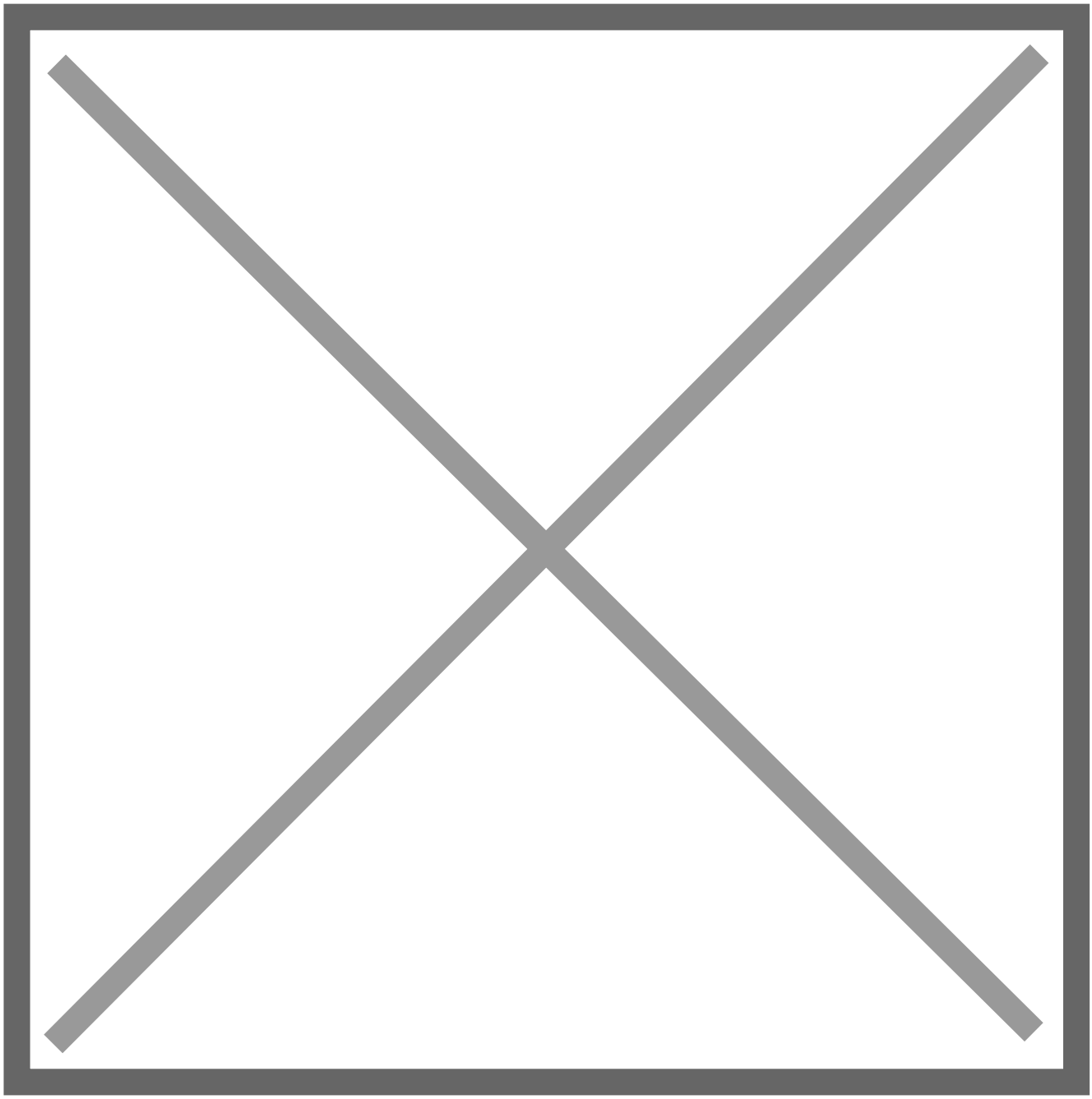
Culture
News



White nationalists are met by counter-protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, Aug. 12, 2017, during a rally over plans to remove the statue of a Confederate general from a city park. (CNS/Reuters/Joshua Roberts)



by Christopher White

Former Vatican Correspondent (2021-2025)

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August 13, 2020
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Editor's note: *Following the publication of this article, on August 14 Sojourners republished the original article and announced new editorial changes, including the appointment of Sandi Villareal as the magazine's new editor-in-chief and a new policy of editorial independence from the organization's advocacy work.*

An article alleging that the Catholic Church has a white power faction was unpublished by Sojourners magazine, prompting backlash from other Catholics over the decision, the public resignation of two of the magazine's editors, four public statements from the editor-in-chief attempting to provide clarification, and ultimately an apology, for the magazine's decision, and a temporary suspension from publishing new articles from outside contributors.

The controversy surrounds the article, first published online under the headline "The Catholic Church has a Visible White-Power Faction" and appearing in the August issue of the print magazine under the title "Harboring a Culture of Hate." The essay was penned by Eric Martin who teaches religion at the University of California Los Angeles and was arrested for countering white supremacist's protests in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017.

In the 2,200-word article, Martin claims that when the U.S. bishops deliberated over their 2018 pastoral letter against racism, they voted to reject language condemning the imagery of swastikas, Confederate flags and nooses.

"The Catholic Church, once persecuted by the Ku Klux Klan, today has a visible white-power faction," he wrote. "As long as the bishops actively refuse to condemn its banners, they give white supremacists space to embrace their anti-Black and anti-Semitic work free of religious dissonance."

Further, Martin chronicles a number of individuals who have promoted their faith as sympathetic to white supremacy or explicitly nationalistic in nature and that these individuals, some of whom led or have founded neo-Nazi groups, have found a safe harbor in Catholic leaders and institutions.

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Sojourners, which was founded by Jim Wallis, a prominent leader in the Christian social justice movement, is a leading advocacy organization in the nation's capital. The monthly magazine began publication in 1971 and since its founding has long served as a progressive voice championing Christian approaches to economic justice, environmental action and racial equality.

In an interview with NCR, Wallis said the decision to unpublish the article was the most agonizing in the nearly 50-year history of the publication and was made in an effort to prevent a break-up of the Circle of Protection, which he describes as "our broadly ecumenical coalition over ten years that has been remarkably effective in preventing deeper budget cuts to the most vulnerable."

Among the members of the Circle of Protection are Catholic Charities USA and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, along with representatives from other ecumenical organizations. Wallis told NCR that he was contacted by members of both organizations, as well as other members, who expressed "outrage" at the article, and rather than risk the article's leading to a potential break-up of allied anti-poverty groups, he made the "agonizing" and "most difficult" decision to pull the article down.

Further, he said that the editorial tensions resulted from the fact that Sojourners is both a magazine publication and an activist organization and that this episode

tested the compatibility of that dual mission. He told NCR that he hopes this "painful episode" would serve as a "case study" for other outlets that are committed to advocacy journalism.

The decision to pull Martin's article has prompted some of its long-time readers, such as Pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler, to write an open letter to the board labeling the decision to unpublish Martin's article as "unsettling." Others have questioned Martin's reporting in the piece, including Catholic board member Stephen Schneck, who argues that the article "ignores our church's strong condemnation of racism."

And for all involved, the month-long imbroglio has created fissures among would-be allies, which those on both sides of the saga believe to be an unhelpful distraction during an election year when many progressive Christians are trying to put racial justice in the spotlight as voters head to the polls.

Public resignations

Since the removal of Martin's original article, two editors — both individuals of color — have publicly resigned in protest.

On Aug. 10, Daniel José Camacho, an associate web editor of the magazine, took to Twitter to announce his resignation.

> Announcement: I'm resigning from @Sojourners
> pic.twitter.com/PuC98W5EJB
>
> — Daniel José Camacho (@DanielJCamacho) August 10, 2020

"I am unable to continue my role here in good conscience," he wrote. "It's become clear that I cannot stay here without compromising my own values and commitment to social justice, journalistic integrity, and honoring diverse and marginalized voices."

At least one other Sojourners editor supported his decision.

"I have immense respect for Daniel J. Camacho and his decision," Sojo.net managing editor Betsy Shirley tweeted. "As the note replacing the article indicates, the editors of Sojourners — myself included — deeply disagreed with this decision."

> I have immense respect for @DanielJCamacho and his decision.
>
> Two weeks ago, this article was removed from https://t.co/SKdbR9O29T. As the note replacing the article indicates, the editors of Sojourners—myself included—deeply disagreed with this decision. https://t.co/qapDbeiwfv https://t.co/G32AJrlj0L
>
> — Betsy Shirley (@BetsyShirley) August 10, 2020

NCR has obtained an internal email sent by Camacho to the Sojourners staff on the morning of Aug. 10.

"In addition to breaking trust with me as an editor at Sojourners, this decision breaks trust with our writers and audience who count on us to have journalistic integrity and to have a sound basis in doing something as extreme as removing a published article, especially one on the topic of racism and the hierarchy of the Catholic Church during the Trump era," he wrote.

Camacho faults Wallis and the executive leadership of Sojourners for overriding the consensus of the editors and bowing to pressure from outside individuals and organizations.

"This drastic move only sows more division instead of building unity amid difference among siblings in Christ," he wrote. "In a national atmosphere with an authoritarian U.S. President who blatantly disregards the truth and attacks journalists, fully cancelling an article is something that should not be done rashly. Silencing dissent can be its own form of violence."

Camacho declined NCR's request for further comments and referred back to his resignation post on Twitter.

On Aug. 13, associate web editor Dhanya Addanki also took to Twitter to announce her resignation from the organization, describing it a "toxic environment" as a woman of color and citing her disapproval of the way Martin's article removal was handled.

> I officially resigned from my associate editor position @Sojourners late last week. I secured another position elsewhere but let me be clear — three years of experiencing this toxic environment as a Dalit woman/WOC + recent events is the reason why I decided to leave. https://t.co/OL4YaVHBbe
>
> — dhanya (@dhanyaddanki) August 13, 2020

An 'explanation of events'

Martin's article was solicited by Sojourners following a paper he submitted to the Society of Christian Ethics, he told NCR. The article first appeared online in early July, but on July 27, it disappeared from the website, with Martin first hearing about the removal via a text message from a friend. The following day, he received an email from the editorial staff of Sojourners informing them that the article had been unpublished at the directive of Wallis, the editor-in-chief.

On social media, however, the controversy was just beginning.

"I am a huge fan of Sojourners, and worked with Eric Martin on a Dan Berrigan book at Orbis Books," tweeted James Keane, an editor at America magazine. "I thought that Eric's article was provocative but fair. It would be great to hear more about why it was deleted as offensive."

> I am a huge fan of Sojourners, and worked with Eric Martin on a Dan Berrigan book at Orbis Books. I thought that Eric's article was provocative but fair. It would be great to hear more about why it was deleted as offensive. https://t.co/bjsMHi6RaQ
>
> — Jim Keane (@jamestkeane) July 28, 2020

"I just wrote a book that looks hard at the way American Catholics have fed into white supremacy and religious intolerance," wrote Megan Goodwin, a visiting lecturer at Northeastern University's Philosophy and Religion department. "This article was not inaccurate or offensive. This article was correct."

Stephen Schneck, executive director of the Franciscan Action Network, pushed back: "Its implications of an organic connection between Catholicism and white supremacy, and of an active effort by church institutions to harbor white supremacists is not supported by its reportage," he tweeted.

As the controversy continued to brew, Wallis has issued a series of statements, beginning with an initial five sentence explanation to subsequently releasing a nearly five-page defense of his decision.

> I read and RTed this article
>
> I just wrote a book that looks hard at the way American Catholics have fed into white supremacy and religious intolerance
>
> this article was not inaccurate or offensive
>
> this article was correcthttps://t.co/QkyXbeUg5u pic.twitter.com/yrBqb4ei05
>
> — Prof. Megan Goodwin (@mpgPhD) July 29, 2020

While his initial statement said the article was "offensive and should not have been published," a second statement on July 31 offered specific criticism of the article.

"The article began with a claim that a bishops pastoral letter on racism was silent on 'three famously extreme symbols of racism' (nooses, swastikas, and the Confederate flag)," wrote Wallis. "The letter in question does in fact name nooses and swastikas as a 'tragic indicator of rising racial and ethnic animus,' though the article says the bishops voted not to condemn them all. The Confederate flag is not named in the letter. This factual error was then used as a key example to link failures in leadership of the Church to the growth of white nationalist and supremacists groups

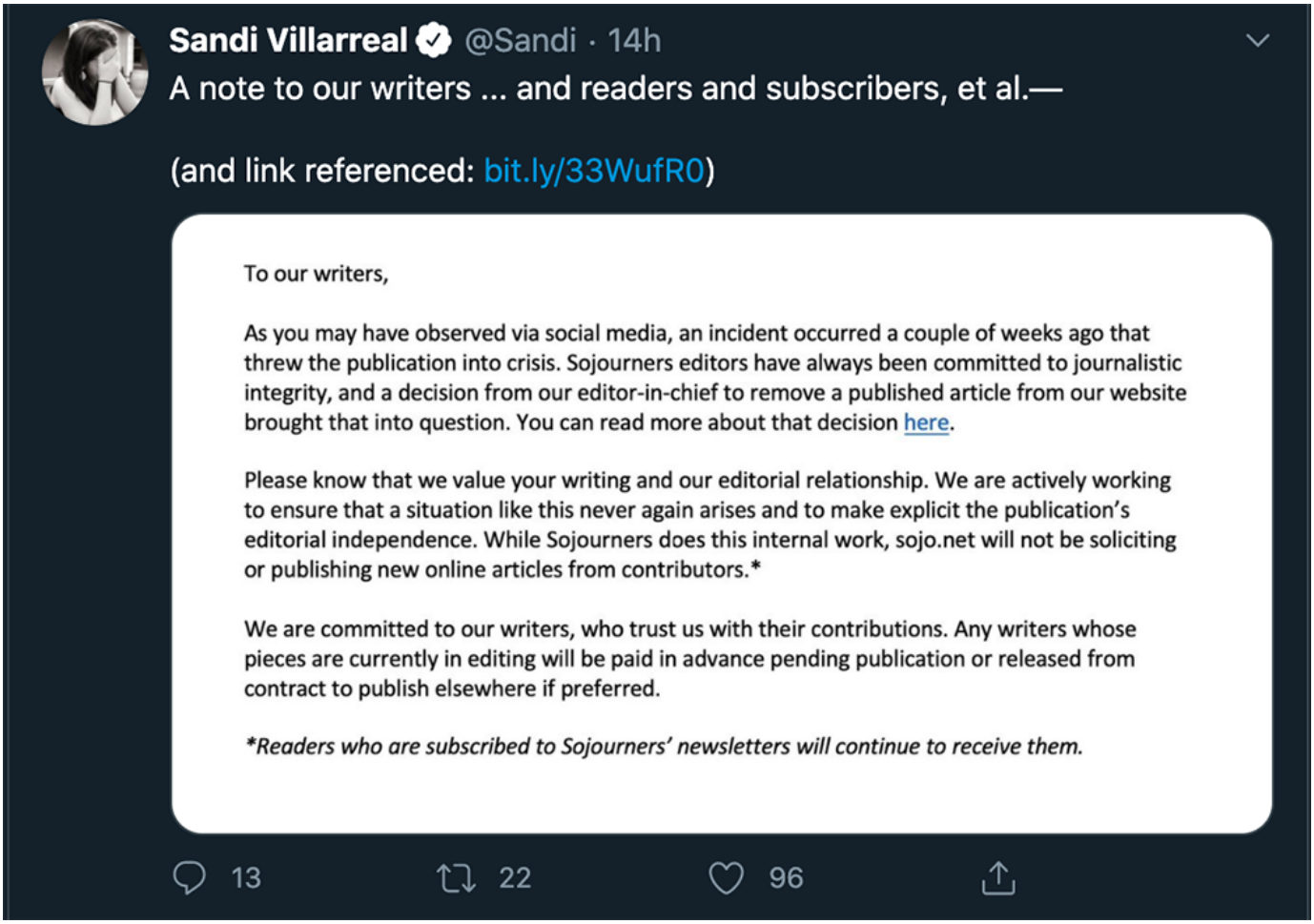
with ties and connections to Catholicism."

"This was a theme that would be returned to throughout the article and ultimately I felt that the broader theme of the article would not be corrected by a simple factual correction," Wallis continued, noting that the other editors had preferred to publish corrections to the original article and keep it on the site.

As online chatter continued, fueled by Camacho's resignation, Wallis issued a statement on Aug. 10 where he attempted to walk a fine line between maintaining his criticism of the article's reporting and its editing process, calling it "perhaps the worst" episode in the history of the magazine, while also saying he took responsibility for the article's being removed and apologized to Martin, whom he labeled as a "a fine scholar and risk-taking activist."

"The first expression of hurt and outrage came from the original publication of the piece, and it was greater than anything I had experienced in our 49 years of publication," he wrote. "This came from many of our dearest, closest, and long-term progressive Catholic allies. This was followed, after the decision to take the article down (and without an adequate explanation), by a whole new wave of hurt and outrage, this time by other friends and readers (many of them also Catholics), who wondered what could have justified such an extraordinary action."

"I deeply understand *both* reactions; I believe both are justified; and I hope to repair the damage that has occurred on both sides," he continued.



Screenshot of tweet from Sandi Villarreal, Sojourners executive editor (NCR photo)

A 'way forward?'

On Aug. 12, Wallis followed up with his summation of events, in a column titled "Repentance- A New Way Forward," where he stressed that his decision was made in an effort to prevent the coalition of religious groups fighting poverty from fracturing, yet also admitting the entire episode had tested the ability to the organization to serve as a journalistic endeavor and an activist group.

"We have tried to be a publication/organization that does both messaging and mobilizing. Many have admired Sojourners for striving to do both. But this time that tension became untenable and failed completely with painful consequences. As both President and Editor in Chief, I wish I had found a way to handle this particular conflict very differently, and I failed at that," he wrote.

Going forward, he said that Sojourners would be doubling down on its commitment to a more transparent editorial process for both writers and staff members, and along with a pledge "to any future editor and writer for Sojourners, we will never again take down an article that has already passed our editorial standards to be published, even if mistakes are made in our process."

"In the future we will always find another way," he wrote. On Twitter, executive editor Sandi Villarreal linked to Wallis' column to note that until internal operations are sorted, the magazine would not be publishing any pieces from outside contributors.

As for Martin, who issued a statement of his own on Aug., 12, he said that Wallis' statement "underlines the profound need for Catholics to address overt and covert white supremacist cultures within our Church."

"I am grateful for whatever correction and clarification this process has brought to light regarding the US bishops' vote to not condemn Confederate flags, swastikas, and nooses in their most recent letter on racism," he said. "I leave it to those who read the print edition or find the article elsewhere to interpret its content with this added context."

He also extended thanks to the editors with whom he worked on the article at Sojourners, saying "I would without hesitation work with these individuals again and I fully support their editors and staff, as well as Daniel José Camacho, as they move forward."

Schneck, who himself was at the center of a similar controversy when a Catholic publication pulled an op-ed he penned earlier in the summer, told NCR that while he stands by his criticism of the original article, he said that "things are often done in moments of panic," but that he hoped the "very carefully built long term relationships with social justice Catholics" wouldn't fall apart over this incident but could move forward in shared cause.

"I don't think you should judge the magazine or Sojourners based on one incident, whether you're on one side or the other," he said.

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