



**VIRGINIA  
COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**

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## ***Virginia Faith Communities Condemn Racist Murders in Charleston, S.C.***

Virginia's faith communities have issued this joint response to the murders of the pastor and eight others during a prayer meeting at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015.

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We reach out in loving concern to the people of Charleston, and especially the members and friends of the individuals murdered while attending a Bible study.

We stand with the people of Charleston, the city's faith community, and the congregants of the Emanuel AME Church today as they confront the most horrific of acts - the hateful slaughter in a holy sanctuary. We remember the victims of this senseless violence: Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, Reverend Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Tywanza Sanders, Myra Thompson, Ethel Lee Lance, Daniel L. Simmons, Rev. Depayne Middleton, and Susie Jackson. May their memories be for a blessing.

The long history of churches as the site of violence against the black community attests to the evil nature of racist extremism. We stand with our Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, with our brother Bishop Richard Franklin Norris of the Seventh Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

We affirm the sanctity of every life and our commitment to building a just society where every individual is valued and cherished. On September 15, 1963, Ku Klux Klan terrorists killed four girls when they bombed the 16th Street Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. said, *"They died between the sacred walls of the church of God, and they were discussing the eternal meaning of love."* These murders are a return to some of the worst moments of our nation's history. His words continue to echo in our ears, *"These murders are 'one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity.' May we all strive to fulfill the commandment of our creator: 'To love our neighbor as ourselves.'" Let our response go beyond our expression of empathy and grief. Let us recommit ourselves to the hard work of racial reconciliation and building communities of safety and love.*

What happened in Charleston has torn a hole in our hearts, as faith leaders, our hands tremble with the horror and grief of this bloodshed. For the historic black churches, their sanctuaries are the heart of non-violent peaceful protest, often in the face of violence, in the national struggle to secure civil rights, voting rights, and dignity.

The faith community is already demonstrating its solidarity with the victims. Religious organizations across the country are reaching out to the African Methodist Episcopal Church leadership and the South Carolina Council of Churches in support. We pray the members of the congregation will find aid and help in the Lord. All of us together and all those who have offered their prayers from across the nation and throughout the world, together we provide a network of prayer support around Emanuel Church and all in the AME family as we together weep and mourn those who have been lost.

We pray that this tragedy will result in actions by each one of us to bring to an end the senseless violence that engulfs our nation. Addressing hate within our communities is a labor we are all called to, no one can ignore this destructive tendency that destroys what God has created. May God never give up on us as we face our own racism and its tragic impact on congregations, their communities, and our very souls.

The Virginia Council of Churches is a statewide fellowship of churches that is enriched by the diversity of gifts found in its membership. The Faith Community in Virginia is greatly blessed by the African Methodist Episcopal Church's long and rich history of ministry and witness for justice rooted in the recognition that all are created in the image of God. Emanuel Church is a powerful symbol of this legacy, making this attack all the more painful and heinous. Along with all other people of good will, we are horrified and deeply saddened.

Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church is the oldest AME church in the South and has one of the oldest and largest black congregations south of Baltimore. It is affectionately referred to as "Mother Emanuel," and one of its founders was renowned abolitionist, Denmark Vesey. A quote by Sister Jean German Ortiz on the home page of the church's website the day following the shootings so appropriately states, "Jesus died a passionate death for us, so our love for Him should be as passionate." In the midst of this tragedy, may the Emanuel AME Church family and the Charleston community feel peace and comfort from the God who conquered death itself.

#### **Our prayer:**

***God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, God who has brought us thus far on our way, only you know why someone would open fire on your children. Only you know why hate would run so deep that it would cause one of your creations to kill others you have formed. In our confusion over this senseless act, we appeal to you for understanding and courage to continue to fight for justice. We pray right now for the families of those who lost lives at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. on June 17, and ask that you would wrap your loving arms around them and the entire community. Likewise, we pray for the continued racial unrest and violence that permeates this great nation and the whole world, we ask you to guide us to work earnestly for change. Now unto you who is able to keep us from falling, we pray all these things. Amen***

Rev. John Myers  
President  
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Southern Conference UCC

Rev. Jonathan Barton  
General Minister  
Va. Council of Churches  
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Rev. Charles Swadley  
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Rev. Jenee Gilchrist  
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Bishop James Mauney  
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The Rt. Rev. Shannon Johnson  
XIII Bishop  
The Episcopal Diocese of Virginia

Bishop Richard Graham  
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Rev. Wilson Gunn  
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Bishop Young Jin Cho  
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Rev. David Shumate  
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Rev. Alika Galloway  
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Rev. Dr. Nathaniel Brooks  
Pastor, to Youth & Young Adults  
Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church  
Herndon