
NATION

'We've slipped into forgetfulness': Charleston church shooting survivors demand gun control



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USA TODAY

Published 5:58 a.m. ET June 24, 2022 | Updated 11:58 a.m. ET June 24, 2022

Key Points

In 2015, a white supremacist gunman killed nine churchgoers at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Seven years later, survivors and their families are hurting as they watch more mass shootings unfold.

The church community is lobbying lawmakers for more gun control.

"Help me save my family. Help me save the next family. Do it because it's the right thing to do," said Melvin Graham, whose younger sister, Cynthia Graham Hurd, was killed in the church shooting.

CHARLESTON, S.C. – Melvin Graham was drinking a mug of coffee in his man cave when he saw the news that 10 Black people had been killed in Buffalo, New York.

The similarity unnerved him. Another young white supremacist had gunned down Black churchgoers in Charleston seven years ago, including Graham's younger sister.

Graham knew what lay ahead for the families. Waiting for your loved one to call you back. Calling their cell phone over and over. Gathering with family near the crime scene for news about whether your loved one is dead or alive.

“You tell yourself it's not real. She's OK,” he recalled. “She's just not answering the phone. She's just not answering the phone.”

In time, the wait turns to certainty.

“You begin to get the picture,” Graham said. “You're hoping against hope every minute that you're wrong.”

The shooting during a Bible study in the fellowship hall at Emanuel AME Church in 2015 shocked the community, the state, the nation and led to pleas for lawmakers, anybody, to try to stop it from happening again.

But in the years since, there have been more hateful attacks against people because of their skin color, their religion, their ethnicity. A shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, three years ago left 23 people, mostly Latinos, dead. A gunman killed 11 Jewish worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018. And last month, those 10 Black shoppers were gunned down at a grocery store in Buffalo.

All were reminders that the shooting at the historic Charleston church, known as Mother Emanuel, was not the last racially-motivated shooting as people had hoped. Some family members fear there could be more.

"I want action," said Graham, 68, a retired lab technician. "My sister's gone. But I still have children and grandchildren. Save them. Help me save my family. Help me save the next family. Do it because it's the right thing to do."

Cynthia Graham Hurd was among nine people fatally shot that awful night on June 17 at the church. Five others survived.

To mark the anniversary, family members, survivors, faith leaders, community folks and strangers gathered at the church last weekend to drop off flowers, pray for better days and attend a televised Bible study focused on the lesson the nine

were studying when they were murdered. It fell during the Juneteenth weekend as the nation celebrated Black culture, history and resilience.

Blondelle Gadsden, who sat in a pew at Mother Emanuel for the anniversary event, said it's important to preserve memories of her sister, Myra Thompson, and the others who died now known as the Emanuel Nine.

"I want to make sure their lives will always be remembered," said Gadsden, who described her older sister as the "sweetest person." "She and I were very, very close. I think about her all the time."

Safe spaces for healing

Graham stopped at the front desk of Charleston's main library only a couple of blocks from Mother Emanuel. He quietly asked: Is it up? Is it running?

Every June the room just inside the entrance, off to the right, becomes a memorial to Hurd. Pictures in black metal frames show her hula hooping. There's a young Hurd smiling with co-workers. There's Hurd in a library with stacks of books behind her.

A lone bench sits in the middle of the room. Flashing across the flat-screen television are people talking about the sister, the librarian, the mentor, the friend.

Every June, a glass showcase near the reception desk is filled with tributes to Hurd.

And across town, there's the Cynthia Graham Hurd St. Andrews library, where she last worked as a branch manager. Inside, her portrait hangs against a back wall.

There are other reminders across the city of the lives lost - tributes to a great-grandmother, ministers, a librarian, choir members, a coach. Many were long-time members at Emanuel and regulars at the Wednesday Bible study:

The Rev. Clementa Pickney, 41, senior pastor at Mother Emanuel and state senator

The Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, 45, associate pastor, high school coach

Cynthia Graham Hurd, 54, long-time librarian, branch manager

Susie Jackson, 87, church trustee, member of the choir

Ethel Lee Lance, 70, sexton, long-time member of Mother Emanuel

DePayne Middleton-Doctor, 49, minister at the church, admissions coordinator, singer

Tywanza Sanders, 26, recent college graduate, aspiring rapper

Daniel Simmons, Sr., 74, retired pastor, Army veteran, Purple Heart recipient

Myra Thompson, 59, teacher, counselor, church trustee

Visitors to the Charleston airport can stop in a gallery and look at stained glass windows featuring nine white doves. Steps from the church, nine wooden benches at the Gaillard Center, a performing arts theater, bear the names of the Emanuel Nine. A memorial garden for Jackson, who at 87 was the oldest of the Emanuel Nine, opened last week.

And if all goes as planned, in 2024 a parking lot next to the church will be transformed into the Emanuel Nine Memorial. The foundation set up for the project has raised more than half the \$20 million it needs. Michael Arad, who designed the 9/11 Memorial in New York City, will design this one too.

The memorial would feature a marble fountain with the names of the nine carved along its edge. There will also be a survivor's garden surrounded by five trees and six stone benches. The sixth bench represents the church, the other survivor.

The texture of the ground leading into the courtyard will change from rough to smooth as visitors approach the two fellowship benches, signaling the path to forgiveness is never easy, said the Rev. Eric Manning, the church pastor.

“I would hope and pray that it serves as a safe space where people can come together and even though we can be on opposite ends of the spectrum, we can have a meaningful dialogue, meaningful conversation, one that would aid in healing,” he said.

On a recent morning, a few bouquets of flowers were tucked in the black gate at the front of Mother Emanuel. A day later, on the anniversary of the shooting, the gate was covered with flowers.

Inside the gate, a plaque on the wall reads “In Remembrance of Emanuel 9” and “Love is Stronger than Hate.”

Passersby stopped to take pictures.

One woman posed pressing her palms together as if to pray. A man sporting a black leather vest climbed off his motorcycle across the street and raised his cellphone toward the church.

“People come to the church all the time from near and far,” said Kimberlyn Davis, executive director of the Mother Emanuel Memorial Foundation. “They’re coming here to mourn and to essentially stand down hate and racism.”

Charleston has long history of racism

The night of the shooting, Dylann Roof, then 21, gunned down nine churchgoers attending Bible study. Only Jennifer Pickney, Polly Sheppard, Felicia Sanders and two children survived.

Roof, who targeted one of the oldest Black churches in the South, was sentenced to death. Last summer, the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the sentence.

The shooting was “catastrophic,” said Larry Watson, a history professor at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg.

“It really, I think, permanently altered many people’s idea of race relations in South Carolina,” he said.

Charleston, a small Southern city, was a key port in the slave trade business. During the civil rights movement, activists led boycotts and protests against segregation there.

For decades, the Confederate flag flew at the state Capitol. In many ways, said Watson, it was a show of defiance against desegregation.

“It was purely a racial divide,” he said.

Over the years, talks about removing the flag came and went, with some arguing it was bad for business. Some companies boycotted the state. Some schools couldn’t recruit student athletes. Still, the flag hung high.

But in the days following the shooting, then Gov. Nikki Haley and others pushed to take down the flag. Roof had posted pictures online of him holding a Confederate flag.

Experts said mass shootings tend to bring communities together – at least for a while.

Watson said there was a brief period of racial harmony after the church shooting, but that subsided in the years of the Trump administration and where in some circles it became “fashionable to be a white supremacist again.”

“We’ve slipped into forgetfulness on this,” he said.

Remembering a sister

Gadsden got a news alert on her cellphone after the shootings in Buffalo. She was "upset, really upset." How can this happen again?

She was surprised to learn the son of one of the elderly women killed was a cousin, who was from a community near Charleston. The families have been in contact.

“It was a lot closer to home than we realized,” said Gadsden, a 64-year-old middle school teacher.

In the years since her sister Myra Thompson's death, Gadsden said she tries to keep busy working around the church and making sure her 11-year-old grandson stays safe.

She and others have also been pushing to get the Clementa C. Pinckney Hate Crimes Act passed in South Carolina, which would increase penalties for hate crimes. She has spoken at rallies and testified before state lawmakers.

“It just makes you wonder when are we all going to be on the same page," she said.

On the anniversary of the shooting, Gadsden joined an afternoon press conference at the church to call for action. She didn't speak then but afterward sat in a pew near the back and shared stories about her sister. Thompson had led Bible study the night of the shooting. Gadsden didn't want to talk about that night.

But she told how Thompson would save up to buy cleaning supplies and other items to give to elderly residents in the community. The week before she was killed, Thompson had called a local store to say she would pick up a box of sale items set aside for her.

“She really was just the sweetest person you could know...serious about church and family and everything, but she would give you her heart,” Gadsden recalled.

She still remembers Thompson, a trustee in the church, running around to get things fixed in the old church she grew up in.

“We always laugh because you see the lights are out,” said Gadsden, laughing and pointing to the light fixtures hanging from the high ceilings. “Well, she couldn't figure out how to get light bulbs changed because we didn't have a ladder tall enough. And so she had this bright idea of calling the fire

departments and they could bring the ladder. And they came out and changed all the lights. She would just do things like that.”

'I'll probably never get over that'

During the anniversary event, against the backdrop of a stained-glass window and pictures of Jesus nailed to the cross, national faith leaders and families of the Emanuel Nine stood in front of the pulpit at the church to urge the country to remember those killed in the fellowship hall seven years ago. They pled for more action from lawmakers.

Perpetrators of these crimes remind us that there's such a thing as holes in souls, said the Rev. Clarence G. Newsome, chairperson of the commemoration events.

“Sometimes the holes are in the souls of legislators, the souls of educators and even church people,” Newsome said. “The church must church in a way to address this major critically important issue in our time.”

Later that evening, families, faith leaders and scholars gathered for a Bible study on Mark 4:1-20, the lesson churchgoers were studying the night they were killed.

The parable is about a farmer sowing seeds in different soil and how those seeds grow. The seeds represent the word of God. The country, the faith leaders said, needs to hear *and* act on the word. They called on faith leaders of all denominations to teach about the parable throughout the year.

“I think God has something more to say,” said the Rev. Dr. James A Forbes, Jr., senior minister emeritus at the Riverside Church in New York City and a co-convener of the effort.

More: Bible study urged to honor nine killed at Charleston church: 'God has something more to say'

Some of the leaders are also calling for lawmakers to step up and support measures to ban assault weapons, raise the age to buy a gun and expand background checks.

The loophole that allowed Roof to get a gun is still on the books, said Rep. James Clyburn, the South Carolina Democrat who proposed legislation known as the “Charleston loophole.” It aims to close the gap in federal law that allows gun sales to proceed without a completed background check if three business days have passed.

Clyburn, the House majority whip, said he thought there would be more action after the shooting in Buffalo.

“There was momentum after Sandy Hook. There was momentum after Charleston,” said Clyburn as he sat in a pew at the church. “There’s always momentum for 24 to 48 hours and then all that seems to wane.”

Clyburn knew Pinckney, who as a college student had interned for him. He knew some of the others too. His daughter, Mignon Clyburn, was a close friend of Hurd's.

And like others in South Carolina, he’s still trying to heal.

“I’ll probably never get over that,” he said. “Those things can consume you if you’re not careful.”

The Rev. Sharon Risher, who lost her mother, Lance, that night, isn’t sure what it will take for lawmakers to act.

“Until you can reach these politicians’ hearts, they’re going to vote the way they vote,” said Risher, who also lost a childhood friend and two cousins in the church shooting. “I pray that their family members don’t ever get killed like my mother got killed.”

More: My mom was killed in the Mother Emanuel church shooting. We must disarm racism and hate.

'It will tear you apart'

In the days, weeks and months after his sister's murder, Graham said he become almost obsessed with tracking mass shootings, counting the number of victims. At some point, he doesn't remember when, he stopped counting. There were too many.

"It will tear you apart if you get too involved in it," he said. "You hear it. You understand it. You internalize it and then you sort of just say, 'OK. OK.' I'm not obsessed with it. But I need to know what's going on. I can't turn away from it and say I don't want to know."

Many are still in the process of healing, said Manning, who has led the church in the wake of the shooting.

With racial trauma and with some experiencing racism almost every day, "it becomes harder to really find a place to heal," he said.

"The country has to do a better job in understanding the impact that systemic racism has on African American communities," Manninghe said.

More: <https://www.usatoday.com/pages/interactives/news/gun-control-mass-killings-timeline/>

To help heal and keep her memory alive, the Graham family started a book drive to honor Hurd, who was an avid reader. The foundation has given away more than 40,000 books to local youth.

In the days after Hurd's death, many told Graham how she had helped them - like the woman who struggled in a statistics class. Hurd, who had majored in mathematics, tutored her. Another said Hurd helped her learn to read.

“She didn't deserve this. None of them deserved this,” said Graham. “He (Roof) said he wanted to kill good people. The one thing he accomplished - he killed good people, strong people, loving people.”

Graham said he understands that one day all the attention will die down.

"And we're going to lose Cynthia to history," said Graham. “But I expect there will always be a remembrance of this day. It may not be a fancy hoopla, it may not be a grand event. But I just want people to take a moment every year to remember.”

On this anniversary, Graham wheeled his Toyota 4Runner past rows of headstones at the church cemetery. He drove past the graves of his parents. He drove past the cemetery

across the road where white South Carolinians, including Confederates, are buried. He turned right. Then right again pulling up close to the dirt's edge.

Hurd's grave was up a little hill. A wreath of red and white flowers rested atop the grave where Graham had placed it the day before.

Others of the Emanuel Nine are buried nearby.

"It's hard," Graham said. "It was a great tragedy. You remember what happened on this day. It's not like, 'Oh, I forgot that.' You don't get to forget."

Back in the truck, Graham pulled out a CD with a gently worn cover. Shirley Caesar's purple autograph was scribbled inside. The gospel singer honored the church after the tragedy with Track 6, "Mother Emanuel."

Graham listens to the song during each visit to his sister's graveside. The lyrics are full of meaning for him:

"You taught your children well

To love instead of hate

They did not discriminate

Standing strong against the gates of hell

Oh mama, Mother Emanuel."

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