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International priest organizations, lay leaders meet to discuss church reform

by Christine Schenk

Perspective

Bregenz, Austria — I spent Oct. 10-12 here for the first international meeting of leaders of reformist priest organizations from six countries. The event provided rich opportunities for international networking, exploration of common problems and sharing of creative strategies for addressing an array of critical renewal issues facing the church. That included the international priest shortage, defending the integrity of parishes, the need for genuine dialogue, lay empowerment, strategies to address abuses of authority, and women's leadership in the church.

Convened by the charismatic Fr. Helmut Schüller of the Austrian Priests' Initiative and Deacon Markus Heil, spokesman for Parish Initiative Switzerland, the high-energy, professionally facilitated gathering drew about 30 people. Among them were leaders of lay movements and priest associations from the United States, Germany, Ireland, Australia, Switzerland and Austria.

I attended as a representative of the 10 U.S. reform organizations that sponsored Schüller's highly successful 15-city "Catholic Tipping Point" tour over the summer. This coalition has committed itself to developing an international network of priests and people working for fundamental rights in the church. Martha Heizer of the International Movement We Are Church; Deborah Rose-Milavec, executive director of FutureChurch; and Hans Peter Hurka of the We Are Church movement in Austria brought important perspectives from lay reform movements at the international, national and local levels.

An important underlying commonality for participants was the shared struggle of ministering in the midst of a steadily worsening priest shortage.

"These are grounded, sincere priests with compassion and a sense of ministry ... who live for the people in

their churches," said Fr. Dan Divis of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests, whose membership includes 1,000 priests. "I see priests who are frightened about the future if issues such as parish closings, the priest shortage and participation of women in church leadership, etc., aren't attended to."

Interesting snapshots emerged about ministerial challenges facing priest associations in each country.

As in the U.S., a major problem in Germany concerns the consolidation of into megachurches, something many German priests say is not helpful for their people, who thrive within the strong sense of community provided by smaller parishes. The German priest associations hail from six dioceses: one more than 40 years old representing 160 priests, two others affiliated with the German We Are Church movement, the last three inspired by the Austrian Priests' Initiative and formed over the last six years. All told, the German priest movements represent about 700 priests.

In Austria, parishes are told there will be no priest to replace an outgoing pastor. That includes Schüller's own parish, leading him to prepare his parishioners to take over responsibility for their Catholic-Christian lives while he is gone. Some Austrian priests serve as many as four parishes, and some have been asked to take on more. These conditions led to the founding of the priests' initiative in 2006.

In 2011, the priests issued a "Call to Disobedience," calling for the admission of women and married people to the priesthood as well as greater lay leadership and transparency in church governance. While the organization counts 400 priests among its members, an independent poll taken shortly after the "Call to Disobedience" found more than 70 percent of Austria's priests positively received the call.

Throughout the conference, the topic of the parish as a self-determining "subject" recurred. An important emerging strategy named the need to empower parishioners to discern the destiny of their parish homes themselves, especially in light of the failure of the institutional church to address the priest shortage. Groups in Austria, Switzerland and Germany committed to using various educational brochures from FutureChurch addressing parishioner rights, how to appeal church closings and other advocacy tools as models for developing their own resources.

In Switzerland, the Parish Initiative Switzerland began in September 2012, when a group of priests and lay ministers developed a 10-point sign-on statement modeled on the Austrian Priests' Initiative's "Call to Disobedience."

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The Parish Initiative Switzerland statement was controversial because it stated publicly the current unusual pastoral practice. Said its spokesman Heil, "the network of initiatives is a place to share different new models of ministry for possible discussion in the other countries."

The Swiss group numbers some 100 priests and 400 lay ministers. Many Swiss parishes are led by deacons or lay administrators, with priests coming in on Sundays for sacramental ministry.

Ute van Appeldorn, a lay administrator and a board member of the Swiss initiative, leads a parish team of 13 people and performs many pastoral functions. By special provision under canon 517.2, she performs baptisms, preaches on Sundays, works with young families in sacramental preparation, leads services of the Word and Communion on Wednesdays, and accompanies individual adults on their spiritual journeys.

"Building relationships is my most important role. I make a lot of time to listen to the people and see what

is moving them," van Appeldorn said. "In those meetings, I feel God at work. [This gathering] made me realize what an excellent privilege I have. I have never had to fight to minister in Switzerland, though I do suffer because I'm not really ordained."

While there are approximately 500 parish administrators in the United States, few routinely baptize or preach regularly on Sunday.

A recurring topic was that of rights in the church, including the rights of women and all laity to participate in church decision-making. Rose-Milavec and Heizer led discussions about how to help the Vatican include real families in the upcoming Synod on the Family, scheduled for October 2014.

"I want all women -- married, single, young, old -- to be able to participate in church decision-making," Rose-Milavec said. "I want women at the Synod on the Family, and I want women to help elect the next pope."

Another key issue for reformist priests and laity alike is difficulties experienced in engaging bishops in genuine dialogue.

"From the different conversations with bishops and bishops conferences, not everything that is called 'dialogue' is really a conversation open for results," Heil said. For him, an important outcome is that "the initiatives will work on and promote an outline of rules for successful and honest dialogue with bishops."

For the future, the "network of networks," as the new international priest-lay group now calls itself, will select a five- or six-member international team to plan for future meetings and initiatives. A high priority is regular communication using all the tools available to current technology.

I asked Divis for his views about what this meeting might mean for the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests.

"The organization needs not to be afraid," Divis said. "The laity hasn't been afraid. They have been leading. They have been bolder and more courageous. The priests have nothing to fear. I believe the issues we are concerned about are also the ones the bishops are concerned about. [The bishops] need our support. There may be new openness to talking about many things because of Pope Francis."

While the various reform initiatives share in the enthusiasm about the positive change in church culture under Francis, they also noted that the hopes and expectations of the people of God for structural change have grown even larger.

How to get behind and support Pope Francis' desire for church renewal and reform animated several small group discussions, particularly the pope's call for the pastor to smell like the sheep; his hopeful outreach to gays; and his belief that the Curia, bishops and cardinals are called to serve the people of God.

Solidarity with those experiencing abuses of power in the church, from the parish to the Vatican, was a sobering topic to many. The presence of Redemptorist Fr. Tony Flannery, the founder of the Irish Association of Catholic Priests who the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith barred from ministry in 2012 for some of his writings, proved a constant reminder that structures in the church, such as those at the doctrinal congregation, are in grave need of reform.

The new international "network of networks" plans to develop a range of strategies addressing abuse of power in the church, including financial and legal support for those experiencing it.

"Even more important will be to share experiences in each conflict, especially with bishops or the Vatican, so that there is mutual learning and less abuse," Heil said.

When Flannery quietly noted that "unless the structures are changed, no real change will happen," this carries weight. While Pope Francis' recent words are hopeful and a good start, priests and people around the world will soon need more than words.

Meanwhile, the reform-minded international priests' associations and their lay partners are forging a creative pathway toward basic human rights in the church.

[A Sister of St. Joseph, Sr. Christine Schenk is a co-founder and executive director emerita of FutureChurch, where she worked for 23 years.]

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