

# **‘Go see the movie,’ Emanuel massacre survivor urges**

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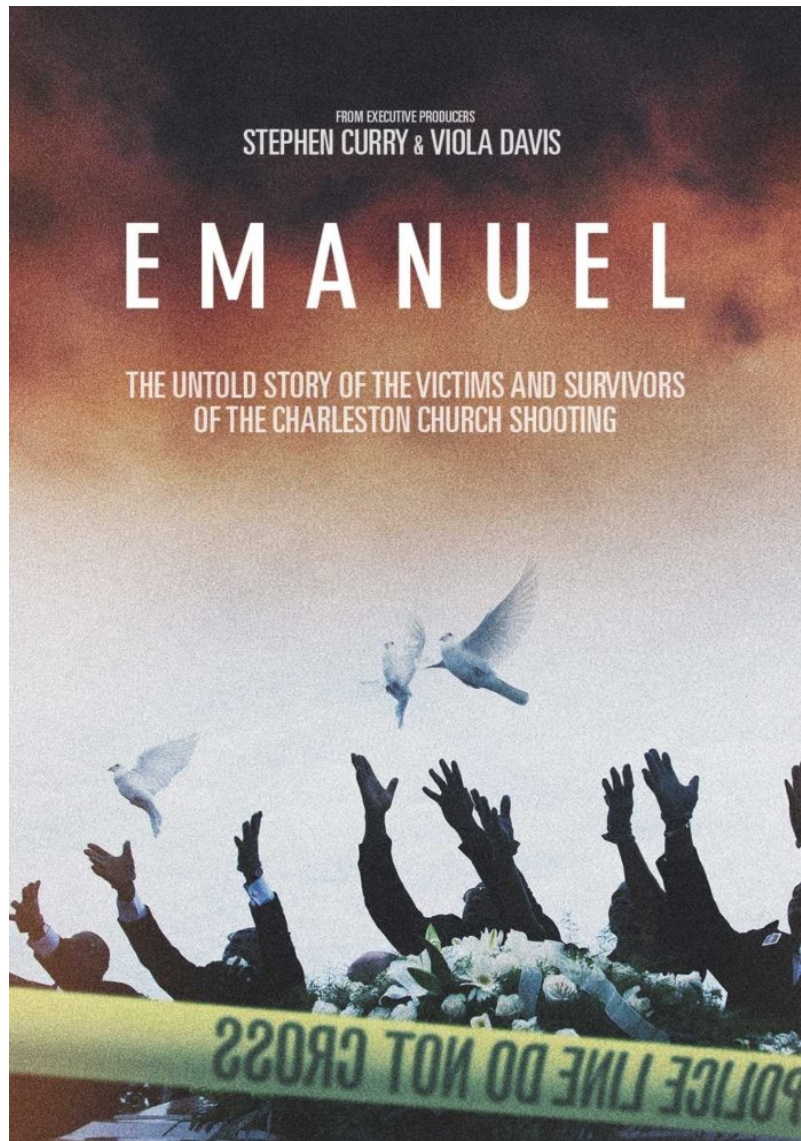
CHARLESTON, S.C. (BP)—Let someone walk into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church with a backpack, and Polly Sheppard relives June 17, 2015. That’s when white supremacist Dylann Roof walked in.

“Only in that church. Other churches I can sit and be calm,” Sheppard said in advance of the documentary film Emanuel. “But when I go to Emanuel and they come in with a backpack and anything like that, I say it’s somebody coming in to do harm, but it doesn’t have to be.”

Roof walked into the church during an evening Bible study and sat silent an hour before methodically shooting church members multiple times as they hung their heads in prayer.

“When we were doing the benediction with our eyes closed, we were standing with our eyes closed and the pastor was praying,” Sheppard recalled. “And that’s when he, that’s when he started to shoot.”

## **The significance of Emanuel AME for black Christians**



Sheppard shares her experience in the film *Emanuel*, in theaters two nights only June 17 and 19. The film tells the story of the massacre against the backdrop of Charleston, S.C., race relations, the historical importance of the church to African Americans, and lessons in forgiveness that resonated internationally after the crime.

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary's Walter Strickland is among scholars featured in the film. Strickland, the seminary's associate vice president for diversity and assistant professor of systematic and contextual theology, spoke on the history of race relations and *Emanuel* AME's

symbolic value as a target of hate.

“For many black people,” Strickland said in an advance copy of the film, “the Christian faith began to be that thing that allowed them to stand and go about week, after week, after week of the abuse, of the oppression that they took.”

## **Remembering those slain at Emanuel AME**

Emanuel includes interviews with family members of those Roof killed, scholars, clergy and journalists, with news footage and historical reenactments. Sheppard was one of three survivors of the massacre. Felicia Sanders survived by playing dead, her still, prostrate body shielding her 11-year-old granddaughter as Roof unloaded a round into her 26-year-old son Tywanza, who died just feet away. Roof killed Sanders’ 87-year-old aunt, Susie Jackson.

Others slain were 41-year-old Senior Pastor Clementa Pinckney; 45-year-old Pastor Sharonda Coleman-Singleton; 74-year-old former Pastor Daniel Simmons; 59-year-old Bible teacher Myra Thompson; 54-year-old Bin Hurd; 70-year-old Ethel Lance, and 49-year-old Depayne Middleton Doctor. Most of the church’s ministerial staff were killed, Sheppard said.

Four years later, Sheppard mostly attends Mt. Zion AME Church. Roof let her live, he claimed as she crouched amid others’ blood, to tell the story of his crime.

“When he was coming towards me, I was thinking, I said maybe I can catch his legs or take him down some kind of way,” Sheppard said in an interview. “But I kept hearing this voice: ‘Be still and know that I am God. Be still.’ ... It was almost like I could hear it. ‘Be still and know that I am

God. Be still.’”

## **Forgiving a killer**

The story Roof wrote in hatred turned into a prevailing story of love and forgiveness as Sheppard, and families of the slaughtered, publicly spoke forgiveness into the evil.

“It took me a while. I had to go to counseling,” Sheppard said. “I was in counseling over a year. But it didn’t take me long, about three months, and I forgave him. And it wasn’t hard, I just had to sit and think of where I was and who had saved me, and who I was leaning on.” Scripture says: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ I know I had to do it.”

Scripture empowered Sheppard to forgive.

“You have to go back to the Scripture. The Bible says you must forgive, you have to forgive others in order for him to forgive you,” Sheppard said. “And if you are true to his word, you will forgive, because mostly it’s for you. It’s your healing.

“That person is going on about his business, and you’re left with this, and if you hold this, you can’t heal,” she said. “But if you get rid of it, turn it over to God, you can heal.”

Sheppard hopes the lesson of forgiveness, the film’s historical content and details of the shooting will draw the public to theaters.

Sheppard’s path to forgiveness shows “that God is real and you can move forward from anywhere you are,” she said. “With God you can do anything, that’s what I want them to learn from that documentary. If you see the state some of these people were in, and you see them now, you’ll see a difference.”

During her career, she worked 14 years at the Charleston County Jail, where Roof was taken after his capture.

“If I was there,” she said of her former job, “I would have had to take care of him.” She retired in 2010.

## Celebrity backing of ‘Emanuel’

Christian professional basketball player [Stephen Curry](#), a championship Golden State Warriors point guard, is an executive producer of the film along with actress Viola Davis, an Oscar, Emmy and Tony Award winner. Actress Mariska Hargitay, a Primetime Emmy and Golden Globe winner, is a co-producer on the project directed by Brian Ivie. Theater information and videos are available at [EmanuelMovie.com](#).

“Go see the movie,” Sheppard urged. “Please see the movie.”

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*EDITOR’S NOTE: ‘Emanuel’ is in theaters on June 17 and June 19 only. Find a theater [here](#).*