

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

What Charleston teaches us about community and belonging

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Last Wednesday, one week after the shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in which an act of racial hatred took the lives of nine congregation members, Grand Rapids gathered in Rosa Parks Circle to reflect, heal and call on our community to promote a future with less racial violence and more justice for all.

Hosted by First Community A.M.E. Church, St. Luke A.M.E. Zion Church, the City of Grand Rapids and Kent County, the evening drew ecumenical and political leaders.

Speakers ranged from Mayor George Heartwell to an 18-year-old pastor. In the crowd

were Catholic sisters from the Dominican Center, some people from the Christian Reformed Church and Reformed Church in America, and ministers from several local congregations.

The tone of the service was one of deep sadness, but also one of joyful hope. Collectively, we mourned loss, not just from this shooting but all racially motivated incidents in our nation.

However, we also celebrated what is possible when people across lines of difference can come together into community.

To the crowd of a few hundred people, the Rev. Gaylyn Wilson, pastor of St. Luke A.M.E. Zion



Gordon

Church, opened the evening by proposing, "We are here because we believe if we dialogue together, worship together, sit and have lunch together, then things will start to change."

Just two days later, President Obama delivered the eulogy of the Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, the pastor of Emanuel A.M.E. Church and one of the nine shooting victims.

In the eulogy, Obama spoke of the legacy of the A.M.E. tradition, which is known for being a symbol of the struggle toward freedom and equality for all; in his words, the A.M.E. church is important "not just for blacks, not just for Christians, but for every American who cares about the steady expansion of human rights and human dignity in this country."

This falls in line with Rev.

Clementa's own philosophy of a "faith in action," where the church's calling was "not just within the walls of the congregation, but ... the life and community in which our congregation resides."

The Rev. Clementa believed that being a person of faith is about more than individual salvation; rather, "it's about our collective salvation; that to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless is not just a call for isolated charity but the imperative of a just society."

The shooting in Charleston and the dialogues that have transpired since call us to heed lessons from Rev. Clementa, as well as our local community's belief that we must live out our values in a way that promotes the common good for all.

Beyond that, these tragic

events also have called us into community and belonging, not just with those we consider to be similar to ourselves, but with everyone, even and especially those who might appear different.

John A. Powell, director of the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society, says: "(A)s we deny the other, we deny ourselves. There is no 'other.' We are connected."

Although the labels we use — self and other, black and white, religious and secular, Republican and Democrat, gay and straight — create a veil of irreconcilable difference, through dialogue we see commonality. The challenge becomes recognizing and celebrating our unique identities and shared humanity in a way that leads to real, positive change for all.

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