

Heartache permeates commencement services for Clementa Pinckney

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Family members of the late Clementa Pinckney recently attended Wesley Theological Seminary's commencement service at the Washington National Cathedral.

Pinckney, a doctor of ministry student at Wesley who was close to completing his final project, was gunned down last June, along with eight of his parishioners, when a young white male, who had joined them for a weekly evening Bible study, opened fire on the unsuspecting participants.

Pinckney not only had been pastor of the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., six years, but also had served in the state Senate 15 years before his untimely death at age 41. He had been committed to seeking justice and the "welfare of the city" nearly 19 years. Someday, he could have achieved national stature as a great statesman; but his life was extinguished in the midst of living out his calling.

Poignant presentation

On May 9, prior to awarding diplomas to the doctor of ministry degree candidates, David McAllister-Wilson, president of the seminary, invited Pinckney's widow, Jennifer, to join him at the podium.

She was accompanied by her two young daughters, Eliana and Malana.

McAllister-Wilson informed the audience the Wesley faculty voted

unanimously to award the diploma to Pinckney posthumously. It also established Pinckney Scholarships for the new doctor of ministry in public engagement degree in honor of its alum.

After the president finished his remarks, Academic Dean Robert Martin came forward and handed Jennifer Pinckney her late husband's hood and his diploma.

“Daddy” to his daughters

As I watched Pinckney's daughters at the commencement service, my heart ached.

The country has come to “know” their father in mythical terms—as a martyr, hero and fallen soldier in the struggle for justice. But the girls knew him as “Daddy.” I could not help but recall some of the martyrs of the civil rights movement and the parentless children they left behind.

Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Viola Liuzzo and James Reeb voluntarily accepted the risk of standing up against an unjust, inhumane socio-political order that doomed generations of African-Americans to substandard existence because of their race.

These martyrs pursued the path of resistance despite the possibility of injury or death. They did so not to seek glory in martyrdom, but because they would have been unable to live with themselves if they had not taken that risk. By resisting injustice, they signed on to consequences that could lead to martyrdom.

However, their children did not. The slayers of Evers, King, Liuzzo and Reeb left 15 children with only one parent to raise them.

Risk remains

One of the more heartbreaking aspects of the Charleston church killings is

these deaths occurred in 2015, not 1965. The civil rights movement ended nearly 50 years ago, but young children still can lose a parent because of white supremacy.

Pinckney's daughters, ages 6 and 10, stood by their mother's side while she delivered her brief remarks, as the older daughter held his hood and the younger daughter held his diploma. Jennifer Pinckney explained that initially, only she was supposed to attend the commencement ceremony. However, the Pinckneys "always did things as a family," so naturally, the girls were going to accompany her on this occasion.

She mentioned she and her husband often spoke of his graduation with great anticipation. He was very much looking forward to having his family present as he received his degree. Now they were present, but he was not.

After Jennifer Pinckney spoke, she turned to McAllister-Wilson and hugged him, and spontaneously, her two young daughters did the same. McAllister-Wilson, a large, physically imposing figure, appeared as a bulwark for the bereaved Pinckney family. They held on to him for a long, pregnant moment. It was a deeply poignant tableau that moved me to tears, as it did others. Long after the trio returned to their seats, one could hear sniffing in the audience.

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