

Charleston shooting survivor Jennifer Pinckney continues justice work

by [Jesse James DeConto](#)

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DURHAM, N.C. (RNS) The first lady of Charleston's Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church offered two enduring images: her late husband's smiling face lying in a casket, and the bullet holes that riddled the church walls when she went to clean out his office a week later.

"Clementa was a peaceful person," said Jennifer Pinckney, the widow of pastor and South Carolina state senator Clementa Pinckney, during a visit to Duke University to talk about gun control, race, and faith. "He was all about peace."

Jennifer Pinckney survived the Charleston massacre that took her husband's life and the lives of eight others. She started a foundation in her husband's name to continue his support of public education and health care access. She also serves on the Women's Coalition for Common Sense, a gun control reform group convened by Gabby Giffords, a former U.S. representative who also survived a mass shooting.

"I want him to smile down on us," Pinckney said. "I want him to be proud. I want to carry on his work."

Speaking to a crowd of several hundred people at Duke University on Tuesday (February 9), Pinckney steered clear of the legal proceedings against accused shooter Dylann Roof, preferring to talk about her husband as a father and a pastor. Roof is returning to court in South Carolina for a pretrial hearing.

"I don't even want to turn my TV on," Pinckney told about a dozen reporters who gathered for a press conference on campus Tuesday. "We're all in the process of trying to heal."

Pinckney's friends Chris Vaughn and Kylon Middleton, both pastors who attended the forum alongside her, addressed issues of gun control, racial inequality, and social

justice.

Middleton, pastor of Mount Zion AME Church, also in Charleston, pointed out that his denomination arose in rebellion against Methodist churches that gave whites priority at the prayer rails.

“The AME church itself was born out of social-justice protest,” he said. “Religion and politics can’t be separated when we have poverty right outside our doors. We cannot divorce ourselves from the plight of everyday people, whether white, black, or purple. It really doesn’t matter. We all should have access to certain things.”

Eboni Marshall Turman, director of Duke Divinity School’s Black Church Studies program, who moderated the forum, lamented that a gospel of prosperity and respectability has taken root, even though black churches were birthed in the experience of suffering and poverty.

Vaughn, pastor of Jerusalem Branch Baptist Church in Salley, South Carolina, concurred.

“We go and get our feel-good on Sunday morning, and when that feel-good is over with, we go on our way,” Vaughn said. “That’s why we need real church, to be able to do real work in the community. More conversations need to take place that make us feel uncomfortable. When we feel uncomfortable, we move.”

Gun-violence prevention activist Kaaren Haldemen said many of the mothers she works with are frustrated with their pastors for not speaking up for gun control.

“How do we get faith leaders to mobilize?” she asked.

Middleton pointed to “Stand-up Sabbath,” an initiative in South Carolina that had some 1,300 Christian, Jewish, and Muslim congregations discussing gun violence during worship on the last weekend in January.

Turman took it a step further, saying that women, who make up the majority of churches, should use their financial leverage when they don’t think clergy are doing enough.

“Money talks,” she said. “If the people in the pews think creatively about how to redirect your tithes and offerings, you’ll mobilize some pastors.”

Middleton added that church members need to support state-level legislation to enact the gun-control provisions President Obama has called for in his recent executive order. Obama's order narrows the so-called gun-show loophole, which exempts most small sellers from keeping formal sales records.

Giffords's group is demanding federal laws requiring stricter background checks for gun buyers.

"In South Carolina, every nine minutes someone dies from gun violence; it's not a white or black issue," Middleton said. "We must sound the clarion trumpet. We must reclaim our prophetic voice and call wrong, wrong."

Though the Charleston victims' families have talked about forgiveness for Roof, Middleton said he and others will watch the court proceedings closely to make sure justice is done.

"As a black man, if I went into a white church and mowed down nine people, I don't think I would be alive today," he said. "They would have served justice in their own way."

Roof is charged with a federal hate crime and could face the death penalty.

Pinckney offered searing images of that fateful day in June that took her husband's life.

She described waiting in another room with her six-year-old daughter, Malana, for the Bible study to finish.

"She heard everything that was going on," said Pinckney of Malana. "Within that moment, she asked me, 'Mama, is Daddy going to die?'"