News



Activists hold signs during a protest outside Trump Tower in New York City Aug. 15. (CNS/Amr Alfiky, Reuters)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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In 1934, a group of Christians in Nazi Germany signed their names to the "Barmen Declaration," a statement opposing Nazi ideology as antithetical to the Gospel. Eighty years later, Christians in the United States feel the need to do the same thing.

More than 400 Christian ethicists and other theologians have signed "A Statement from Christian Ethicists Without Borders on White Supremacy and Racism." Organized by four ethics professors and dated Aug. 14, the statement rejects "racist, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and neo-Nazi ideology as a sin against God that divides the human family created in God's image."

The organizers were particularly concerned — as were those in Nazi Germany — by those involved in white supremacist and other movements who also claim to be Christians. "That's a warped version of Christianity," said Tobias Winright, associate professor of health care ethics at St. Louis University and founder of the "Ethicists without Borders" Facebook group, which organized the statement.

This statement focuses on Christian ethicists "because this is a Christian problem," Winright said.

"White supremacy and racism deny the dignity of each human being revealed through the Incarnation. The evil of white supremacy and racism must be brought face-to-face before the figure of Jesus Christ, who cannot be confined to any one culture or nationality," the statement says.

The statement connects anti-Semitism and racism to nationalism, including the "America First" doctrine, which it calls a "pernicious and idolatrous error" because it "foolishly asks Americans to replace the worship of God with the worship of the nation."

"We wanted to make a really strong statement that those views are heretical to the Christian gospel," said Anna Floerke Scheid, associate professor of theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, one of the organizers.

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Floerke Scheid and others have been disappointed with the tepid response from clergy and other religious leaders in the wake of racially charged events, even before Charlottesville. "There's a separation of what's happening in the streets and what's happening in the churches," she said.

Even reaction from Catholic leaders to the violence in Charlottesville has not matched the strength of previous church teaching against racism and anti-Semitism, said Matthew Tapie, director of the Center of Catholic-Jewish Studies at St. Leo University in Florida and another organizer of the statement. "It seems to me we are in an emergency situation and need stronger denunciation," he said.

The statement suggests active responses against racism and white supremacy from all Christians, but especially from pastors, including prayer, working across religious traditions, participating in protests and civil disobedience, and engaging in political action.

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> —Anna Floerke Scheid
>
> —Anna Floerke Scheid" target="_blank">Tweet this

An informal poll on social media on Aug. 13 about whether churches addressed the events in Charlottesville or racism more generally found that few did, especially among parishes that are predominantly white, according to MT Dávila, associate professor of Christian ethics at Andover Newton Theological School, another organizer.

Dávila hopes the statement — signed by Christians across a wide denominational and even ideological spectrum — gives pastors "permission to preach a word that is faithful to the Gospel and that decries racism for the violation of the common good and human dignity that it is."

In black churches, however, Charlottesville was on everyone's minds.

"It's simply another indication of something we've already known," said Reggie Williams, associate professor of Christian ethics at McCormick Theological Seminary

in Chicago, who signed the statement.

He said the statement's strong language "puts down on paper what it means to be morally faithful to Christ at this moment."

But other signers and organizers hope it does more than that.

"We need to be much more vocal and proactive in speaking out against racism in all its forms — individual and structural," said Floerke Scheid. "If we can't do that, we're going to be irrelevant as a church."

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