

Resistance and mourning at Emanuel

by [Yamiche Alcindor](#) in the [July 22, 2015](#) issue

Hundreds packed the pews of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, just days after the deadly June 17 attack there, readying themselves to bury nine beloved members and seek justice on their behalf as part of the church's activist tradition.

In an energetic and emotional service, Norvel Goff, interim senior pastor, assured those gathered that the victims, including Clementa Pinckney, the church's senior pastor and a state senator, did not die in vain.

"We still believe that prayer changes things," Goff said. "Can I get a witness?" The congregation, swelled with government and community leaders and South Carolina governor Nikki Haley and her family, responded with a rousing "Yes."

"We're going to be vigilant," Goff said as churchgoers swayed and clapped in response. "The blood of the Mother Emanuel nine requires us to work until not only justice in this case but for those living in the margin of life, those less fortunate than ourselves, that we stay on the battlefield until there's no more fight to be fought."

Dylann Roof, 21, was charged with opening fire on the group during a Wednesday Bible study, according to police affidavits.

"There are people who are terrorized by what happened," said Daniel Martin Jr., 52, a Charleston County judge, who is the fourth generation of his family to attend the church.

His 83-year-old mother left the church just an hour before the shooting, and his 17-year-old daughter often helped Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, a member of the ministerial staff who died in the attack, pray with the church's youngest members. Neither woman went to church June 21.

"My daughter is struggling with the loss," Martin said. "She is very afraid to come back in the building right now."

Emanuel, which has more than 1,500 members, is the oldest African Methodist Episcopal church in the South and is called “Mother Emanuel.”

[The church’s website listed five people on the ministerial staff, three of whom died in the attack. One of them, Daniel L. Simmons Sr., had earned a master of divinity degree from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina, as had Pinckney. Susan McArver, professor of church history and educational ministry, said of Pinckney, 41, in a statement on the school’s website, “While at LTSS, he and his wife, Jennifer, welcomed their firstborn. Clementa balanced all of these roles, as a legislator, pastor, student, husband, and father, with grace and wisdom well beyond his years.”]

The church has a history of political involvement. In 1822, it was investigated after one of its founders, Denmark Vesey, tried to organize a failed slave rebellion. In March 1909, Booker T. Washington spoke there, and in 1962, Martin Luther King Jr. and Wyatt Tee Walker of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference called on church members to register to vote.

“This church has always been about resistance,” Martin said. “When the time is right, you will hear from Emanuel and this community. Changes need to be made and after the grieving process has been completed, you will hear loudly and the voice of many that some things are going to have to change.”

Goff said he would focus on the victims’ families and talk about reforms later. “I’m reminded that there are other challenges that face us, does not go unnoticed, does not mean we’re unaware of the problems that many of us face not only in America but in South Carolina and Charleston,” he said.

Willi Glee, 74, who has been a member of Emanuel AME for decades, had left the church just an hour and a half before the shooting happened. On June 21 he said having a Sunday service soon after the shooting sent a message.

“It said to me that this is our house, and we should be able to come back to our house even after all this,” Glee said.

Angie Smith, 47, a social worker who started attending Emanuel AME as a seven-year-old, agreed. She said she felt surprisingly calm and at peace when she walked into the church that Sunday morning.

Since the shooting, Smith had been crying constantly and trying to understand how such a thing could have happened. Goff's Sunday sermon helped put her mind at ease, made her feel less depressed, and reminded her about the character of her fellow congregants, she said.

"We're all about uplifting people and doing the right thing," Smith said. "We wrap our arms around everyone. Despite the fact that there was someone who came in from the outside, we still open our arms to everyone to come into the church."

Smith, a black woman, added that she has been followed in some of Charleston's stores because of her race. She hopes that the shooting will lead people to have frank discussions about how to break away from prejudices.

Lucinda Magwood, 60, of Johns Island, South Carolina, spent Sunday at Emanuel AME in remembrance of Ethel Lance, a shooting victim who was a friend of a friend. "Racism is still here, prominent in America in the 21st century," she said.

Glee has lived in Charleston for 38 years but experienced one of the most blatant episodes of racism in his life in Connecticut. He said a woman declined to rent him an apartment because he was black.

"Racism is a disease," Glee said. "It's like water poured into the ground. It is everywhere. It will never go away because we keep feeding it. And, there are a lot of sick people." — *USA Today*

This article was edited on July 6, 2015.