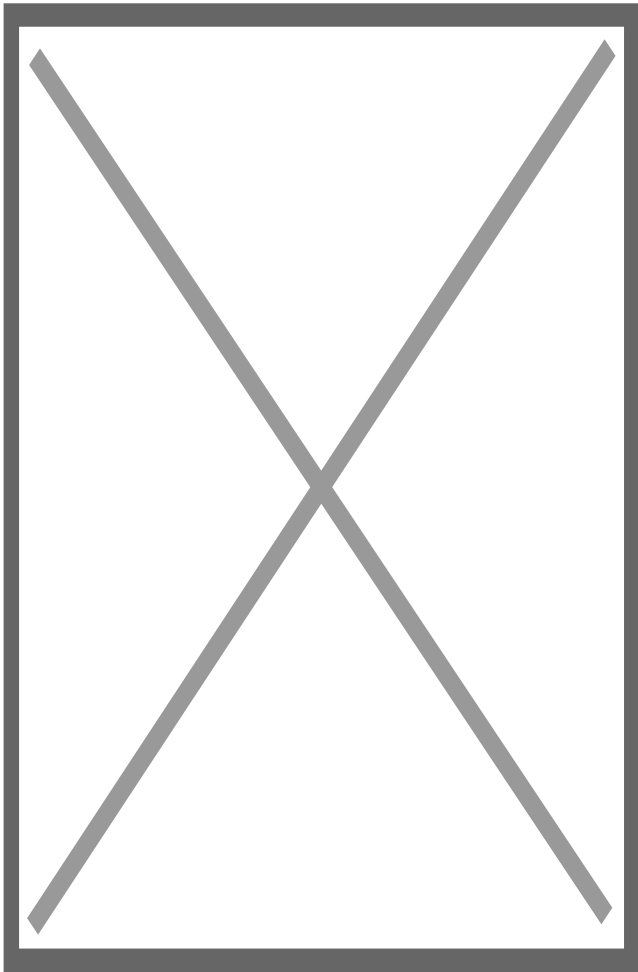


Mother Emanuel's long struggle

In his history of the Charleston congregation, Kevin Sack frames the 2015 mass murder as the culmination of 200 years of persecution.

by [Elizabeth Robeson](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue

## In Review



## Mother Emanuel

Two Centuries of Race, Resistance, and Forgiveness in One Charleston Church

By Kevin Sack

Crown

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

If White Christians in the United States read just one book this year, I hope it will be *Mother Emanuel*. Kevin Sack, who covered the nightmarish murder trial of Dylann Storm Roof for *The New York Times*, has gifted the nation with an exquisitely tended and cathartic yield seeded by the cataclysm of June 17, 2015.

On that sultry Wednesday evening, Roof, a 21-year-old White supremacist from Columbia, South Carolina, drove to the “Holy City” of Charleston—so nicknamed for its abundance of striking churches—and coolly entered a Bible study underway at Mother Emanuel AME, arguably the most historic Black church in the American South. He went, he later said, to spark a race war.

Within an hour of having welcomed their ill-fated guest, the group ended its discussion of the parable of the sower and stood to pray. When all eyes had closed, Roof pulled a Glock .45 from his waist. Shrieking racial epithets, he squeezed the trigger 77 times to shred the bodies of nine people, including a recent college graduate, his 87-year-old great-aunt, and their accomplished young pastor, then serving a third term in the state senate.

Survivors included an 11-year-old girl and two women, one of whom attracted Roof’s demonic attention as she lay traumatized and praying under a table. With his gun’s laser homing in on her head, he asked querulously, “Did I shoot you yet?” And then, “I’m not going to. I’m going to leave you here to tell the story.” Slipping away, he drove to the North Carolina mountains where law enforcement apprehended him the next morning. The murderer descends from a distinguished line of Lutheran pastors.

Reviewers have declared *Mother Emanuel* a masterpiece, and rightly so. It is high drama, impeccably written. A mosaic of history, reportage, and meditation, the book has elicited an outpouring of commentary, much of it focused on the astonishing public professions of forgiveness declaimed by six members of victims’ families two days after the massacre.

None of the Emanuel Nine had yet been buried when their loved ones learned of Roof’s public bond hearing on June 19. There, the soft-spoken but implacable killer appeared via closed-circuit television in a room of emotional devastation. Broadcast live around the world, it was the most dramatic and controversial aspect of the terror’s aftermath. The family members had no inkling that they would be invited to address him, but they were—and six members of different families stood, one after another, to express their anguish and to bestow upon Roof their forgiveness and prayers for God’s mercy. Incredulously, survivor Felicia Sanders—whose son and aunt were lost in the carnage—summoned the grace to stanch her tears and say, “We welcomed you. We enjoyed you.”

Sack attributes this unscripted spontaneity to “an ethereal force” that by turns outraged, bewildered, and humbled all who witnessed it.

Through dozens of interviews and his own contemplation of this transcendent moment, Sack renders the poignant essence of Black Methodism as an unshakable faith annealed through centuries of dehumanization that few White Americans have dared to fathom. While these six did not speak for all whose lives were scarred, they personified, writes Sack, the inherited practice of forgiveness as self-preservation. It’s a practice forged by their ancestors through a deeply embodied identification with the martyred Christ, a devotion that White supremacy corrupted in the slaveholder and throughout the evangelical South.

The slaveholder’s capacity for delusion is evident in South Carolina’s terrifying slave code. Ascribing to White Christians the quality of virtue and an abhorrence for cruelty, the code is a catalog of sadistic punishment reserved for “barbarous” Africans: facial branding, public whippings, slit nostrils, severed tendons, sliced-off ears, castration, burning at the stake, starving to death in chains. Rewards to Indigenous trackers of runaways required the return of a scalp bearing two ears. The code vested in every White person the power to detain,

interrogate, beat, maim, rob, or kill an African with impunity. Codified as chattel—meaning things, not human beings—enslaved people possessed no right to self-defense.

As the seat of slaveholders' hegemonic power and the point of entry for nearly half of all Africans forced into the maw of American slavery, historic Charleston bears little resemblance to the idyll conjured by its aristocracy and booster-heirs. For most of its 355 years, the city has existed as a jackbooted police state.

Against this backdrop, Sack's recounting of Mother Emanuel's founding in 1817 and how it withstood two centuries of persecution reads like Greek mythology, a testament to the resilience of a people committed to the advent of the kingdom of God. The congregation's practice of forgiveness, he writes, has sustained and shielded the very humanity that execrable White Christians have tried mercilessly to stamp out.

*Mother Emanuel* is a perfectly timed cautionary tale. From America's execution chambers and ICE roundups to the starvation in the rubble of Gaza, Christendom's wretched obsession with controlling and desecrating the body of "the other" is ascendant once again. Dylann Roof is just one among the blighting legions enraged by the audacity of non-White people to persevere.

After completing his grueling *New York Times* assignment, Kevin Sack could have returned to a comfortable life in Atlanta. Instead, he moved to Charleston, deeply affected by his experience there and transfixed by the congregation's long and arduous struggle for liberation. A decade in the making, *Mother Emanuel* ensures that the congregation's legacy will not be charred by a White supremacist but celebrated far and wide for its stalwart refusal to break. May we all be so faithful in the days ahead.