

With regard to Charleston: why I want us to all stop praying for a while

By [Crystal St. Marie Lewis](#)

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I'm certain you've heard the news by now. Nine Black people were murdered Wednesday night at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The gunman, a White man, reportedly attended Bible study and prayed with his victims before launching into a tirade about how Black people are "taking over the country" and "raping white women." He opened fire on the congregants, killing most of those in attendance, including Clementa Pinckney, pastor and a state senator.

I've mostly been glued to the coverage of this event, both via social media and cable news. I fell asleep for a short while Wednesday night knowing that yet another horrendous, racially-motivated act had been carried out against my people in the land that I call "home." And then I awakened, immediately remembering the pain and frustration of the night before. I can't describe the extraordinary sadness, bewilderment, and longing for justice I feel. I can only say that all of those emotions seem to have seeped beyond my psyche into my bones. The pain has collected in my flesh. I'm numb sometimes, and then I feel the radiating emotional anguish down in my joints all over again.

When the pain subsides, I'm able to process the overwhelming anger mixed with palpable fear—anger that so few people are listening to the cries of the racially targeted and oppressed, and fear that an incident like the one in Charleston will happen again. Unquestioningly, I know that this feeling in the pit of my gut is *terror* in every sense of the word.

The timing of the shooting was such that I was unable to speak with anyone face-to-face about what I was feeling before taking to social media for solace and human interaction. As a religion blogger, I naturally follow a large number of religious figures online, including clergy, writers, and other thinkers. I noticed that most of them were asking that we all pray; that we petition for divine intervention into America's problems with white supremacy and racism; that we ask God to help us overcome our addiction to firearms.

I watched my Twitter timeline fill with calls for prayer, all while deeply realizing how profoundly we are missing the mark. To be quite candid, it seems to me that we don't need to talk with *God* about white supremacy, racism, or gun control. We need, instead, to be talking with one another.

I've wondered what might happen if people of faith transformed their churches into spaces where conversations about race and ethnicity were not taboo. What would happen if white churches intentionally dug in deep to educate themselves about racism (which is different from discrimination), instead of disengaging when conversations get tough? Who could we become if we boldly turned our attention to having tough conversations with one another?

I continue in this sadness and bewilderment with a heavy heart and with the conviction that we religious folks may, perhaps, need a moratorium on our talks with God—for a short time at least. We need, instead, to start talking openly, honestly, and without fear to one another about how people in our generation continue to participate in the oppressive phenomenon known as racism. We need to talk with one another about what it means for people of color to live in terror, what it means for a church like the historic Emmanuel AME to lose its sense of sanctuary, and what it means when outrage against events like these only lasts as long as the news cycle will allow.

I understand, my religious friends and colleagues, how desperately you desire to pray, given the tragic nature of these events. However, I have run out of prayers and only desire to ask you: will you instead talk face-to-face with someone about white supremacy and racism? Are you willing to start a conversation about what the world needs in order to move forward in peace?

Is it possible that our prayers for God to somehow fix the world seem unheard because we don't yet see ourselves as the answers to those prayers? And if so, how do we change our faulty perspective?

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