



Op-Ed: Mother Emanuel Church Racial Murder and Lessons Learned

It's been just over five years since one of the most heinous racial killings in U.S. history when a white supremacist intent on igniting a race war murdered nine worshipers at the historic Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C. The massacre shocked the nation and prompted a racial dialogue in the city that is now inflamed again by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minn.

I traveled to Charleston in October 2015 to pay my respect to those lost to racism, hate and violence. I will always remember that emotional visit and how it renewed my commitment to fight against hate and racism. This murderous rampage showed the worst of human nature, but the church, the community and the world has united around it in an overwhelming expression of love and support. As the state senator representing Newtown, I have seen that very same human spirit on display. I went there to listen, to pray, and to reinforce the notion that evil acts cannot, and will not, define us.

I was again reminded of the incredible healing powers of the human spirit in September 2018 when survivors — family members of those killed — participated with Wiley Mullins, police Chief Richard Doyle, who was captain at the time, and me at [Covenant Church](#) of Easton and Alida Ward and David Rowe at [Greenfield Hill Congregational Church](#) in two remarkable and mesmerizing sermons and dialogue exchange on forgiveness, healing and faith.

Polly Shepard was one of the two survivors who looked into the eyes of the killer and whose life was spared by the white supremacist killer. He spared her with the intent of her telling the story of racial hatred and violence that led to his murderous rampage and hoping that this act of violence would lead to a inflammatory racial war. Instead, Shepard chose to forgive instead of giving into hate and revenge.

She reinforced her faith and believed in the inherent human spirit for kindness and connection. Her message that “Forgiveness is our Choice” and with faith and a united belief that love and support will always win forever changed my perspective and conduct as a person and a legislative leader. Those are the values and lessons that I will hold onto as we engage in current dialogues toward creating much needed changes for equality, fairness, safety and that Black Lives truly matter.

Senator Tony Hwang serves the 28th District which includes the towns of Easton, Fairfield, Newtown, Weston and Westport.



• Mother Emanuel AME Survivors



Mother Emanuel-AME Church Charleston, SC

Photo above left: Wiley Mullins, Alana Simmons (her grandfather, the Rev. Daniel Lee

Simmons Sr., was murdered), State Senator Tony Hwang, Polly Shepard (one of the two survivors in the study), the Rev. Anthony Thompson (his wife, Myra, who led the Bible Study was murdered) and then-Easton Police Captain Richard Doyle, who is now Police Chief.