A JUST AND COMPASSIONATE RESPONSE IN THE WAKE OF THE SHOOTING AT
EMANUEL A.M.E. CHURCH IN CHARLESTON SOUTH CAROLINA

Submitted by
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A Resolution of Witness

SUMMARY

On June 17, 2015 nine people attending a Bible Study at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in Charleston, South Carolina were killed by a young white male who had sat with them as they studied the Word of God. Among those killed were family members of clergy who serve in United Church of Christ settings as well as Rev. Clementa Pinckney who was a leader for justice in the faith community and the South Carolina state legislature.

Circular Congregational Church, also located in Charleston, was founded in 1681. In the early nineteenth century it was home to a large congregation of both black and white members including prominent businessmen, influential politicians, and poor descendants of both slaves and indentured white families. Circular was sister to the new African Methodist Episcopal churches founded in Charleston in 1816 as a rebellion against the strictures of religious structures that sought to quell their ministry and spirit. One of those churches is known now as Mother Emanuel A.M.E.

Consistent with United Church of Christ (UCC) practices, Circular Congregational Church has historically stood with ecumenical and interfaith partners to address issues of social concern. Currently they are a member of the Charleston Area Justice Ministry which seeks to meet the needs throughout the city for justice, education, and addressing the effects of incarceration. When word of the shooting went out, several religious leaders from Charleston, including Reverend Jeremy Rutledge, pastor of Circular, were participating in a Civil Rights bus tour and interrupted their trip to fly home immediately.

When the murders occurred on June 17th, Charleston was still in the midst of responding to the fatal shooting of Walter Scott by a police officer. Many local churches were involved in vigils bearing witness to the need for change in policing policies and the reduction of violence and poverty in the community. Rev. Jeremy Rutledge shared in his sermon of June 21,

He stood next to us on the grass. Rev. Clementa Pinckney. He had a deep voice, soothing and powerful. And he stood next to us, waiting to speak. We had gathered near the corner of Remount and Craig to pray for our brother Walter Scott, killed by a police officer in North
Charleston. We had gone to the spot not to make speeches or statements, but simply to pray. We gathered around each other. We laid flowers on the grass. We prayed for our brother, for his family, and for ourselves. And Rev. Pinckney was there. I don’t remember what he said, just the tone of it. Just that deep voice, ushering a calm.

We stood outside on the sidewalk. The church was filled to capacity. No room for anyone else. But hundreds stood outside anyway, bearing the heat, gathering around each other. We had come to pray again. But this time we were praying for him, Rev. Pinckney, and the eight other members of Mother Emanuel AME Church killed in a racist attack on Calhoun Street. I sweated through my suit, but it wasn’t the heat that made me dizzy. It was the memory. Standing next to him in April. Standing for him in June. Wondering who we would be standing for next and when it would ever stop.

At 10:00 a.m. on Sunday, June 21 the city was filled with sound as over 80 churches gave witness in pealing bells and resounding chimes to the opening of worship at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church.

**BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL GROUNDING**

We are given consolation in times such as this when all that is sacred and holy is violated in such a profound way. Psalm 72 reminds us “God has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence God redeems their life; and precious is their blood in God’s sight.

The resolution “Violence in our Society and World” adopted by General Synod 20 reminds us, “Violence is commonly conceived in individual terms with a single perpetrator and a single victim. The reality, however, is far more complex. Violence is a part of the very structures that define the way we relate to each other socially, politically, economically and spiritually. None of us is solely victim, perpetrator or bystander. Violence manifests itself in our language, in our social structures and in our public policy as it lingers in our land.

The “Resolution Calling on the United Church of Christ to Renew the Battle Against Racism in All of Its Guises” adopted by General Synod 24 stated that each attendee shall be encouraged to renew his or her personal battle against racism in its more subtle forms, drawing upon the strength of God and our gathered community; that the United Church of Christ affirm and advocate a renewed battle against the divisive effects of racism in society by joining interfaith councils where they exist and act to create such organizations where they are lacking; and through dialogue among such groups and within local churches, the United Church of Christ shall take up the challenge of unity, to truly “be as one” (John 17:20-24). It also encouraged that we hasten back to our individual churches intent on reaching out to communities unlike our own, that we strive to forge new bonds, and foster a keener discernment of the wily, hidden face of racism.

It is telling that more than a decade later it is still necessary to call for these actions as a part of our faith response to the culture of violence and racism that daily assaults our sensibilities and dominates in all forms of media. It is also a testament to the ongoing work of congregations in
the United Church of Christ that Circular Congregational Church and many other UCC
congregations are actively living into and out of the very actions we are called to undertake.

We are reminded that Paul addresses how we are to live into the promise given in the life, death
and resurrection of Jesus Christ:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of
Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down
the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its
commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the
two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross,
thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were
far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to
the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints
and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and
prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined
together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together
spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:13-22 NRSV)

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Circular Congregational Church participates in the Charleston Area Justice Ministry (CAJM) and
has shared ministry with historic African American congregations in Charleston. The United
Church of Christ will continue to witness to the historical commitment to justice serving the least
of these through the CAJM and the participation of the Southeast Conference United Church of
Christ as an institutional member of the South Carolina Christian Action Council; the Southern
Conference United Church of Christ as a member of the North Carolina Council of Churches,
Virginia Council of Churches and the Moral Monday Movement; and other UCC Conferences as
members of similar ecumenical and interfaith organizations whose primary focus is justice and
peace for all.

Adoption of this resolution would serve as a tangible expression of solidarity with ecumenical
partners, demonstrate our commitment to participation in ministries of justice and reconciliation,
and provide ongoing advocacy to address issues of violence, racism, and injustice particularly in
the community of Charleston and the state of South Carolina.

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

The implementation of this resolution will not require additional financial or staff resources. The
work of the Charleston Area Justice Ministry has been supported by a Neighbors in Need grant.

PROBABILITY OF INFLUENCING SOCIAL CHANGE

A Resolution of Witness by Thirtieth General Synod will send a message of support, fellowship,
consolation, solidarity, and common witness to the members of Emanuel A.M.E, the 7th
Episcopal District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the people of Charleston and the
State of South Carolina, and those around the world who have been following the reports of this event and the recovery of Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church.

It will further strengthen the present ecumenical and interfaith coalition of Charleston churches and the Charleston Area Justice Ministry who work to address issues of justice, poverty, inclusion, and violence in the community and in South Carolina. It will also be a powerful witness and support for the work of the South Carolina Christian Action Council.

Rev. Dr. Norvel Goff, Sr., Interim Pastor and Presiding Elder of the Edisto District of the 7th Episcopal District of the AME Church in South Carolina, said in his sermon on June 21, "We have shown the world how we as a group of people can come together and pray and work out things that need to be worked out."

Goff also called for action: "Let's not get it twisted. We're going to pursue justice, we're going to be vigilant and we're going to hold our elected officials accountable to do the right thing. The blood of the Mother Emanuel nine requires us to work until not only justice is served in this case, but for those who are still living on the margin of life."

Standing alongside this call to be a reconciling, forgiving community in the pursuit of justice will be a testament to the gospel message lived out in daily life.

**TEXT OF THE MOTION**

WHEREAS, nine sisters and brothers in Christ were slain while in a Bible study at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina on June 17, 2015, and

WHEREAS, there exists a relationship in ministry among churches in Charleston, South Carolina that seeks to address issues of poverty and injustice including Circular Congregational Church and the Charleston Area Justice Ministry which engages in research, educates the public, and publicly addresses the root causes of, and solutions to, poverty and injustice in their communities and seeks to transform the systems that cause suffering by holding local officials accountable for resolving these inequities and injustices, and

WHEREAS, the members of the Southeast Conference have sought to reach out to faith leaders in Charleston and South Carolina by presence in worship, standing in vigil, and offering prayers and solace to UCC members who lost family members in the shooting, and

WHEREAS, the United Church of Christ has historically sought to address issues of gun violence, racism, and justice as evidenced by the resolutions “Violence in our Society and World” and “Guns and Violence” adopted by General Synod 20, “Resolution Calling on the United Church of Christ to Renew the Battle Against Racism in All of Its Guises” adopted by General Synod 24, and the pastoral letter from the Collegium in 2013 which addressed gun violence and another pastoral letter from the Collegium in 2015 on racism, “A New Awakening,” and

WHEREAS, the Confederate flag has been, and continues to be a divisive and controversial symbol of violence, discrimination, oppression, hatred and racism, and that the United Church of
Christ has responded to symbols of racial oppression such as the symbolic logo of the
Washington football team and the symbolic caricature of the Cleveland baseball team from the
stance that justice is a theological issue, not a political issue, and that symbols that are indicative
of racial oppression should be resisted;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Thirtieth General Synod of the United Church of
Christ reach out in Christian love to communicate to the members of Emanuel A.M.E Church
our deep sympathy for their loss and the shattering of safe space in their house of worship and to
assure other houses of faith in Charleston that we stand in witness to their faith and courage and
pray as the psalmist does that “Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or
destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.
(Psalms 60:18)

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Collegium take appropriate actions to comfort and
provide support for members and pastors of the United Church of Christ who lost family on June
17, 2015.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Thirtieth General Synod of the United Church of Christ
stands in solidarity with South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, the more than thirty South
Carolina State Legislators, the South Carolina NAACP, South Carolina Christian Action
Council, and other residents of the State of South Carolina in their call to have the Confederate
flag removed from the grounds of the South Carolina State House.

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED, that the Thirtieth General Synod of the United Church of Christ
encourages pastors and congregations to renew their efforts to address issues of racism and
violence in their communities and to promote fruitful relationships with other communities of
faith in their cities and towns, especially through spiritual reflection in order to better understand
the roots of violence and racism in our culture, consider the resources of our faith in ending such
racism and violence, and taking action in our local communities and with ecumenical and
interfaith partners to address the needs of the community to restore human dignity, meet the
needs of healthy and wholesome life, and show the love of God to all the world.

FUNDING
The funding for the implementation of the Resolution will be made in accordance with the
overall mandates of the affected agencies and the funds available.

IMPLEMENTATION
The Collegium of Officers, in consultation with appropriate ministries or other entities within the
United Church of Christ, will determine the implementing body.