

ACLCL Clergy Helping to Re-knit America's Multiracial Fabric

Tom Cutts
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Race relations in America were severely challenged by riots and the destruction of property in Ferguson, Missouri (2014), and Baltimore, Maryland (2015). However, the response of the survivors to last year's mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina, offers a hopeful example of the power of forgiveness.

State Senator and Pastor Clementa C. Pinckney and eight members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church were murdered on June 17, 2015, while bowed in prayer during a Bible study. Immediately after the slaying, survivors of the incident shocked the world by forgiving the shooter. Their trust in a loving and forgiving God won the respect and the attention of people across the globe.

To mark the first anniversary of the slayings, clergy of the American Clergy Leadership Conference (ACLCL) participated in a prayer and panel discussion in Charleston. The event was hosted by the Wesley United Methodist Church and its pastor, Rev. Anna Miller, and took place from 6 to 9:30 p.m. on Friday, June 24, 2016. There were about 60 participants, including ten ACLCL pastors and South Carolina State Representatives J. Seth Whipper and Terry Alexander.

Two participants of the program were Rev. and Mrs. William Robinson. Before relocating to Edisto Island, South Carolina, they lived in New York and hosted several ACLCL prayer breakfasts at the Ebenezer A.M.E. Church in Harlem. They were very moved by the memorial program and felt a lot of hope for reconciliation. Rev. Robinson said: "Dr. Michael Jenkins [ACLCL chair emeritus] is a charismatic leader and gave a powerful message. I was also very impressed with the delivery and presentation by Rev. Tom Cutts [ACLCL executive director]. I felt proud to know them both and proud to be a part of ACLCL."

Another ACLCL pastor and his wife in attendance were Bishop Mosby Nelson and Mrs. Rosa Nelson. Before moving to Columbia, South Carolina, they had hosted several ACLCL prayer breakfasts in their church in Florida, the Central Faith Mission Ministry of Miami.

Ms. Becky Butler of Mt. Pleasant, S.C. commented, "I was impressed that the presentations evidenced strong spiritual bases even more than political. I felt hopeful more than I have in the past, though I know the road is a hard one."

Before the event, an informal dinner was held with some of the speakers and out-of-town guests at the Charleston restaurant Virginia's On King. The panel discussion was one of several memorial events held in Charleston and across the country. ACLCL clergy helped organize a similar memorial program in Harlem on Friday, June 17, 2016.

The prayer and panel discussion were facilitated by Rev. Dr. Luonne Abram Rouse, the pastor of Huntington Cold Spring Harbor United Methodist Church in Huntington, New York. The panel included Pastor Miller, Representative Alexander, Major Consuela Wilds-Glover, Dr. Michael W. Jenkins, Rev. Dr. Willie Wade, Rev. Dr. Timothy Bowman, Rev. Tom Cutts, Rev. Johnny Cesar, and Ms. Pauline Doty.

Each panelist offered remarks and prayed specifically for one of the nine victims slain at the Emanuel A.M.E. Church, which often is called “Mother Emanuel.”

Dr. Rouse said, “We gathered in Charleston, where a model for healing and reconciling was revealed. The transformative power of forgiveness was sparked by the families of the Charleston victims, and forgiveness remains the primary motive for all reconciliation.”

Representative Alexander, who is also the pastor of Wayside Chapel Baptist Church in Florence, South Carolina, remarked: “The moral conscience of the nation rests on the shoulders of the black church, because of who we are. Moral development in America will move forward beneath the steeples of black churches.” He added: “I knew Senator Pinckney personally. We spent countless times together as legislative leaders in South Carolina through the years.” He also discussed the “burden of inclusion” and how blacks have been asked to give their “presence without power.”

Dr. Jenkins noted that the forces of darkness picked the wrong church and the wrong city with which to try to tear apart the fabric of America. “Pastor Pinckney taught his church well,” Dr. Jenkins said. Contrasting the response of the people of Charleston with those of Ferguson and Baltimore, he commented, “When tragedy struck, instead of being tempted to act in vengeance and violence, the survivors trusted a loving and forgiving God.”

When people came to Charleston to try to create another Ferguson, the church people of Charleston told them to leave. Dr. Jenkins added: “Only faith leaders can heal the body of Christ and transform the nation. We can take the evil out of people only with love. There is no other way.” Referring to Zechariah 4:6, he concluded by saying, “We will succeed not by might nor by power, but by the spirit of the Lord.”

Rev. Anna Miller, the pastor of Wesley United Methodist Church, said she and her congregation knew many of the people who had been murdered. She spoke about the continued suffering of the survivors of Mother Emanuel and the members of Wesley. “People cannot speak of the incident,” she said. “They are afraid even to breathe. They feel suffocated.” Before the survivors had time to grieve, the incident attracted so much international attention and the church services were filled with visitors and well-wishers. “We never had the opportunity to talk among ourselves and have an honest conversation,” Rev. Miller said.

One of the panelists, Ms. Doty, is a grief counselor. After hearing Rev. Miller’s impassioned remarks, she offered to conduct small-group sessions to help facilitate the grieving process and healing.

Rev. Tom Cutts quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood.” Rev. Cutts explained how he is meeting members of the black Cutts family in Georgia whose ancestors were slaves to white Cutts families. He commented, “We are trying to fulfill the dream of Dr. King and are searching for ways to sit together at the table of brotherhood.”

The two FFWPU families who live in Charleston attended the program. Mr. and Mrs. Sammi Rugema brought all six of their children, ages 6 to 16. Mrs. Doreen Rugema said: “It was wonderful to have leaders like Dr. Jenkins and Rev. Cutts with us in Charleston for this historic event. They are able to penetrate barriers and embrace everyone, regardless of race or color, with love and compassion and make such a powerful statement in events such as this. Hearing them speak, our children were even more proud to be Unificationists.”

Mr. and Mrs. David Doose also came to the program. Their son, Jayce, and daughter-in-law, Agnes, dropped by with their two daughters during the informal dinner. Mr. Doose helped with the photography. Mrs. Sanae Doose has been a member of a local ministerial alliance for 20 years, faithfully attending its weekly meetings. She was happy that ACLC finally came to Charleston. “I was hoping ACLC would acknowledge the incident at Mother Emanuel, and this event has been an answer to my prayers,” she said.

Rev. Randall Reeves, the state leader of FFWPU, drove two hours from the capital, Columbia, to participate in the program. With him came two ACLC ministers, a pastor’s wife, and another FFWPU member.

It was decided that in the near future more ACLC programs will be held in Charleston with the hope of helping to mend the multiracial fabric of America.