

With new pastor in place, Emanuel AME continues on its 'mission of hope'

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Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, has welcomed a new pastor as the congregation's work for justice continues.

Betty Deas Clark, a close colleague of the previous pastor, Clementa Pinckney, became the pastor at Emanuel in late January. Pinckney was among the nine people killed by a white supremacist shooter during a Bible study on June 17.

"I'm sure that to some of my parishioners it's like yesterday," Clark told a local television station. "It's going to take me some time to sit with the people, cry with the people, talk to the people . . . then talk to God and ask him, Where do we go from here?"

Her first sermon focused on a message of hope based on Jeremiah 29:11, the *Charleston Post and Courier* reported.

"God feels our pain, hears our cries, and he knows our every move," Clark said. "While the dreams, expectations, and bodies of many have been laid to rest, we must not allow nor put our hope to rest."

The congregation anticipates that Clark's work will include "building upon the healing that has been done," several church leaders wrote in a document published February 1 on the congregation's website. "Our mission is still one of hope."

The document describes Emanuel's history of resilience in the face of racism, and how it is moving forward.

"We know that we live in a violent and sinful world," they wrote. "Our faith must be stronger than our fear."

Clementa Pinckney's work, which also included being a state senator, was "all about peace," said Jennifer Pinckney, his widow and one of the survivors of the massacre

at Emanuel AME, in a forum February 9 at Duke University on gun control, race, and faith.

Pinckney spoke about the shooting and how she waited in another room with her six-year-old daughter, Malana, for the Bible study to finish.

“She heard everything that was going on,” said Pinckney of Malana. “Within that moment, she asked me, ‘Mama, is Daddy going to die?’”

Pinckney has started a foundation in her husband’s name to continue his support of public education and health care access. She also serves on the Women’s Coalition for Common Sense, a gun control reform group convened by Gabby Giffords, a former U.S. representative who also survived a mass shooting.

“I want him to smile down on us,” Pinckney said. “I want to carry on his work.”

Pinckney’s friends Chris Vaughn and Kylon Middleton, pastors who also spoke at the forum, addressed gun control, racial inequality, and social justice.

Middleton, pastor of Mount Zion AME Church, also in Charleston, pointed out that his denomination arose in rebellion against Methodist churches that gave whites priority at the prayer rails.

“The AME church itself was born out of social-justice protest,” he said. “Religion and politics can’t be separated when we have poverty right outside our doors. We cannot divorce ourselves from the plight of everyday people, whether white, black, or purple. It really doesn’t matter. We all should have access to certain things.”

Eboni Marshall Turman, director of Duke Divinity School’s Black Church Studies program, who moderated the forum, lamented the rise of a gospel of prosperity and respectability, noting that black churches were birthed in the experience of suffering and poverty.

Vaughn, pastor of Jerusalem Branch Baptist Church in Salley, South Carolina, concurred.

“We go and get our feel-good on Sunday morning, and when that feel-good is over with, we go on our way,” Vaughn said. “That’s why we need real church, to be able to do real work in the community. More conversations need to take place that make us feel uncomfortable. When we feel uncomfortable, we move.”

Middleton added that church members need to support state-level legislation to enact the gun control provisions President Obama has called for in his recent executive order. Obama's order narrows the so-called gun show loophole, which exempts most small sellers from keeping formal sales records.

"In South Carolina, every nine minutes someone dies from gun violence; it's not a white or black issue," Middleton said. "We must sound the clarion trumpet. We must reclaim our prophetic voice and call wrong, wrong." —the *Christian Century* staff; Religion News Service