CTA include "**The Future of Priestly Ministry**," an attempt to promote dialogue at every level concerning the priest shortage and its implications, and "**Women in Church Leadership**," education, advocacy and organizing for women's equality.

The prayer service designed by CTA and FutureChurch to honor **St. Mary**

Magdalen on July 22 has caught on nationally. First celebrated in 1998, the 1999 program involved over 2,000 people in over 100 rituals, including 40 in parishes, .

CTA has supported the international campaign to ban land mines, and is involved in the grassroots movement to close the **U.S. Army School of the Americas** , where many Latin American military responsible for human rights abuses have been trained. Many local chapters are actively working against the death penalty.

In 1999, CTA launched two **Email Action Alert lists** , where members sign up to receive information to enable them to take quick action on both social justice and church reform issues.

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