News



Michael Voris, founder of Church Militant, leads the praying of the rosary in Baltimore Nov. 16, 2021, during the organization's rally near the hotel where the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was holding its fall general assembly Nov. 15-18. (CNS/Catholic Review/Kevin J. Parks)



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Kristine Christlieb said "red lights were going off" in her head the day Church Militant disconnected the telephones at work after a staff meeting in November 2022.

"It was pretty symbolic, at least it was to me," said Christlieb, who said she worked as a reporter and executive producer at the far-right Catholic media network for 3.5 years, until she was laid off on March 30.

Christlieb told NCR that Church Militant, based in suburban Detroit, laid off almost two dozen part-time and full-time employees. Several former employees have confirmed being laid off on their social media accounts.

In an emailed response to NCR's request for comment, Church Militant said "no outfit is immune from economic realities," and attributed the layoffs to "difficult economic times and challenges."

"It happens to lots of operations. Frequently, they restructure and bounce back," the outlet said in an email it asked to be attributed to "Church Militant Leadership."

In a statement posted on the outlet's website, Michael Voris, who founded Church Militant as Real Catholic TV in 2008, said President Joe Biden's "socialist economy" had "cost our apostolate financially and has forced us to make very hard decisions that have caused all of us much pain personally."

The layoffs at Church Militant followed years of rapid growth. The outlet's profile and visibility grew so much and rose so quickly that from 2017 to 2019 Church Militant was described as a "right-wing media empire in the making" by news outlets like Detroit Free Press, The Atlantic and Vice News.

In those years, Church Militant launched an ambitious expansion campaign by hiring additional staff, building a new chapel and television studio, opening an office in Rome, updating its website and creating a new mobile app.

The day after Biden's inauguration in January 2021, Voris announced that Church Militant was expanding its staff "like never before" thanks to "various people's generosity in the wake of the direction the country is heading." Voris said then that the outlet was looking to hire reporters, producers, and behind-the-scenes editors and camera operators.

Christlieb was working as a freelance writer when she linked up with Church Militant halfway through Trump's term in office. Christlieb said she found Voris to be "a firebrand," and added that she believes Church Militant serves a real need in the Catholic media market.

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"In my opinion, Michael's strength is that he connects the dots," Christlieb said. "He's a real big picture thinker, and he's an excellent commentator. He's a very compelling commentator."

But as a chief executive, Christlieb criticized Voris as leading an operation with "an old-school top-down management style" where communication had increasingly become "very bad" over the last year.

Christlieb, whose professional background is in fundraising for charitable organizations and other nonprofits, also cited Voris' everyday role as the president of St. Michael's Media/Church Militant at the same time that he serves on the organization's board of directors.

"These organizations melt down all the time because of these kinds of governance issues," Christlieb said.




A reporter with Church Militant, also known as St. Michael's Media, interviews Matt DePerno, candidate for Michigan attorney general, Oct. 12, 2021, in Lansing, Michigan. (CNS/Jim West)

Lloyd Hitoshi Mayer, a law professor at the University of Notre Dame who studies nonprofit organizations, told NCR that it is "generally a bad idea" for an organization's chief executive to serve on its board of directors.

"Part of the board's role is to hire, evaluate and set the compensation for the chief executive, and it's hard for the board to perform those oversight functions properly if the person running the board is also the chief executive," Mayer said.

In its statement to NCR, Church Militant said its board is not involved in day-to-day operations, and added that the board "rarely meets or makes decisions beyond minimal legal obligations, or to review regulatory filings, etc."

Regarding Voris' position on the board, the statement said it was he "who not only founded the apostolate but also donated over 1 million dollars of his own personal

money to begin the operation. If others would like to donate a million dollars to the cause, they are certainly welcome to join the board as well."

According to court records, Church Militant has been involved in at least three lawsuits over the last two years. The outlet is still in litigation against the city of Baltimore over the city's move in 2021 to cancel a rally the organization held that November during the U.S. Catholic bishops' annual meeting. The outlet is also currently a defendant in a federal defamation lawsuit brought by a New Hampshire priest in February 2021. A two-week trial is scheduled for September.

In its statement to NCR, Church Militant said that despite recent economic setbacks the outlet "still maintains one of the largest staffs (46) of any Catholic media apostolate who are each dedicated to the mission and work diligently to promote and advance it."

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