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Emanuel AME and the Buoyancy of Hope

Rev. Clementa Pinckney and his fellow congregants of Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. gathered as usual in the historic edifice June 17 for their Wednesday evening prayer service. They came, as always, to refresh their religious faith, to testify and bear witness to the importance of living a life of righteousness and to extend to all including the stranger in their midst their welcome and their trust.

How could they know that he represented a monstrous evil that would consume them?

So, once again, American society has been wounded by the dangerous forces of hatred and violence that have always shadowed the gleaming idealism of the American Creed.

As usual, when the mask of American innocence slips, the crowd that loves to glibly boast of “American exceptionalism” ran for cover. Fox News propagandists led the way in desperately fleeing from the clear evidence of Dylann Roof’s racism. Instead, they claimed he was striking against Christianity and “religious freedom.” Revealingly, the same pose was adopted by the Internet’s overtly white-supremacist websites and the trolls of the right-wing Twitter mob.

But Dylann Roof’s own words and Facebook posts leave no doubt of his motivation—and leave no room for the cowardice of not confronting them.

President Obama gave voice to “the heartache and the sadness and the anger” the massacre provoked



Lee A. Daniels
NNPA
Columnist

in decent people when he said, “we as a country will have to reckon with the fact that this type of mass violence does not happen in other advanced countries ... with this kind of frequency. And it is in our power to do something about it ... the politics in [Washington]

Dylann Roof’s own words and Facebook posts leave no doubt of his motivation — and leave no room for the cowardice of not confronting them

foreclose a lot of those avenues right now. But it would be wrong for us not to acknowledge it. At some point, it’s going to be important for the American people to come to grips with it, and for us to be able to shift how we think about the issue of gun violence collectively.”

In those words the president spoke, substitute for “gun violence” the words “slavery” or “racism” and you have why, for many Black Americans, the terrorist attack at Emanuel AME scoured a profound historically-rooted pain.

Yet even in this moment of grief, we ought to recognize the several truths that offer “the buoyancy of

hope,” said the President, quoting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

One truth lies in our learning something of the very people — a cross-section of the American people — who were gunned down. Their being lost to the whirlwind of evil shouldn’t be allowed to obscure their fundamental goodness and commitment to Christianity’s most cherished precepts — as shown in their families’ heart-rending declarations of forgiveness toward Roof. “We are the family that love built,” said Bethane Middleton-Brown, sister of DePayne Middleton-Doctor, during the June 19 court hearing

Americans forged and buffed to a luminous shine both their civic faith in the American Ideal and the weapon — nonviolent protest — they would use to demand the full measure of their American citizenship.

Another insight is that Emanuel AME is “historic” not just because of its early 19th-century founding, but because it met again and again the challenge of being a full-service Black communal institution. In that regard, Mother Emanuel is, thankfully, far from unique. Innumerable Black communities across the country have a “Mother Church” of this or that Protestant denomination whose roots go back to at least the late 1800s.

Another bright light the tragedy cannot extinguish was the immediate rush of people of all backgrounds to stand in solidarity with the congregants of Mother Emanuel. That was most dramatically illustrated by the actions of Debbie Dills and Todd Frady, two white North Carolinians whose call to a local police officer in the morning of June 18 directly led to Dylann Roof’s capture. Dills, who spotted Roof in his car while she was driving to her job at Frady’s florist shop, said, “I saw the news coverage last night. ... Since it happened I was praying for them and the church. I was in the right place at the right time that the Lord puts you.”

That shining compassion, sense of kinship and determination to redeem a terrible wrong justifies “the buoyancy of hope” that has always fueled Black Americans’ faith in America and in their march toward the future.

Left and Right Converge on Justice Reform

While social change for some may appear to be inevitable, it does not happen by osmosis, and it does not occur without a focused effort led by those who are not restrained by the fears of social transformation. An effective reform of the system of laws, courts, policies and institutions defined as the criminal justice system in the United States of America requires more than a principled public debate.

What is needed today with a renewed sense of urgency, beyond the all-too-frequent expressions of justifiable outrage and protest in response to videotaped incidents of police brutality, is a committed, bipartisan, well-resourced nationwide criminal justice reform movement. Black lives do matter. In fact, all lives matter.

As President and CEO of the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), the nation’s oldest and largest trade association of African American-owned newspapers, we reach more than 20 million readers per week through 205 affiliated local and regional print and digital media companies.

The issues of mass incarceration, overcriminalization, prosecutorial and police misconduct, equal justice, alternative sentencing, recidivism and judicial dysfunction are all serious problems that are having a severe negative



Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.
NNPA
President and CEO

impact, in particular, on the quality of life of African Americans. What is required today, however, is a multiracial coalition to ensure that a successful reform movement is representative of the interests of all Americans.

state and federal levels toward equal justice for all. Now we need to rebuild and expand the movement to reform criminal justice.

I also know what it is like to be unjustly sentenced and incarcerated in a prison system that dehumanizes both the imprisoned and those in charge of vastly deteriorating overcrowded penal institutions.

I was a member of the Wilmington 10, a group of civil rights activists who were unjustly imprisoned for a combined sentence of 282 years for standing up for the rights of equal education for African American students in Wil-

to ourselves. We must participate in helping to build this important reform movement.

Thus, it is why without any hesitation that I am hereby publicly stating my endorsement of the coalition-building efforts of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL), Charles Koch Institute and Koch Industries, Coalition for Public Safety, Center for American Progress, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, and other national and regional organizations that have committed to support various criminal justice reform efforts. I believe it is now a propitious time to work together to establish a national bipartisan reform movement.

I was very interested and encouraged to learn that the controversial Koch Industries has been involved in the issues of overcriminalization and criminal justice reform for years. Reforming the criminal justice system is not a concern to be constrained to the left or to the right on the political spectrum.

The respect for the moral dignity and wellbeing of every person, without the filter of race, class, religion or any other discriminating factor, is a paramount principle that has to be maintained in a society that strives to strengthen the inclusiveness of its democracy.

‘An injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere’

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I know something about the movement-building process, dating back to my early days in the 1960s as a youth coordinator in my home state of North Carolina for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Dr. King, Jr. was a master movement builder. I learned firsthand from witnessing how Dr. King fused together a diverse coalition of intergenerational leaders to bring about change at the local,

ington, N.C. in the 1970s. Today, there are millions of people who not only want to see changes in the criminal justice system, but also are willing to join and support the emergence of a national “Criminal Justice Reform Movement” (CJRM).

My columns for the NNPA have always been about speaking truth to power in the vein of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois, two pioneering editors who knew the power of words. Yet today, we must also dare to speak the truth