



Jansen Ormson // photo

Reverend Dr. William Swinton worshipping during his service on people breaking chains in their lives at Ebenezer AME Church in Charleston on Aug. 30.

An embrace of forgiveness

Compassion, grace offer healing power in tragedy

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"Today, I'd like to speak on the subject of breaking chains," Reverend Dr. William Swinton bellows from his empowering position at the altar.

His deep, compelling voice echoes throughout the church and personifies the stained glass windows that line the walls. Even on a sulking, rainy Sunday in late August, the vibrant stained glass gleams with a brightness

that is matched only by the spirit of the congregation itself.

Pews scattered with men, women and children nod, shout and sway their hands towards the ceiling in passionate agreement with the pastor's sermon. Voices of the old and the young entwine with the sonorous tune of the organ: the true sound of human connection.

This is Ebenezer AME Church in Charleston.

Assistant Principal Cheryl Swinton is a long-time member of Ebenezer Church, and her husband is a pastor at the church that is only five blocks away from Emanuel AME Church, the site of the Emanuel Nine shooting this past June.

AME stands for African Methodist Episcopalian, and is a denomination of churches created by Rt. Rev. Richard Allen in Philadelphia in 1816. Since then, AME churches have grown and spread throughout not only the

United States, but throughout the world as well.

"Because we are a connectional church, there is this bond between anyone who is in an AME churches, and you become close with people who are in your district," Swinton said. "And because it has grown out of a need for autonomy in worship, AME churches are welcome to everyone."

The Emanuel AME church is part of Ebenezer's district, and multiple congregation members that were victims of the shooting were a part of Swinton's life.

"Rev. Clementa Pinckney was a youth ministry teacher when I was a director about 20 years ago," Swinton said. "He was always a

leader, always a gentleman and always aspired to do great things for people. I believe that was always his mission in life."

Swinton was also close with other victims. She knew Reverend Daniel Simmons. She knew Susie Jackson. She knew Myra Thompson. She knew Sharonda Singleton. She knew Tywanza Sanders.

The impact of the shooting reached far beyond the victims themselves -- people all throughout the AME community have been affected by this tragedy from the night it happened.

"In light of the violence that had recently happened in North Charleston [Walter Scott], way."

lar Wednesday night was a Bible study night for us and we actually had a law enforcement officer in our Bible study talking to us about positive ways to interact with police officers," Swinton said. "He got the call at the end of his presentation, and as we were leaving he was talking to our custodian about the need to make sure the building was locked and that everyone had left the premises."

Swinton and her husband were driving home when they received worried calls in relation to the shooting.

"Did you hear what happened at Emanuel?"

"Do you know what's going on downtown?"

"Are you okay?"

By the next morning, the full story surfaced, and the true weight of the situation rippled through the AME church community as well as all of Charleston and other parts of the country.

"When you hear of any shooting in general, you're sad -- because you don't want anyone to be hurt -- and you're wondering what's going through a person's mind in that situation," Swinton said. "But when you hear that this individual came into the church and made a statement that he wanted to start a race war... you feel an even deeper sadness."

Emanuel AME is often considered to be the "Mother" of AME churches in the South, since it was the first AME church established in the South. Because of this, and the shooter's specific message by choosing this church, the shooting was a painful blow to the AME family all over the world.

"Think of it as your mother. This is the first [AME] church in the South; everyone respects it and holds it in high esteem, and it really represents all that we stand for," Swinton said. "In addition to the specific congregation there that was impacted there, it literally impacted the whole world."

In addition to the disturbing motivation of the shooter, Swinton was further upset at the shooter's age -- 21 year old Dylan Roof, and the even more alarming dynamic this added to the tragedy.

"In conversation with people, we thought 'It can't be a 21 year old, because a 21 year old couldn't have that kind of hate,'" Swinton said.

And perhaps that is the most ominous message to emerge from this tragedy -- that a person who grew up in this modern era can still manifest this kind of hate within themselves.

"Martin Luther King always dreamed of a time when people would look at their content of each other's character and not the color of their skin," Swinton said. "I'm so grateful that most people believe that. They don't consider that because someone is African American or Hispanic or Asian that they must be a certain

Being so closely knit, the response from the AME community was immediate, support-

ive and loving.

"Despite his feeling of hate, we represent Christ in the AME church. We won't hate him. We hate the act. For me, it really caused me to reflect and determine:

can really hate someone so much...hate a group of people so much that you would want to impose that kind of harm upon them?" Swinton said, her voice choking up. "It also caused helped me to really evaluate what Christianity is about. Because if you love people, and you say you love God...you really can't hate that way."

Despite the tragic and deeply upsetting nature of this event, the response from the individual families, AME community, Charleston and the country as a whole has been truly remarkable. There have been multiple gatherings, memorials and other forms of outreach to the families -- many of which Swinton attended.

"This incident has softened the hearts of so many people, and caused so many people to realize how important it is to care, and to love all people," Swinton said.

After the shock, the heartbreak and the memorials, the only option left is to somehow find it in oneself to move on, and hope that a

tragedy such as this can enlighten society's path.

"I think we need to expose our children to more information about people's differences," Swinton said. "I think that the more we understand about people's differences, the more we can recognize the commonalities. As as school and as a community, we need to get to know people better."

Of course, there are more physically takeaways from this calamity; what can actually be changed in society to prevent this from happening again?

"I could get on my soap box about gun control," Swinton said. "I feel that the strongly that the system failed in that area. I know that he had some issues, some of them mental, but he also had a drug offense and if the system had worked properly, he wouldn't have been able to even purchase a gun."

Ebenezer Church has recently undergone over \$7,000 in security renovations, ensuring that "this will be a safe and peaceful place for worship," Rev. Swinton said during church announcements

August 30.

In the end, this reaction to this tragedy has displayed and increased the strength, grace and love of the Charleston and AME community. As Swinton puts it, "he [Roof] might've fought with hate, but we're going to fight with love."



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Reverend Dr. William Swinton and assistant principle Cheryl Swinton after a church service on Sunday, August 30 at Ebenezer AME Church where Mr. Swinton preaches.