

Charleston Clergy: Here For You

The "Holy City" sits in awe and disbelief as we try to bear the enormous weight of the knowledge that on Wednesday evening, June 17, 2015, the unthinkable happened. As a minister of the gospel, I am struggling to wrap my head around the heinous crime that took place just a few miles away from the church I pastor, the Shiloh Seventh-day Adventist Church. After talking with other members of the clergy in the area, I found that we are all at a loss for words. In fact as we try to make sense of something that makes no sense, the common conclusion was simply: He that shall come, will come!

As I stood before my own congregants that same Wednesday evening, a young man that did not look like me entered the sanctuary. I had no inkling of the events beginning to unfold at Mother Emanuel, and as usual, we invited him in with open arms. At the conclusion of our service, we sat in my office for about 20 minutes as I searched high and low to find the assistance that he needed. An hour later, chills ran down my spine as I realized the mirror image of my own experience, and that of Clementa Pinckney, and how similar our stories could have ended.

Although I did not work with Senator Pinckney often, the time we did spend together, most recently after the death of Walter Scott, (the unarmed Black man shot eight times in the back by a North Charleston Police Officer), allowed me to see and know that the words spoken of him in death were exemplified in life.

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Since the deaths of the #Emanuel9, people began to gather immediately upon hearing the news of the shooting. Every day since has seen a surge of people, looking for solace, looking for hope and looking for answers. One pastor, recounted his anger and angst, but remembered that people were

counting on him to be strong even when it seems that our strength has been stolen. The general consensus is that we, as a community of many races, creeds and people, have been shaken to our core, but in spite of it all, there is still hope in love and power in prayer.

As I sit here and reflect on my own life, the reality of the matter is that I must face my own fears. I am speaking of fear as a man, as an African American in the Deep South, where the confederate flag still stands high above our state capitol building.

And as I come to grips with my reality, I am not overcome by fear that my life will be taken as much as I am overcome by the fear that there are still some that have not experienced God's amazing grace salvation, the fact that we are living in the last days, and the necessity of putting one's life in order to make Heaven their final home. I am afraid that even in the midst of this tragedy, there are still those that refuse to accept the right of decision given to them at the beginning of time, and using that same right to make Jesus their final choice. By no means should this tragedy be diminished; in fact, it is a stark reminder that we as the church triumphant have a work to do, hearts to touch, prayers to pray, and souls to win in order for our Lord and Savior to return. Charleston has been dubbed "The Holy City" because of the number of churches that line the city streets and call us to repentance. Clearly, the call must resonate louder, ring clearer and burn deeper in our hearts so that we go into all the world and share the love of Jesus Christ!

Sunday morning as I went to Mother Emanuel to attend the first worship service since the horrific scenes of the fateful night, the call to worship and pray reverberated with thousands. Some were greeted by members of various churches including Awaken Church, whose members wore orange tee shirts that read "HERE FOR YOU" and took pleasure in handing out water in the heat of 95-degrees.

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Inside Mother Emanuel, the words of "Total Praise" could be heard as worship began. Joseph Riley, dubbed as the Nation's Mayor, stood alongside Governor Niki Haley, Senator Tim Scott, and Bishop Richard Franklin Norris, the Presiding Prelate of the Seventh- Episcopal District, along with other dignitaries as well as the congregants of Mother Emanuel Church.

As the thousands heard the song, "What shall I Render?" many searched their own hearts privately, wondering what service they could offer to unify a city touched so deeply by this act. Norvell Goff, the presiding elder of the Edisto District of the State Conference of the AME Church, took the podium and spoke eloquently of the nine lives taken, the deep wounds that have been created by this act, and the work that remains for the living. "The shooter intended a race war; today he got all races joined together in the one way that despite race and creed, we all could be united: prayer and love."

So what do I take away from all of this? I am still trying to figure it out. Some days I'm in a daze and other days I am fielding calls from parishioners and community members that still want answers. Where do we go from here? Well as a city, as a community and as a church, we've made up our minds that we shall overcome. We will band together as one unit and continue to fight the good fight of faith.