



Southwestern Washington Synod

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

God's work. Our hands.

The Rev. Richard E. Jaech, Bishop

20 June 2015

Dear Friends,

These past three days I have felt continuing waves of grief, shock and anger following the killing of nine members of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Charleston, S.C., who were gunned down by a young white man at their church. Over and over again during the past months, we have witnessed acts of racial violence against African Americans in our country. The slaughter of good and loving people during a Bible study takes us even deeper into a place of raw injustice and fear.

The event becomes even more personal as we discover our Lutheran connections to this tragic event. Emanuel AME's pastor, the Rev. Clementa Pinckney, was a graduate of the Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, as was the Rev. Daniel Simmons, an associate pastor at Mother Emanuel. Both were killed in this shooting. The man who killed them, Dylann Roof, is a member of an ELCA congregation in South Carolina. This was an "in-family" murder and we cannot pretend to stay uninvolved.

I suspect that Dylann Roof's defense lawyers will probably plead that he is mentally ill and therefore not responsible for his actions. While he is undoubtedly mentally wounded, his violence is clearly an expression of the ingrained racism and violent hatred ingrained throughout our country. We cannot dismiss this as the aberrant act of one misguided person. Dylann Roof was shaped and twisted by the systemic racism that batters people of color each day when they go to school, apply for jobs, look for housing or simply drive down the street.

What can we do? We can begin, first by praying for the families in Charleston that have experienced such tragic loss. I have included a prayer at the bottom of this letter that can be a resource for you in your congregation.

We can pray for Dylann Roof and our entire nation, asking that God will free us from our conditioned hatred and suspicion of one another.

Perhaps most importantly, we can work to end racism by entering into active dialogue and mutual support with members of the African American community. In Ephesians 2, Paul writes: "Christ Jesus is our peace; in his flesh he has broken down the dividing walls of hostility." Jesus often starts this peace process by simply by bringing us together to talk and understand each other's lives. We need to move from being strangers to being family again.

Out of the tragedy in Charleston, I have made a commitment to immediately begin meeting the AME pastors in our Synod. I want to listen to their stories and learn from them. I recognize that I will need to wrestle with my own racial ignorance and suspicions along the way. But it

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will be a step in the healing process. I encourage each of you to join me and choose one specific action that you will do in the next month that will help break down our racial divide.

At a court bond hearing in Charleston on Friday, the family members of those who were slain were allowed to speak to Dylann Roof. They spoke about the pain of their loss, but each one of them announced to Dylann that they forgave him and prayed that he would repent and discover the peace that God wished for him. I can barely comprehend the deep well of love and graciousness in their hearts that enabled them to forgive. Yet I know that they were being fed by the well of living water that springs from Christ and from the throne of God. That is our only hope as we strive to end and move beyond racism and violence.

Blessings to you and to our nation as we walk this path.

Bishop Rick Jaech

*Holy One, you do not distance yourself from the pain of your people, but in Jesus you bear that pain with all who suffer at others' hands. With your cleansing love, bring healing and strength to all effected by the murders at Emanuel AME church; and by your justice bring our country to repentance for racism and gun violence. In Jesus name we pray. **Amen.***