Reflections on the Massacre at Emanuel AME Church from Housing Works CEO Charles King

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Housing Works is a healing community of people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. Our mission is to end the dual crises of homelessness and AIDS through relentless advocacy, the provision of lifesaving services, and entrepreneurial businesses that sustain our efforts.
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Dear Housing Works Community,

For over a week now, I have been struggling to find words to express to you my thoughts and feelings about the massacre in Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina. While I have been deeply saddened and outraged by many of the deaths that have inspired the Black Lives Matter movement, this violent act was one that I feel viscerally.

Many of you probably know that I remain an ordained Baptist minister. What you may not know is that I was ordained at Immanuel Missionary Baptist Church, a Black congregation in New Haven Connecticut, and I served as the Associate Minister and then Assistant Pastor there for some three years. My ordination was intended, at least in part, by the Pastor, the Rev. Curtis Cofield, and the congregation as a deliberate stand against the racial segregation that takes place even today on Sunday mornings in Christian churches, not just in the South, but all across our land.

Like the people who were shot at Emanuel, I spent many an evening participating in mid-week Bible study in the basement below the sanctuary. Bible study, as I experience it, is about much more than just delving into the scriptures. It is a time for intimate sharing, when fears, setbacks, accomplishments, hopes and dreams can all be spoken in a way that might not otherwise happen, even in a faith community, as people look for Divine guidance that will add understanding and significance to their daily lives.

Like many Black churches, the doors at Immanuel in New Haven were open every day of the week, from morning until late into the evening. Our calendar was filled with activities, from Bible study to mission groups, from rehearsals for half a dozen or more different choirs to the food pantry, the Usher Board, the Deacon meetings, and, of course scores of weddings, funerals and services to celebrate one anniversary or another, all on top of Sunday School and multiple worship services. In the summer, the basement and gymnasium of the church rang with the voices of young people, including participants in the Youth

Employment Program, day camp, the summer children's lunch program, and, of course, Vacation Bible School. The building itself vibrated as if it were the living heart of our community. Like Emanuel in Charleston, we embraced everyone who walked through our doors, never turning anyone away, no matter how mentally unstable or inebriated. Everyone was welcome, if only for a shared word of encouragement, a prayer, and always a warm embrace.

My experience at Immanuel much shaped my views of what kind of community we should be striving to build at Housing Works. In addition, I was privileged to visit "Mother Emanuel" in Charleston on vacation with Keith Cylar the summer before he died. I can't find words to express the horror I still feel at the thought of a person, coming into that church, welcomed with open arms in an hour of sharing, filled with so much hate that he could then stand up shoot and kill nine loving people in cold blood, repeatedly reloading his revolver. When I close my eyes, I can see each one of those people, imagining I know each one's story as intimately as a pastor could, and my heart breaks.

It is easy when a tragedy like this happens to foist it off on one hate-filled person or even to blame mental illness in a way that stigmatizes thousands of people who live with mental illness without loading a revolver and shooting people after a racist rant. But in this case, that can't happen. After all, this is South Carolina, where the Confederate Battle Flag, created by General Nathan Bedford Forrest, who would later found the Ku Klux Klan, proudly flies on the State Capital grounds as "a celebration of Southern culture and heritage." Mind you, in celebration of that heritage, one can still visit the largest slave market in the South, right in downtown Charleston, or one of the nearby plantations, a few of which have preserved the meager living quarters of black people owned by the folk who lived in the "big house". And part of that culture includes cuisine that was forged from the throw-away parts of the animal that were allocated to slaves along with meager rations of corn meal and rice.

But one doesn't have to look to the South to find the racism that fueled this vicious crime. One only has to look to the words of Donald Trump as he recently declared his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president, calling Mexican immigrants "rapists"; the same accusation that Dylann Roof laid against Black folk before he began firing his gun. Or one could look the mealy-mouthed answers just about every Republican candidate for president has given to questions about the massacre at Emanuel in order to avoid any direct comments about racism that might offend South Carolina conservatives in advance of the all-important South Carolina Republican primary next year. In fact, Lindsey Graham, one of South Carolina's two Senators, first suggested that the incident was an expression of hate against religion rather than a racist attack.

But lest we throw too many stones, we need to acknowledge that we are all steeped in racism. If slavery was America's original sin, then racism is a gaping open wound on our nation's soul, Lupus-like, a sore filled with pus and the stench of rotten flesh, that never heals, yet one that we all turn our heads to avoid seeing or discussing, unless it comes up in the context of a violent murder. But the truth is that none of us can really avoid it even if we refuse to address it. It is deeply imbedded in our culture, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, and it impacts every one of us no matter the color of our skin or our country of origin. So as painful as it is, we must address it. And addressing it goes well beyond removing the Confederate flag, though that would be a good place to start.

You know, I didn't join in the battle against AIDS or make it my life's cause because I was gay or I was HIV+. I joined in the fight against AIDS because I am a minister who was called to seek justice. But even if ending the AIDS epidemic was all I cared about, I would tell you that we cannot end AIDS unless we end racism and the other social drivers that have allowed this disease to thrive. And I hope that all of us

come to Housing Works in hopes of not only responding to a disease, but to be a part of creating a more just world.

A march or demonstration doesn't feel like the right response to what happened in Charleston, even after the funerals. Especially when so many family members of the persons murdered spoke so eloquently only days later of forgiveness. But we are already in discussions with like-minded organizations to plan activities this summer to directly confront the issue of racism in our society. And we are going to continue to discuss ways to identify and address racism that seeps into our own community. If you would like to be involved in our coalition planning, please speak with Jaron Benjamin.

In the meantime, you can make a financial contribution to support those who have been so deeply affected by this terrible act at "Mother Emanuel." You can give directly to the church on their website at http://emanuelamechurch.org/.

Love,
Charles

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