

The Honorable Nikki R. Haley
Office of the Governor
1205 Pendleton Street
Columbia, SC 29201

June 17, 2016

Dear Governor Haley,

We've never met, but we've been in the same place many times over the past year. My name is Reverend Anya Marsalek Leveille, and I am the pastor of New Emanuel AME Church in Jamestown, SC. For what it's worth, I'm white.

I congratulate you on being named an "honorary AME." I'm an actual AME, and I have been for 15 years. I was ordained to the pastoral ministry in the AME Church by Bishop Richard Franklin Norris almost two years ago. As a white person who has been blessed by the AME Church and her people, I need to share some thoughts with you.

I was there in the TD Arena today for the memorial service. Your heartfelt remembrances of the victims moved us all.

Together with my Bishop, I praise your compassionate leadership in the hours and days following the tragedy at Emanuel. By your presence and sympathy, you modeled public mourning and drew deserved attention to the lives that were lost. I was one of millions overjoyed by your change of heart regarding the Confederate battle flag at the State Capitol. I thank you for leading the way in doing the right thing for our state in that first month after the shooting.

Your exemplary leadership over that period makes your lack of leadership in the months since all the more disappointing. Advocating kindness is all well and good, but does not address the systemic oppression faced by Black people in South Carolina, nor the scourge of gun violence.

One line in particular from your remarks today left me shaking my head in disbelief. You spoke of how shocked the people of our state were to hear of the atrocity that had been committed at Emanuel. "Not in South Carolina!" you said.

Which part of our state's history makes this crime astonishing? The part where it was founded by men intent on exploiting slave labor for their own profit? The part where the AME Church was banned from the state following the execution of one of its leaders, Denmark Vesey? The part where it seceded from our nation to protect the rights of its citizens to continue to exploit slave labor? The part where it passed Jim Crow laws to keep the newly freed slaves from exercising the rights of citizens? The part where it insisted it had not failed its children by neglecting to provide even a minimally adequate education?

Every part of South Carolina's history drips with racial injustice. And in every part, Black blood was spilled.

Dylann Roof was not a foreign terrorist. He was a South Carolina terrorist. Thousands of other South Carolinians share his beliefs, even if they would never act on them in the way he did. If you doubt that, read some online comment sections. Hatred as vile as Roof's is widespread.

As our governor, you had—and still have—the opportunity to call out and condemn the pervasive racial inequities in our state. Instead, you congratulate us for our "unity."

In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote of the distinction between "the negative peace that is the absence of tension" and "the positive peace that is the presence of justice." In your remarks today, you actively championed the negative peace that is the absence of tension. I and other AME's pray that you will be moved by our pain enough to bring your power to bear on behalf of the positive peace that is the presence of justice.

You said today, "I'm not going to say anything political." Couldn't you see that we want our leaders to say something political? You heard the cheers for Senator Kimpson and Congressman Clyburn (through his staff) as they talked about using laws to make our state and nation safer and more just.

We want commonsense gun reform. We want excellent public schools for our children. We want Medicaid expansion to provide health insurance to those who can't afford it. We want law enforcement to end the practice of pretext stops. We want real change, not platitudes.

I see your sincere faith. I believe you love and trust God. I pray that you will listen to the voices of God's prophets, from Isaiah to Richard Norris, and use your power to work for true, lasting changes in our state that will move us closer to the ideal of liberty and justice for all.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anya Marsalek Leveille', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rev. Anya Marsalek Leveille

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