



## Reflections on Living in South Carolina During This Last Horrendous but Redeeming Week, June 17-24, 2015

by Rev. H. Frederick Reisz, Jr.

Following the clearly racist attack murdering nine African Americans in their church during a Bible Study at "Mother" Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina last Wednesday night, I had sent out an e-mail to some of my friends. I wrote about my and May's experience living in South Carolina, away from Charleston, near Hilton Head Island, during this past week. As it happened we have a personal connection to the tragedy. I was asked if I might allow an edited account to be more widely circulated. This e-mail is that account. Send it where you desire.

What has become clear to me in the last week is that we are witnessing an important example of the Theology of the Cross being lived out in extraordinary Christian witness by a Gospel oriented and non-violent disciplined Christian community. This deserves to be recorded historically, recited as Christian witness, and integrated into our teaching of contemporary Gospel proclamation.

I still rarely go to bed at night before 3 a.m. So I was up on Wednesday night, June 17 and then into Thursday early morning. In fact, I did not go to sleep all night, just watched the TV coverage. It has been a horrendous event here in South Carolina. It has also been accompanied by incredibly Christian reactions from the Black Christian community and then the White in Charleston. The members of "Mother" Emanuel AME Church in Charleston have made an extraordinary Christian witness.

I first heard about the shooting at about 10 p.m. Wednesday night. We were simply told in a news flash that there had been a shooting at the church during a Bible Study. Later the numbers of the dead kept growing until it got to nine! Then I looked up the church on the net and realized that the chief pastor there (among about five ministers) was a former student and graduate from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary who attended in part when I was president of the seminary. May and I knew him as a student. So I sent him an e-mail at about midnight telling him of my horror and my prayers for him and his congregation and assuring him of his gifts for ministry in this situation. The police withheld any information on whom had been shot. At about 3 a.m. they released the name of one of the persons killed. That was State Senator, the Rev Clementa Pinckney. He was our student. He was also a 20 year veteran SC legislator. He was 41. Immediately at 3:15 a.m. I sent an e-mail to the congregation explaining who I was and offering prayers and support. The next day we learned an older pastor of the church was also killed, and he had graduated from LTSS seminary.

These have been horrendous days for us in SC. This is so clearly a racist act. After sitting in a Bible Study at the Church (which he had strategically selected for its historical prominence among African Americans), the young shooter said, "I want to kill Black people!" To add to the mix the family of the young man shooter is a long-time attendee/member of an ELCA Lutheran Church, St. Paul's, in Columbia, SC. A good friend of mine, Rev. Dr. Tony Metze, is the pastor of that congregation. I have been in touch with him supporting him in what will be a long and difficult ministry.

Within an hour of the shooting, Black members of the AME Church, and some Whites were in the streets of Charleston outside the church, in prayer circles praying. As there was much confusion and news reporters descended on them, they bore witness to Christ and

non-violence. This is the oldest AME Church in the South. This is a congregation who has undergone attack, prejudice, even burning. They were schooled in the Gospel, in the hymns, and in non-violence. They were ready! Are we as well disciplined in the faith?

On Thursday morning, I sent an e-mail to our seminary's current and former faculty members who had taught Clementa. His last day was a testament to whom he was and to what our faculty helped to form and affirm in him. Clementa worked all day in the State Senate. Then he drove for two hours to get to his church in Charleston for an early evening planning meeting looking toward the church's anniversary. Then he stayed for an hour's Bible Study which he helped lead after the meeting. It was there that he was shot by this young man. I told the faculty in that day alone he fulfilled his calling as social leader, congregational pastor and his following the way of the Cross in ways we could not have anticipated. Christ hold him.

Friday, May and I went to an AME church near us for a Noon Day ecumenical worship of prayers and scriptures. It was a wonderful mixing of races and Christian witness with integrity. On the way there, we had decided that we would take extra care to sit in pews with Black members. Why would we even have to think about that? When we arrived there did seem to be clumps of Black and then separated clumps of White people. Fortunately that changed as the service time drew near. In the Black Church tradition of wonderful hospitality to any minister, May and I were seated on the front row with the Pastor's wife and family. Amazing. Pastors from half a dozen other area churches were there and led prayers. The Methodist minister was also one of my former students who graduated from Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary.

Throughout this past week, churches have witnessed to outrage at violence, condemnation of racism on a theological basis, faithfulness to Christ's mercy for all those murdered and their families and long arms extended to one another and our communities.

We are suffering through this horror, supporting friends, Emanuel AME Church, and joining in the tremendous Christian witness which is happening. It is an extraordinary experience! Tomorrow, Thursday, June 25, May and I will attend the "viewing" for our former student, Rev. Senator Clementa Pinckney at Saint John AME Church in Ridgeland, SC, his family church. His funeral is Friday in Charleston, a very public national occasion. Let the music and preaching of that service wash over you. It will wrap you in hope in Christ.

The whole issue around the confederate battle flag flying on the State House grounds in Columbia is a strange work of the Spirit in these days of horror and mourning. On January 17, 2000, May and I marched with 10,000 others in Columbia, SC, then our home, to get that flag taken down from being flown with the American flag, and SC state flag on top of the State House! It had been placed there in the early 1960's as a defiant gesture against the United States' desegregation laws. The flag eventually came down BUT it was placed in a more prominent place at the foot of Main Street right in front of the State House. I believe that the movement now, even among staunch supporters of that symbol to have it removed to museums is a strong example of Dr. Martin Luther King's non-violent resistance principles. You act, resist, and force the oppressor to reveal their true beliefs publically. Then you trust in human morality to have to acknowledge injustice. In this case, it has taken a radically racist young man wanting to begin a race war by his actions to have politicians and state officials moved to action. That is a terrible truth and a deep darkness in the Cross of Christ.

What is happening in Charleston and other places in South Carolina in these days is a Christian "drama" being played before our eyes in Black and White Christians (and Jews and others) witnessing in word and deed. It is also a people wrapped in mourning, mutual prayer, and trust in Christ. It is a testimony to faithful pastors who have formed a primarily Black congregation to be Christian witnesses in the face of their own martyrs and threat of their own persecution. It is the Holy Spirit holding our feet to the Pentecost fires felt through the heart of the crucified and resurrected Christ. God bless Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston as they are surely blessing and leading us in the faith. Pray for us now. This is the hour of our need.

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