

South Carolina AME churches keep extending welcome a year after massacre

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [July 6, 2016](#) issue

A few weeks after a young white gunman killed nine people at a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, another young white man walked into a Bible study at another AME church in South Carolina.

This young man did not seem to understand why his unexpected presence at Campbell Chapel, 100 miles away in the coastal town of Bluffton, unnerved the regulars that Wednesday evening.

It was as if he hadn't heard about Dylann Roof and his intention to start a race war. The young man's awkward body language, sighs, and eye rolling only made the congregants more nervous as they tried to focus on scripture.

In Charleston, Roof had listened for nearly an hour as a group of 12 studied a passage from the Gospel of Mark. Then, authorities say, he opened fire with a gun he had received as a present for his 21st birthday.

The horror of that night was still vivid to Jon Black, Campbell Chapel's pastor. Clementa Pinckney, slain at Emanuel, had once pastored Campbell Chapel and had mentored Black.

Black was watching confusing, inconclusive news footage on June 17, 2015, while speaking by phone to a fellow pastor calling from outside Emanuel.

His distraught friend kept repeating: "The ambulances are not moving. The ambulances are not moving." And then he told Black that Pinckney was dead.

"It crushed me," Black said.

But when the strange young man showed up in his church a few weeks later, he felt that he could not ask him to leave. The litany that AME church leaders had asked its pastors to share with their congregations the Sunday after the Charleston massacre was titled "Our Doors Are Open."

“So how do you do that on Sunday morning and close them on Wednesday night?” Black said.

His church welcomed the young man, who still comes to Bible study at Campbell Chapel sometimes. The church’s doors remain open.

In the wake of the shooting at Emanuel, congregations in the AME and other black churches have ratcheted up security—installing cameras and, in some cases, posting armed ushers. Officers sometimes sit in on Bible classes, and law enforcement ran a background check on Campbell Chapel’s unfamiliar visitor.

At Emanuel, Bible study has continued every Wednesday in the same linoleum-tiled basement room where Roof pulled his gun. Photographs of the nine victims are framed by the entrance. Typically, about 20 people came to Bible study, but far fewer were there the night of the shooting because a church meeting earlier in the evening had pushed the study later into the night.

After June 17, the Bible study was packed with visitors, black and white. “Standing room only,” said Willi Glee, the chairman pro tem of the church’s board of trustees.

Attendance has been dwindling since then; about 40 people came on a recent Wednesday evening. Two-thirds black and one-third white, they sat unsegregated in folding chairs, facing Emanuel’s new pastor.

Betty Deas Clark used her clarion voice to take up the serious subject of the evening: how to be a good church member. But she often employed her own humor to drive home her teaching.

“You’ve got to learn to love the hell out of other people,” she said, drawing some titters for her choice of words. “I tell people all the time, the way I use *hell* in church is totally different from the way you use it at home. ‘Cause you do use it. You know you use it.”

Once, before the final prayer, as she spoke about the esteem with which she holds her calling as a pastor, she referred to the bloodshed that took place in the room last year: “I know this is probably a delicate thing to say, especially in this room, but I need to say this. If you’re not willing to die for what you believe in, you’re not ready to live. You’re not ready to live.”

She received a chorus of amens.

“So when I stand here, look, I don’t care how big you are,” she said. “I really don’t care how tall you are. I don’t care what you’re packing. I got something better to do. OK?”

Clark was installed in January to fill Pinckney’s big shoes. She focuses on healing, preaching, and pastoral care, something some parishioners said they weren’t getting enough of in the immediate aftermath of the massacre, amid security concerns and a dispute over how to spend the money donated to Emanuel.

The challenges facing her church are daunting. But Emanuel—a five-minute walk from the harbor where 40 percent of North America’s enslaved Africans arrived in chains—was born in hostile territory.

“Tragedies happen to black people since the history of black people in this country,” said Glee of Emanuel’s board of trustees. “Terrorism to black people isn’t new. It’s old. It’s new to white people. But it’s not new to black people.” —Religion News Service

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