

Church Shooting Survivor: God Was in the Room With Us

A shocking act of racially motivated violence that could have divided a city is profiled in the new documentary *Emanuel*, premiering in theaters June 17 and 19 as a Fathom Events presentation. The film, executive produced by Stephen Curry and Viola Davis and co-produced by Mariska Hargitay, centers on the shooting deaths of nine church members at the Emanuel AME Church during a prayer meeting in 2015. The film features interviews with family members of victims as well as Polly Sheppard, a survivor whose life was spared.

In a stunning twist to the tragic story, the family members spoke to Roof during the bond hearing two days later, offering forgiveness. Sheppard, who was initially reluctant to do the film because of the memories it might provoke, hopes that viewers will see the power of a community coming together and healing after such a devastating loss.

"After the shooting, I saw a lot of togetherness," she said. "Everybody hugging and kissing each other. No differences. You didn't see any difference in race or anything. There was a calmness. Other cities would burn, rioting, we didn't have any of that. It was a close-knit community."

During the shooting, Roof approached Sheppard, but decided to leave her alive to "tell the story." Sheppard said he "was saying his life was over and that he was going to shoot himself, but he never did." He pointed the gun at the floor near her and clicked it twice, but nothing came out.

"I thought maybe the gun was empty," she said. "But we found out in court it wasn't empty. There were two more bullets in there."

The entire evening was "different than anything I've ever

seen," she said, adding that the events unfolded very quickly and it was strangely quiet.

"I know God had to be in that room with us, even though He took some of us," she said. "He left me to finish what I gotta' do."

Sheppard, who now attends another nearby AME church to lessen the "fanfare" of being recognized in her former congregation, admits she wrestled with being left alive to recount the tragedy for others, especially considering the killer's directive.

"I was perplexed because I'd never done a lot of public speaking," she said. "So I asked the Lord, 'What do you want me to do? Where do you want me to go?' I finally got up and decided I'd tell my Father's story. I think Dylan thought he was using me to tell his story, but my story is to tell my Father's story and how he left me here to tell who He is."

Considering that she now is part of a heartbreaking group of those who have survived mass shootings, Sheppard has advice for other survivors.

"I would tell them you need to get counseling and to trust God," she said. "And you have to forgive. If you don't forgive, it eats you. It's like drinking poison and waiting for somebody else to die. You have to let it go and know that God left you here for a reason."

Emanuel debuts this week, commemorating the anniversaries of the shooting and the first bond hearing, as a Fathom Events presentation. It is directed by Brian Ivey.

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