

EMANUEL

DISCUSSION GUIDE IN PARTNERSHIP WITH SOJOURNERS



OVERVIEW

The film *Emanuel* offers a sobering reminder of our nation's unresolved struggle to free itself from the demons of white supremacy and racial hatred. It also serves as an inspiring testament to the transformative power of forgiveness and highlights the urgent need for deeper racial reconciliation and justice. *Emanuel* is filled with themes tied to forgiveness, repentance, repair, and, ultimately, the ever present and costly demands of justice. For many viewers, the film will cause anguish and discomfort, because it forces us to look in the mirror and see the battered soul of our nation.

“*Emanuel* honors the lives and legacy of the Emanuel Nine.”

Emanuel honors the lives and legacy of the Emanuel Nine. Displaying their stories, told by their beloved relatives, helps to ensure that memories of them will live on, and that their executions will not be in vain. The courageous witness of their surviving relatives has the power to transform hearts and minds and catalyze commitment to repairing the breach caused by racism in our country—which, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. argued, wounds and imprisons both the oppressed and the oppressor.



ROLE OF THIS GUIDE

This discussion guide is designed to provide tools and resources to help leaders facilitate a discussion about *Emanuel*—whether in a theater after the film is screened, in a church setting, or a small group setting. These questions are not meant to serve as a rigid template but, instead, provide a flexible framework to foster dialogue around the core themes of the film.

It is important to note that people may still be in a very emotive state after watching the film. Those who have experienced racial trauma may be triggered by the film. Others may be shell-shocked or emotionally exhausted. Many white viewers may wrestle with a sense of guilt, while many black viewers may try to tone down their feelings of anger. As a result, we recommend starting the discussion with open-ended questions that invite dialogue and give everyone an opportunity to more effectively process what they saw and experienced.

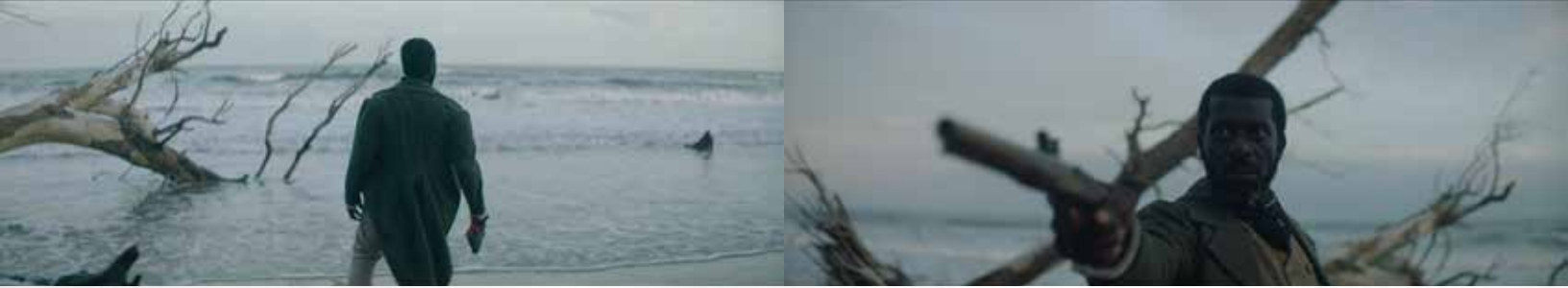
Putting the Film in Context

As the film points out, it was not a coincidence that Dylann Roof marked the Emanuel A.M.E. Church for terrorism. We can't fully appreciate the symbolism of Mother Emanuel without understanding racial terror in the South, which spans through slavery, the post-Reconstruction era, and Jim Crow segregation, and encompasses our present struggles with mass incarceration and racialized violence by police. In the film, historian Herb Frazier highlights that, although church steeples make Charleston look like the "holy city," the city's past is not so holy. Charleston served as a major hub of the slave trade: An estimated 40 percent of American slaves arrived there. This means that a significant part of black America can trace its family history through Charleston.

Start with Open-Ended Questions

- 1 What emotion are you mostly feeling after watching the film?
- 2 What central message did you take away from the film?
- 3 What did you learn from the film that surprised or shocked you?
- 4 Do you remember where you were when you first learned about the Emanuel A.M.E. massacre, (which occurred on June 17, 2015)? What was your immediate reaction? Has the film reshaped your thoughts about what happened? If so, how?
- 5 What thoughts of hope have you taken away from the film?





Charleston also played a key role in the Civil War. Articles of secession were signed there, South Carolina being the first state to secede from the Union. For many Americans today, Charleston is a “confederate Disneyland,” due to its prevalent reminders and monuments to the confederacy—which fuel tourism and shape people’s minds.

It is critical to understand the history and importance of the black church. The black church grew quickly in the South after the Civil War, serving as a source of liberation and a refuge from oppression and violence. As Pastor A.R. Bernard said in the film, “[T]he Christian faith enabled blacks to withstand abuse and be their authentic self. The church was the space where the black community had a sense of ownership.” The church played a central role in promoting social justice, especially by being the backbone and driving force of the civil rights movement. The African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) Church was founded as an anti-slavery church. And Mother Emanuel represented the first free standing black church in the South, standing as an icon for the A.M.E Church nationally and internationally.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What did you learn about Charleston’s past by watching the film?
- 2 Did the film change your opinion on the act of flying the confederate flag or the presence of Confederate monuments, which are prominent in many Southern cities?
- 3 How do you interpret the historian Herb Frazier’s description of Charleston as a “confederate Disneyland”?
- 4 Why do you think the black church was considered a threat and target by many white slave owners and segregationists?
- 5 The film is centered on family members who lost their loved ones because of domestic terrorism. Which of their stories stood out to you?



THE COURAGE TO FORGIVE

The murders of the Emanuel Nine were horrific on several levels. Dylann Roof was invited to the Bible study in the basement of Emanuel A.M.E. with open arms, by people whom he eventually murdered. He sat through the entire Bible study and began to shoot when they bowed their heads to pray. He said he wanted to incite a race war, telling his victims that “black men were raping white women” and that black people “had to go.” When he appeared in court, after being apprehended by police, he showed no visible remorse for what he did.

And yet, as we see in the film, some relatives of the victims went to his bond hearing just 48 hours after the massacre of their loved ones and told him and the world that they forgave him for what he did. This was a radical act that almost no one saw coming. It wasn't something the relatives of the victims had discussed ahead of time. In that moment, their hearts were moved, their spirits convicted to speak forgiveness—a profound evocation of scripture and its call for Christians. For as A.R. Bernard highlighted, as Jesus—an innocent man—hung on the cross, he prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Forgiveness is a consistent and dominate theme of scripture. Jesus called on his followers to “Love your

enemies...bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28). Peter goes to Jesus and asks, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but 77 times.” (Matthew 18:21-22). Forgiveness lies at the center of the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus taught his disciples, instructing them to ask that God “forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sins against us” (Matthew 6:12). The Apostle Paul also reinforced the power and importance of forgiveness when he wrote to the Colossian church, instructing them to: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Col. 3:13).

“Anger can be an important source of courage and a catalyst for change when channeled in the right ways.”

Thus, forgiving Roof modeled the teachings of Christ and was a display of one of the greatest acts of love possible. As President Obama expressed at the memorial service, God works in mysterious ways, and the act of those relatives of the victims mirrored God's “amazing grace.” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. highlighted the connection between forgiveness and love when he said: “We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us.” Dr. King also warned against the destructive dangers of hate, “Returning hate for hate multiplies hate,” he said, “adding deeper darkness to a night





already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Our capacity and commitment to forgive seeks to mirror God’s unconditional love. And forgiveness can release us from pain and resentment, breaking the vicious cycle of vengeance and retribution that often begets greater enmity or violence. As relatives of the victims remind us in the film, Dylann Roof will always carry the heavy burden of what he did.

But the willingness to forgive that many of the relatives of the victims displayed does not negate the anger they felt toward Roof, as he showed no outward remorse for his actions. And the film documents how other relatives of the victims weren’t willing to forgive, some of them still declining to do so—which is understandable. Anger is not contradictory to forgiveness, and relatives of the victims who were driven by their faith to forgive Roof were no less angry at him, the way he was treated by police—which was likely different than if he been a young black shooter—or the racism their families still live among in the South. Anger can be an important source of courage and a catalyst for change when channeled in the right ways.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Why do you think many relatives of the victims were able to forgive Dylann Roof just 48 hours after their loved ones’ lives were taken? Do you think you’re capable of this degree of forgiveness?
- 2 What struck you about Nadine and Anthony statements of forgiveness to Dylann Roof?
- 3 How does forgiveness demonstrate courage in the face of hatred? How does following Christ demand forgiveness?
- 4 How did Chris’s story impact you?
- 5 Do you think the fact that the massacre happened in a church impacted the way people responded? If so, why?



THE LONG ROAD TO RACIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

As A.M.E pastor Joseph Darby said in the film, “Racism is as American as apple pie.” President Obama, at the memorial for those slain at Mother Emanuel, referred to the nation’s “original sin” of racism. In order to fully understand the dynamics unfolding in this massacre and its aftermath, we need to understand the prevalence and persistence of systemic racism in America. It’s much more than individual hateful attitudes. Racism is deeply embedded in almost every facet and major institution of American society, and while much has changed in large measure—due to the Civil Rights movement – much remains the same or has become worse. Deep inequities and disparities of income, wealth, education, housing, the criminal justice system, and infant and maternal mortality are just a few areas in which we see racism persist in insidious ways.

The film reminds us that just two months before the Emanuel A.M.E massacre, Walter Scott—an unarmed black man—was shot in the back, killed by a white police officer in North Charleston, the moment captured on a bystander’s cell phone. The incident was added to a long and tragic list of high-profile examples of racialized policing and violence, from Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Sandra Bland to Tamir Rice and Eric Garner. The film notes that controversy surrounding the Trayvon Martin case inspired Dylan Roof to search the internet, where he found white supremacist and neo-Nazi content.

If we are to achieve real and lasting racial justice and healing, we must move beyond forgiveness for heinous acts of violence and hate and look for ways to dismantle structures of racial inequity and affirmations of racism. We also need to understand that some Black Lives Matter activists who criticized the narratives of forgiveness that emerged in the aftermath of the Emanuel A.M.E. massacre seek to address the often ignored causes and institutionalization of racial injustice. Racial justice requires redressing those pervasive racial inequalities.

In the aftermath of the massacre, Roof is referred to by police and the media as the killer but almost never as a domestic terrorist. The rising threat of domestic terrorism is being underplayed or ignored by too many political leaders, even though there are many more lives lost to acts of terror by American citizens than by foreign actors. From Oklahoma City to Charleston, Charlottesville to Pittsburgh, New Zealand to Norway and other locations in



Europe, white nationalism and white supremacy are a growing movement. This movement is unified by fear that white people's power and superiority is being taken away by growth of more diverse and inclusive democracies. The changing racial demographics of the U.S.—in which the Census Bureau estimates that, around the year 2045, white people will no longer be a majority—have also led to increasingly public white nationalist politics and policies.

The Anti-Defamation League reported that, in the United States, "right-wing extremists collectively have been responsible for more than 70 percent of the 427 extremist-related killings over the past 10 years, far outnumbering those committed by left-wing extremists or domestic Islamist extremists—even with the sharp rise of Islamist-extremist killings in the past five years." Tragically, the New Zealand white power killer—a 28-year-old white Australian man who fatally shot 50 Muslims while they were worshipping and injured 50 more, the deadliest event of its kind in New Zealand's history—cited Dylann Roof as an inspiration.

A biblical understanding of justice requires a commitment to address causes of injustice, which often include unjust domination, violence, exploitation, and exclusion. True restoration requires a both/and approach of reconciling broken relationships and dismantling the systems, laws, policies, and attitudes that inflict harm and cause subordination—including attitudes of superiority and hatred. We must change the structures of American society at every level, so they no longer pathologize and demonize black people, treating them as threats rather than children of God made in God's image.

Discussion Questions

- 1 In the film, Black Lives Matter activist Muhiyidin D'baha said that the bond hearing "was a nail in the coffin." How do you think the profound act of forgiveness impacted the community's anger and calls for systemic change? Can forgiveness be coupled with the act of seeking justice?
- 2 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that a riot is the language of the unheard. Do you agree? How do you see the unheard crying out?
- 3 Family member Waltrina Middleton said, "We never get to the truth-telling, to the why, the realities of racism in this city and nation." What truths in relation to racism and white supremacy do you think our nation needs to discuss and come to terms with?
- 4 How do we best combat hatred and uproot racism?
- 5 Why do you think Charleston avoided the violence that happened in many other cities, in the wake of high-profile killings of people of color?

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMATION

While societal and structural transformation is absolutely critical for racial equity and healing, repentance and transformation at a personal level is also necessary and should be viewed as complementary to systemic change, rather than in tension with it. We don't need to choose one or the other. Honoring the memory of the Emanuel Nine requires us to work on both interpersonal and systemic levels.

The true meaning of repentance is important to understand in this context. Repentance is much more than saying sorry or feeling deep regret or sadness. True repentance means turning around and going in a new direction. As individuals and a society, this is what we need to do. We owe it to the Emanuel Nine and so many others.

Since a big part of what drives unconscious and conscious bias between people of different backgrounds is a lack of direct, meaningful relationships and experience with each other, we need to change the racial geography that keeps us apart from each other. This means finding ways to build meaningful relationships in and between schools, congregations, families, colleagues, and more.

“ If you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small. Proverbs 24:10 ”

While the outpouring of unity that followed the Emanuel A.M.E. massacre provided a hopeful moment of transformation, Charleston remains a deeply divided city. The newly elected mayor formed an advisory council of pastors from across the city to focus on reconciliation, forgiveness and repentance. This is an important step that requires follow-through. Will *Emanuel* be just another film that generates a fleeting sense of outrage and urgency, or will it be a catalyst that accelerates and deepens our individual and collective pursuit of racial reconciliation and justice? The answer is in each of our

hands. While there is no single remedy to combat racism and prevent more acts of racial violence, every courageous conversation, act of solidarity, and changed mind and heart puts an important dent in the walls of racism. You can start with the places close to you—your church, community, city, etc.—by closing the moral distance between yourself and people from another race. You can use the power of your voice and vote to support candidates and policies that will advance racial justice and reconciliation.

What do the stories of the Emanuel Nine require of you? What will you commit to doing after this discussion ends?

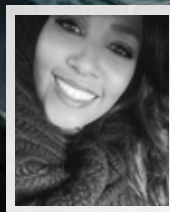
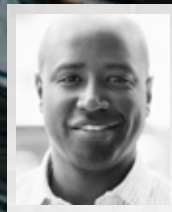
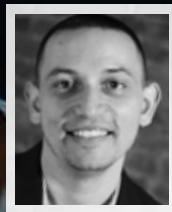
Discussion Questions

- 1 Based on the film, are there any commitments you are ready and willing to make, to foster racial justice and reconciliation?
- 2 How are you already serving as an ally or change agent?
- 3 In what ways can you build more bridges across racial lines?
- 4 Does your social circle include people whose ethnic backgrounds are different than yours?
- 5 How have you tolerated, or been complicit in, racism and white supremacy?
- 6 Complete this statement: “The blood of the Emanuel Nine requires us to ...”



RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING:

- *Grace Will Lead Us Home: The Charleston Church Massacre and the Hard, Inspiring Journey to Forgiveness*, by Jennifer Berry Hawes (St. Martin's Press, 2019)
- *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson (Spiegel & Grau, 2014)
- *Race Matters, 25th Anniversary Edition*, by Cornel West (Beacon Press, 2017)
- *America's Original Sin*, by Jim Wallis (Brazos Press, 2016)
- *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander (New Press, 2012)
- *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates (Spiegel & Grau, 2015)
- *White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo (Beacon Press, 2018)
- "*How White Privilege Shapes the U.S.*," by Robert Jensen (Beyond Whiteness)



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