

Testimony of
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on

*The Targeting of Black Institutions: From Church Violence to University Bomb
Threats*

Before a Hearing of the
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives

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10:00 a.m. EDT

310 Cannon House Office Building and via Cisco WebEx

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Katko, thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts with you this morning.

This is the first time that I have ever appeared before a congressional committee. Please know how deeply humbled I am by this opportunity to share with you today, my reflections on the pain that was experienced by a deliberate and sinful act rooted in hate.

While there have been many attacks levied against the black church throughout history, for the purpose of this testimony today I will discuss two. The first being the 16th Street Baptist Church, the site of one sinful act rooted in hate. On Sunday September 15th, 1963, at 10:22 am, when worshippers were gathering for worship service and church school was concluding a bomb went off. Four young girls attending Sunday School were murdered: Addie Mae Collins (14), Cynthia Wesley (14), Carole Robertson (14) and Carol Denise McNair (11). While this sinful act of hate took place over fifty-seven years ago, the community is still feeling the pain that was inflicted upon them.

The second sinful act rooted in hate occurred on Wednesday June 17th, 2015, at the conclusion of Bible Study. This act occurred at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) while the Bible Study group closed the session in prayer. It was at that time a lone gunman, who was welcomed by the group opened fire killing nine members of the church: Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton (45), Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd (54), Susie J. Jackson (87), Ethel Lee Lance (70), Rev. DePayne Middleton (49), Honorable Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney (41), Tywanza Sanders (26), Rev. Daniel L. Simmons, Sr. (74), and Myra Singleton Thompson (59). There were also five survivors: Felicia Sanders, Polly Sheppard, Jennifer Pinckney, and two minor children.

The tragedy of June 17th, 2015 shook all the foundations of Mother Emanuel AMEC to their very core. Acts of Christian love were met by forces of hate, racism, bigotry, and violence. A welcomed visitor ended the weekly prayer meeting with actions the congregation had never experienced in more than two centuries of worship.

As the worshippers bowed their heads in a closing prayer nine members—including the young and visionary pastor—were murdered. Three other members were terrorized—tortured by indescribable memories.

The entire congregation was shocked, stunned and rendered speechless by an unbelievable horror. It left an indelible stain on their hearts, minds, and memories.

A sacred sanctuary became a crime scene.

The loving response of Charleston citizens, the protective response of city, state and national officials, the outpouring of condolences and sympathy revealed that this tragedy of bigotry and hate no longer represented the forces that opposed Mother Emanuel AMEC in its earlier days.

Despite the welcomed support the indelible stain of tragedy was uniquely felt by Mother Emanuel AMEC. With joined hands and humble hearts the congregation had to look only to the Divine hills for help. There they found comfort in the arms of a loving God. While this sinful act of hate took place almost seven years ago the community is still feeling the lingering effects of this trauma.

It is important to understand that both crimes rooted in hate struck at the heart of the black community, which is the church. In many communities the church is the place where the community gathers to fellowship, comfort, discuss community concerns, and most importantly share in the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ. When an attack is levied against the black church it has lingering effects and I am not sure how long it takes to truly heal from these acts of hate that are rooted in the sin of racism.

I have served the congregation of Mother Emanuel AMEC as their senior pastor for almost six years and can truly say that every member is in a different place when it comes to healing. Many continue to deal with the lingering impact of having their sacred place of worship being violated by the sin of racism. To this day there are still many members who have not returned to the church.

I would characterize the lingering effects of trauma as a long-term opportunity (meaning that we still must seek resources that will help members recover). In the short term (immediately following the tragedy) the church developed a detailed security plan. This security plan was implemented by the church and continues to be updated on a regular basis.

To date the church has spent well over fifty thousand dollars in updating the security cameras on site, deploying bio metric scanners, key fobs, and employing off duty police officers. This new budgetary item is one that I thought would be reduced over time, unfortunately this has not become a reality for Mother Emanuel AMEC.

Tragically, we live in a world where the sin of hate is so strong that many houses of worship will need to develop detailed security plans. I believe that we can all still come together to find sustainable solutions that would protect all houses of worship, understanding though that this would require all of us to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I would want to believe that we could truly embrace what Abraham Lincoln said, “let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other man—this race and that race and the other race being inferior... Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal”.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share with you all today.