News



In this 2015 file photo, Archbishop John Nienstedt is seen in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis. The Napa Institute in Irvine, California, announced Aug. 15 that the archbishop, former head of the Minnesota archdiocese, has "stepped aside from his responsibilities" with the institute. (CNS/Dave Hrbacek, The Catholic Spirit)

Maria Wiering

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Archbishop John Nienstedt has "stepped aside from his responsibilities" at the Napa Institute, the Irvine, California-based organization announced Aug. 15.

According to the institute, since 2016 Nienstedt had been an independent contractor with the Napa Institute, where he edited its conference proceedings for publication, celebrated Masses and participated in its annual conference.

The institute said it had been advised that there are no restrictions on Nienstedt's ministry.

The archbishop resigned as head of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis along with Auxiliary Bishop Lee Piché in June 2015. Their resignations followed the filing of criminal and civil charges by the Ramsey County Attorney's Office against the archdiocese in its handling of sexual abuse perpetrated by former priest Curtis Wehmeyer in 2008-2011.

Nienstedt's connections to the Napa Institute drew criticism from The American Conservative magazine's senior editor, Rod Dreher, who on his blog Aug. 6 accused the institute of being inconsistent in its stance against bishops accused of mishandling sexual abuse.

The institute's founder, Timothy Busch, published an article titled "Our Great Commission: The Call of the Laity to Holiness & Reform in Times of Scandal" which, in light of the credible abuse and sexual misconduct allegations against Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, said the institute would be "turning our attention toward the appropriate and authentic response to the reform necessary in the church."

Dreher said that the institute could not do that credibly while retaining connections to Nienstedt.

After the archbishop's resignation, Pope Francis named Archbishop Bernard Hebda to lead the archdiocese temporarily, later making the appointment permanent. The archdiocese settled the civil charges in 2015, and the Ramsey County Attorney's Office dismissed the criminal charges in 2016.

In a statement he gave at the time of his resignation, Nienstedt said he submitted his resignation to Pope Francis "in order to give the archdiocese a new beginning amidst the many challenges we face" and that he left "knowing that my team and I have put in place solid protocols to ensure protection of minors and vulnerable adults."

As Dreher highlighted, Nienstedt also was the focus of a sexual misconduct investigation he commissioned in 2014 following allegations about his time as a priest and bishop of Detroit and New Ulm, Minnesota. The investigation's report, as well as a report from a follow-up investigation, was submitted to Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, then the U.S. papal representative.

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Nienstedt, who became archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis in 2008, has maintained that the allegations of sexual misconduct are false.

In an August 2016 statement to The Catholic Spirit, the archdiocesan newspaper, following the release of documents related to the Ramsey County Attorney's investigation into the archdiocese, he said that he believes "that the allegations have been made as a personal attack against me due to my unwavering stance on issues consistent with Catholic teaching, such as opposition to so-called same-sex marriage."

He also said that he was "sorry for the way the archdiocese, under my leadership, addressed the allegations against Curtis Wehmeyer. As the archbishop, I should have asked more questions, I should have demanded more answers, and I should have insisted those within the archdiocesan administration at the time share more information with each other."

In its Aug. 15 statement, the Napa Institute said that Nienstedt's leaving was "in light of the Napa Institute's efforts to promote a faithful lay-led reform."

"The Napa Institute is gathering together lay leaders to chart a new way forward that is both faithful to the church's hierarchical structure and committed to holding church leadership accountable," the statement said. "These leaders are working on concrete proposals for governance changes to avoid future scandals.

As part of this effort, the Napa Institute will be hosting a conference in Washington Oct. 2 on authentic reform and the universal call to holiness."

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Wiering is editor of The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.