

THE AFTERMATH OF TRAGEDY / COMMUNITIES JOIN "TO UPLIFT EACH OTHER"

## Mother Emanuel survivors visit Tree of Life, offer strength, solidarity

In 2015, nine worshipers at Mother Emanuel church in Charleston, S.C. were murdered by a white supremacist. They know too well the pain felt by survivors of Tree of Life.

By [TOBY TABACHNICK](#)

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Rev. Eric S.C. Manning, left, Rabbi Jeffrey Myers and congregants of Mother Emanuel gather outside Tree of Life building. (Photo by Toby Tabachnick)

Six months after the murder of his mother, Rose Mallinger, Alan Mallinger finally got a chance to do what he has wanted to do since Nov. 2: thank the Rev. Eric S.C. Manning, pastor of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., for coming to Pittsburgh then and speaking at her funeral.

“You are not alone,” Manning told the mourners that day at the service held in Rodef Shalom. “Charleston stands with you. We mourn with you. We’re here for you and that will never change.”

Manning was again in Pittsburgh last weekend, along with nine congregants from his church — which is commonly known as Mother Emanuel — in continued solidarity with the three congregations attacked by a white supremacist on Oct. 27, 2018, at the Tree of Life synagogue building: Tree of Life\*Or L’Simcha, New Light and Dor Hadash.

Mother Emanuel suffered its own racially motivated attack in 2015, during which nine of its members were murdered.

“I couldn’t see the pastor after the funeral, and I’m glad today to finally thank him,” Mallinger said, adding that Manning’s presence and words at his mother’s memorial service were “unbelievable.”

Survivors from the Tree of Life massacre gathered together with their visitors from South Carolina outside the Tree of Life synagogue building on Friday, May 3 as part of the two communities' continuing commitment to strengthen one another and to heal.

"This is the second time we have been together," said Stephen Cohen, co-president of New Light Congregation. "We were down there in January, and met with folks in Charleston from the Jewish community, and from Mother Emanuel. And we spent time with Pastor Manning, who is an inspirational individual and has done wonderful things with the church."

Rabbi Jeffrey Myers, spiritual leader of Tree of Life\*Or L'Simcha, addressed the two communities gathered in solidarity in front of the Tree of Life building, noting that the intersection of Wilkins and Shady avenues has become "a holy site for the world." Myers read the names and spoke in detail about each of the 11 victims of the Tree of Life attack, memorials to each of them visible through the windows of the building.

"None of their names should be here," Myers said.

Myers and Manning then co-led the recitation of selected Psalms.

"We are here not to mourn, not to grieve, but to uplift each other," Myers said. "To say we will not give evil a posthumous victory. ... Good will always win. We stand here as proof of that."

Longtime Mother Emanuel member Charles Williams could relate to the feelings of those survivors of the Tree of Life attack. The nine people murdered at Mother Emanuel were all friends of his, he said.

"These times, you have to be strong," he stressed. "Your faith has to be strong. Faith is the key."

Faith is what motivated Williams to purchase and install a camera at Mother Emanuel about six months before its 2015 attack. That camera was the one that captured images of the killer, and led to his quick identification by the FBI and to his arrest shortly thereafter.

"I had to buy that camera," said Williams, who remembered the name of the Radio Shack employee who sold it to him, as well as the name of the contractor who installed it. "No one told me to, but I just knew we needed it. I said, 'God,' maybe one day you will show me why I had to do this."

"We share something now," Williams said of his congregation's connection to the survivors of the Tree of Life massacre.

"It's a bond," added his wife, the Rev. Ruth Williams.

Despite his unfathomable loss, Williams said that his "faith is intact. It's stronger now that it's ever been. You have to hang in there. God is in the mix always."

It's not a club anyone wants to be a member of, but there is something empowering about being in the presence of those who have suffered from the same type of trauma, noted Carol Black, a member of New Light, who hid in a closet as the murderer executed her fellow congregants on Oct. 27, including her brother, Dr. Richard Gottfried.

"They've been there, and know what we're going through, and they have found a way to forgiveness," Black said. "That's something I may struggle with forever."

The visit from Mother Emanuel "gives us a lot of strength because they've been through what we've been through," said Andrea Wedner, who was seriously injured in the shooting, and is the daughter of murder victim Rose Mallinger. "They know how we feel, and we know how they feel."

"The outpouring of love has been overwhelming," Wedner added. "It's very therapeutic, and it helps me immensely."

Both faith communities have “gone through the same thing,” said Manning. “They can strengthen one another and encourage one another toward perseverance.”

Myers has been grateful for the support of the Mother Emanuel congregation, especially that of Manning. The two faith leaders have kept in close contact since the Tree of Life massacre.

“God sent an angel to me,” Myers said, referring to Manning. “God is there for me. I’m keenly aware there are many whose faith has been challenged, or perhaps even lost. But we are all going to figure it out together. That’s why this visit is so important. It’s not a first or a last, but on a continuum of a long-term relationship.”

The four congregations joined together for Shabbat services Saturday morning at Rodef Shalom, where Tree of Life\*Or L'Simcha and Dor Hadash are currently housed. **pjc**

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