

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH BISHOP JOHN BRYANT

SUBJECT: CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA SHOOTING: WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?

MODERATOR: JOHN HUGHES, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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**JOHN HUGHES:** (Sounds gavel.) Welcome to the National Press Club. My name is John Hughes. I'm an editor for Bloomberg's First Word, that's our breaking news desk here in Washington, and I am the President of the National Press Club. Our guest today is the Right Reverend John Richard Bryant, senior bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. He played an important role in the aftermath of the Charleston, South Carolina mass shooting and we'll get to that in a moment. .

But first, I want to introduce our distinguished head table. From the audience's right, C. Naseer Ahmad, writer for *Diplomatic Courier* and board member for *Interfaith Voices* on NPR and a National Press Club member; Robert MacPherson, a correspondent for *Agence France-Presse* and a National Press Club member who covered the Charleston, South Carolina shootings and has covered other mass shootings in the United States; Shawna Thomas, senior producer for NBC's *Meet the Press* and a club member; Bishop William DeVeaux, presiding prelate of the 2<sup>nd</sup> District of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a guest of the speaker; Bruce Johnson, anchor, reporter for WUSA TV, Channel 9, CBS, and one of the newest members of the National Press Club. We're so proud to have him. Reverend Dr. Cecilia Williams Bryant, wife of Bishop Bryant and a guest of the speaker. (Laughter) Donna Leinwand, Breaking News Editor for *USA Today*, she is a past president of the National Press Club and is the current Vice Chair of the Club's Speakers Committee.

Skipping over our speaker for a moment, Jeff Ballou. He's the Vice Chair of the National Press Club Board of Governors. And he's the member who organized today's luncheon. Thank you, Jeff. Dr. Pamela DeVeaux, Episcopal Supervisor of the 2<sup>nd</sup> District

of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the wife of Bishop William DeVeaux, and a guest of our speaker. George Thompson of Thompson & Associates, a National Press Club member. And he invited Bishop Bryant to be our speaker today. Denise Rolark-Barnes, Chair of the National Newspapers Publishers Association, publisher of the *Washington Informer* and a member of the National Press Club. Noel St. John, a freelance photographer, a Club member and member of the National Press Club's Photo Committee. (Applause)

I also want to welcome our C-SPAN and public radio audiences, and you can follow the action today on Twitter. Use the hashtag NPCLive, that's NPCLive.

It's been almost two months since the mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina. Nine worshippers, including the pastor were killed during a weekly Bible study inside the historic Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Quickly after the tragedy Bishop Bryant called the nation to prayer. And barely 24 hours later, there was a vigil in a packed and sweltering Morris Brown AME Church just blocks away from where the shooting occurred. That day Rev. Bryant invoked the African-American legacy of resilience. He said that the shooting suspect Dylann Roof had, quote, "picked the wrong place and the wrong crowd," end quote. Bishop Bryant then discussed the problem of gun violence.

The days that followed saw a massive outpouring of sympathy and a global dialogue on forgiveness, faith, race, and guns. Since those early days after Charleston, much has happened. The Confederate flag was removed from the grounds of the South Carolina State Capitol and from other public places. The nation's continuing struggle with racial division has continued to play out in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. There have been new incidents of mass gun violence in Lafayette, Louisiana and Chattanooga, Tennessee. And reports of gun violence continue daily in Washington, D.C., Chicago and in other cities and towns across American.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, who once spoke in this very room, right about where I'm standing, he said in a 1967 essay, he asked the question, "Where do we go from here? Chaos or community?" Perhaps our guest today can try to answer that question. Please give a warm, National Press Club welcome to the Presiding Prelate and Senior Bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Right Reverend John Richard Bryant. (Applause)

**REV. BRYANT:** Let me acknowledge the presence, again, of my wife, my partner in marriage and ministry for 46 years. (Applause) Then I'm happy to have the Patriarch of our family here, Mr. Charles Robinson, who will turn 90 later this month (Applause). Happy to have my sister here, Cynthia Bryant Pitts. (Applause) God bless you. And my son, Jamul Harrison Bryant (Applause) and my godson, Michael Wilkins Ray. (Applause) I have a host of sons and daughters in the ministry here. And so they may have felt I wouldn't an Amen in this crowd. (Laughter) So they came to give me some back-up.

Let me share in the next 20 minutes or so what all of us experienced June 17<sup>th</sup>, Wednesday night in the ground floor of Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. A young stranger comes in but he's greeted like a fellow pilgrim, sits amongst the people who are studying the Word of God and pray. Half hour later he gets up and with a loaded guns he begins to empty that gun into human flesh, floors, walls, ceilings. The reloads, empties it. Then reloads and empties it until nine people, none of whom whose name he probably knows, dead in a pool of their own blood.

What a horrible night. What a horrible experience. But after it, believe it or not some good stuff happens. It's almost like Easter that comes after Good Friday. Some good stuff. A mayor of a southern city comes and spends the night amongst the people. When I arrived the next day, this is how he was described to me by a lay person. "He loves us. That's the Mayor. He loves us." While reporters, TV anchors were searching for a motive, he said clearly, "This is a hate crime." Some good stuff happened. The Governor showed up. And both the Governor and the Mayor participated in what we as the Church call the Ministry of Presence, when it is not so much what you say. It's what your presence communicates.

And so the Governor of this southern state comes and she stays and says, "We will bring the perpetrator to justice." Some good stuff. The nation was able to get a close-up view of a real church and a description of a real pastor. They were murdered while studying the Word of God. Pastored by a man who loved Jesus, loved his family, loved his flock, loved his community. He was on the floor because he was a State Representative. An important vote was coming up. His seatmate said, "You stay for this vote." And he said, "No. I'm going to a prayer meeting." I've been elected here but I've been selected there. And I've made it clear that my first priority is the Church." And so he rushed to death.

Mother Emanuel demonstrated the Christian Gospel better than any theologian in any seminary. Love those who despitely use you. And in the face of what real Christianity looks like, it got the attention of the nation and so much of the world. Some good stuff happened. Mother Emanuel had security cameras. And on the security camera it captured the image of this young man. Law enforcement was there. And they announced that, "We will use everything at our disposal to bring the perpetrator to justice." And in quick order he was arrested. Some good stuff happened.

I received communication from around the world and from around the country. A mosque in Oakland sent \$10,000 dollars. Our lifelong soulmates, the Quaker Church who first befriended us when we started over 200 years ago, sent word to me that, "We want to do something. We have a retreat center. If there are those in that community who just need to get away or need to have someone to help them process, please contact us. We would like to welcome those persons to the retreat center free of charge." The letters, the calls, the various denominations from other nations, all wishing to share our grief. Some good things happened.

In the city of Charleston, South Carolina, services held in the heart of the black community, white folks showed up and acted as if they weren't afraid. Went to a restaurant and they, while eating, the patrons kept coming to the table to share their condolences. The owner said, "Now, don't try to pay for this meal. We just feel so bad as a city that this has happened." They acted as if, to them, black lives matter.

The Governor of a southern state said, "It's time for the flag to come down." When Pastor Pinckney was elected, such a young man elected, friends said to him, "You will finally be able to bring that flag off of that tax-paid land." And he said, "It won't happen in my lifetime." And he was right. But it happened. That's some good stuff, isn't it?

But what's the bad stuff. The bad stuff for me is the gun. The love affair this nation has with the gun. It's like owning a pit bull that keeps biting people and you keep defending it because you love it. That gun, the violence in our homes. When homicide takes place in the home, present is the gun. Increasing suicide, the instrument of choice the gun. Since 2010 over 8,000 people have been shot mistakenly in our national parks by the gun. And each time we make emotional adjustments to hold on to the gun. And of late it seems as if we have fallen madly in love with the gun.

Legislative houses all across the country are making new arrangements that the gun will be present in new places. President of NRA says that Pinckney was his fault. That if he had had a gun, he nor his members would have died. The facts don't bear that out. We keep saying the gun will protect us and yet it seems to make us more violent. We sell more. We own more guns than any nation in the world. And we are the most violent nation in the world. It seems to increase it.

I said in South Carolina that in my city it looked like we were going to win the Stanley Cup. We had to work on the television, everything, to get the people together because if they win, they didn't want them to tear the city up. Because they can tear the city up. Emotions run high when you when. And so you put out-of-control emotions and liquor together. Now add the gun. Is that insanity? Put it on your hip, you know, like Wild Bill Hickok. That's what we're returning to. Take it to school. Take it in the restaurant Wear it on you hip. What's the fascination with this instrument that can do so much damage, so much harm? That's a bad thing. The gun hasn't moved an in the aftermath. It's free.

In the aftermath we're still stuck with racism. Racism in this country has been plaguing us from the beginning. I was telling some people, I have some churches in India. And I was reading an article about India. And in the next decade they're supposed to surpass China in population. But the scholar say that they will not pass China because India has the caste system, which takes a large group of people out of the mix. And China does a better job of integrating everybody.

Racism, where a large proportion of your population is sinking and it is a challenge. It is a challenge to our political system. The 2012 election, the Republicans

said, repeatedly, repeatedly, repeatedly that they were standing on the side of the one percent. The Democrats said repeatedly, repeatedly, repeatedly, we are for the middle class. Nobody spoke for the poor. (Applause) And African-Americans have made progress in that more of us have risen to the middle class. But the same is that those at the bottom are increasing in great number and nothing is being done about it.

I watched the Republican debates. Would you believe that they could spend that many hours and nobody deal with racism that's eating away at the fiber of this country. Racism, the need to look down on something, to not see somebody, to not see, to not see, to become invisible in a culture, to not see. To not see that half, over half of African-Americans are not graduating from high school, to not see it. To not see that there is a different set of laws for blacks than there are for whites, to not see it, to not see it.

I was reading an article written in the *New York* magazine about a week ago. And he was reporting on a research just done that found that in the schools white children who offended the rules were either given medication or sent to therapy constantly. Blacks who offended the rules were expelled or to prison for the same infractions. Psychologists reported in the same article that in a study done by the Pew researchers, that in the eyes of whites, black children look older and larger than their white counterparts.

So when I see—listen the way a black is described who breaks the law. Never is the term used, “child.” It's delinquent or thug. Because in their eyes he looks so menacing. He looks larger. He looks older than he white counterpart. The man who killed Michael Brown said he looked like a monster. And the Grand Jury agreed.

Racism, it's a challenge to the Church. It's a challenge to the black Church because in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, our liberator and emancipator, we cannot be silent nor otherworldly (Applause) and watch our people or fail to see our people who are suffering. Part of my district is Detroit, where they are still amongst the black community 40 percent unemployment. And these unemployment rates so high and no job training. They act as if black lives don't matter

I resent it when I say, “Black lives matter,” and people respond, “All lives matter.” I ain't talking about all lives. (Applause) It's clear in America that some live sure enough matter. I'm talking about bringing attention to the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, who are still human beings, who still need to be rescued, who still need the Ministry of Presence.

It's a challenge to the white Church. How are you able to sing hymns and not mention what's going on right around us, week after week after week after week after week? It's a challenge to law enforcement. It's a problem when the majority of good police don't put the bad police in check. (Applause) It's a challenge to law enforcement, prosecutors when they see a black differently than they see a white. It's a challenge to the prison industry, which has been called the new Jim Crow.

I think my 20 minutes is about up. (Laughter) And I'm not finished but I'm going to stop (Laughter) and receive what questions you have.

(Applause)

**MR. HUGHES:** I want to start with a question about the gun, which you talked about. Gun control, gun legislation, it seems like in the aftermath of the shooting, there was no budging, as I think you mentioned. How optimistic are you of any kind of regulation forthcoming? And is it going to happen at the state level or at the federal level. Will Congress take any action on the gun policy front?

**REV. BRYANT:** Pinckney said, "Not in my lifetime." Thank God for God's time. My prayer is that the people will get enough. I don't see the change coming from the legislators. But when we get enough of the violence—it is so alarming to look at global statistics and homicide rates globally in the developed world as compared to US, ten, 20 times greater here. I read an article not long ago about the murders or the shootings to death by police of citizens and they were like in a certain country, that year three, four; in our country, 370-something. When we get enough and when good people stop remaining silent, I'm hopeful that then the change will come.

**MR. HUGHES:** This questioner notes that in the last two months the AME Church has experienced two tragedies, South Carolina and Sandra Bland that directly reflect the state of race relations and African-American in the United States. In this short time the AME found itself in a religious spotlight usually consumed by black mega churches. What is the AME doing with this opportunity to help civil rights movements like Black Lives Matter and what are the local churches doing?

**REV. BRYANT:** Glad you asked. (Laughter) A lot of our churches are mega churches. And a lot of our churches have been on the firing line continuously without publication. I am now a bona fide senior citizen. Back in the seventies you could call a news conference and the news would show up. Today you can call a news conference and nobody comes. So what happened in Charleston is the new lit up Emanuel that's been there doing ministry for 200 years. And I talked to a brother who is here who said he was at Bible study at Emanuel last Wednesday and it was packed. And most of the people were white. They didn't know it was there.

I responded to a letter that said, "All of the marching and protesting doesn't mean anything. Since the cameras left you all haven't done anything—church." And I wrote him back; some I write back. And I said, "Never confuse the presence of the camera as the presence of our activity." The cameras left Charleston and are now following Trump. (Applause) But last week I had a tour. My son has opened up a center, a school feeding 500 young people there in Baltimore. (Applause) And I was able to walk around and see young people in large number so quiet and orderly behind new computer with satellites hanging from the ceiling in their science, learning about saving and investing from those who were experts, being exposed to the arts.

And I wrote back to the person, “Now just because you haven’t seen it on TV doesn’t mean it’s a non-reality. It’s real. I walked through it. Just the cameras have gone. And other things have taken place in Baltimore but we don’t have a mechanism to share it. So we are the Church. So it means we can never do enough because we are the Lord’s representatives in the earth. And whatever we do it’s not nearly enough. But so much is going on to try to make a difference. And then we have to learn to share through this media. Twitter, Facebook, that’s our new reporters. Because when the reports don’t come we can report out ourselves. But a lot is going on and a lot more needs to go on.

**MR. HUGHES:** Are the disruptive tactics of the Black Lives Matter Movement that we’ve seen of late at campaign events, is that justified or is it distracting, and explain why? And another questions on the Black Lives Matter Movement: is it as disorganized as the Occupy Movement? Do they need a clear goal like what we saw 50 years ago in Alabama?

**REV. BRYANT:** I once pastored in New England. And it was first, second generation Barbadians who basically came from the Anglican Church. And now they were in the AME Church trying to get used to our noise. (Laughter) And they brought it up in a Board meeting. They said, “And Pastor, these young people you have coming to the Church, they don’t know how to have Church. You preaching and they whistling. And they shouting, ‘Right on.’” Says, “That’s not Church talk. They should say, ‘Amen,’ ‘Hallelujah,’ ‘Thank you, Jesus.’” And I said to the brother, I said, “Suppose I got up from my seat and came where you are and hit you in the head with a hammer. Would it be proper for me to tell you how to say, ‘Ouch?’”

What ought to be scary to us, and that’s what I tried to say this morning, there is a large group of people who are suffering: one in four in the criminal system; outlandish numbers unemployed, can’t find a job. And then to add insult to injury, those who have jobs and are still poor because the jobs pay so little. And this is the crowd that has erupted. And we want to sanitize them. And really we need to try to run in front of it and give it shape. And this—that we think can take that movement further down the road.

But right now we’re playing catch up. They’ve come to the streets out of frustration. And what they’ve said to us is that we’ve heard what you said and we’ve tried. And when we can see people gunned down and catch it on film in living color you see it and then to have the dismissed, we’re still angry. And so the way they respond may not be the way responded years ago when we were taken through workshops and what have you, the non-violence—we’ve got to catch up to that. But right now across this country, there is a deep feeling of frustration in the souls of people who feel that in this culture, in this society, their lives don’t matter.

And so they’re saying, “Hey!! Look at me. I’m a man. I’m a woman. I have needs like you do.” And we’ve got to run behind them and clean it up. Calm them down.” But it’s the response of the human soul that’s been pent up and ignored.

**MR. HUGHES:** You mentioned racism and it got questions about racism. While the Confederate flag no longer flies on the South Carolina capitol grounds, what needs to be done to change the racist conditions and unapologetic killer like Mr. Roof? And another questioner along similar lines says: it's a very good an important thing to take down a symbol or racism such as the confederate flag at the State House. How do you take down the racism in people's hearts and minds?

**REV. BRYANT:** And that's where we need our white brothers and sisters of good will. A lot is said in our absence that can be corrected. I live in Chicago and I was at a demonstration at the Tower. And it was about 50- 50 black and white. And the white kids turned around and started shouting at the police and telling the police what they were going to do. And telling the police where they could go. I never turned around. (Laughter) I kept my face front because they won't get killed.

Another brave, young man I saw on the news who saw the police with his foot on the neck and brutalizing an individual. He couldn't take it. And he tackled the police. Do you know the miracle? He didn't die. He tackled the police and he didn't die. So I'm praying that as our brothers and sisters of good will see what's going on and speak out and vote out and stand up it will help us. Because the kind of racism I'm talking about, as King said, it can't be legislated. It's a matter of heart. The kind of deposits that were made in that young man's life that birthed that level of hatred, that's deep.

Now we have our work to do. I'm talking about the African-American community. Because if you're treated like you're nothing long enough, you'll act like you're nothing. And in like manner, we've got to take care that we've got to do that job with sowing into the hearts and spirits of our people self-worth, even when everything around you tells you you're good and you have no destiny. It's up to us to give them another message.

But on September 2<sup>nd</sup> get back to your situation. We are going to be back in this facility. News conference, AME Church, the CME Church, and the AME Zion Church, where on that date, the 2<sup>nd</sup>, we're going roll out an agenda of what we need to do to make these United States more humane and more united. And so you're all invited back at ten o'clock in the morning on September 2<sup>nd</sup> for the National Press Club.

**MR. HUGHES:** This questioner asks: on a scale of one to ten, how much progress have we made to realize Dr. Martin Luther King's dream?

**REV. BRYANT:** If you had asked me that six years ago, seven years ago, I would have had a different answer. Our greatest blessing has turned out to be at the same time our greatest pain. The election of Barack Hussein Obama has unearthed a fear, and that is what drives so much of this now, a fear in the county. Do not take it lightly when there are those who cry, "We want our country back." Initially, we said in amazement, "Well, who has your country," until we understood that this is no longer a country of white, male privilege. This is a stew. I don't call us a melting pot anymore because nothing has melted. It's a stew.



It [?] don't have to be. I hear people saying, "We all that same under this." No. I'm different. Love me anyway. In the stew I know where the carrots are. I know where the potatoes are. I know where the greens are. And when you eat it all together, it's good. It doesn't have to blend.

**MR. HUGHES:** This year gay marriage has become legal across the United States. On July 17<sup>th</sup> an ordained, gay AME minister, Benjamin David Hutchinson was married in United Methodist Church. Where does the AME Church stand on gay marriage? Can gay people get married in the AME Church? And if the AME Church does not accept it now do you see it changing?

**REV. BRYANT:** The American atmosphere has been filled with gay rights. All the programming, all of the TV shows, all of the movies, school curriculums, legislation on gay, but nothing on race. So in that you've given us this small window to talk about race and guns, I think I want to keep my hour to talk about what America refuses to talk about. (Applause)

**MR. HUGHES:** Some of our nation's public places, such as government buildings and schools have found the need to secure these places with armed security. How can black churches better protect their congregations in a hostile south?

**REV. BRYANT:** North, east, south and west. That's a very serious question. I do not want to see churches armed. I don't want to play into that. And so there is no move afoot to arm the Church. We have to trust God. It is a violent culture. And what happened in South Carolina can happen in any one of our churches, mosque or synagogue. But I would hate that the Church would follow suit of the culture and everybody is armed to the teeth. And as I said before, what it has demonstrated is that it really doesn't work. We are armed to the teeth and we're killing each other left and right.

So I would hope the Church would be a violence-free zone. And if others who are demented and what have you come in with something else on their mind, we will not take their approach or response. But we will continue to trust God.

**MR. HUGHES:** Before I ask the last question, I have some housekeeping. The National Press Club is the world's leading professional organization for journalists. And we fight for a free press worldwide. For more information on the Club visit our website that's [press\[dot\]org](http://press.org). And to donate to our non-profit journalism institute, visit [press\[dot\]org\[/slash\]institute](http://press.org/institute).

I would also like to remind you of some upcoming events. Next Tuesday, August 18<sup>th</sup> New Orleans Mitch Landrieu will address the Club just ahead of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. On September 2<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley will speak at a National Press Club luncheon. And on September 5<sup>th</sup> the Press Club will hold its annual 5k to raise money for journalism scholarships, journalism training and press freedom.

Now I would like to present out guest with the traditional National Press Club mug. (Applause)

I would now like to ask the last question. And believe it or not somebody managed to get us a Donald Trump question, along your reference. If Donald Trump comes to you seeking pastoral guidance (Laughter) what would you tell him? (Laughter)

**REV. BRYANT:** You must be born again. (Applause) (Laughter)

**MR. HUGHES:** They asked a follow-up question. What would Dr. Martin Luther King advice Donald Trump to do.

**REV. BRYANT:** [Pause] I have absolutely no idea. I've heard people ask King questions these years later. And what would be in his heart and his mind. Very seriously, and I know we laughed, but when you listen to the candidate and you listen to what he's running on, it's money. And I really do believe that what we need in leadership are those who think deeper than the material. I believe that—and that's when I talked about the people in South Carolina saying, "This Mayor loves us." And we need in this country leadership that sees us, that our burden is their burden, that there are no easy fixes but counsel, prayer, collaboration, needs to take place.

So anybody who says, "I'm worth so much. So I can be your leader," no. You must be born again of the spirit and of the soul to be the father of the nation or the mother of the nation. (Applause)

**MR. HUGHES:** Ladies and gentlemen, how about a round of applause for our speaker? (Applause)

I'd also like to thank the Press Club staff including its Journalism Institute and broadcast center for organizing today's event. If you would like a copy of today's program, or to learn more about the National Press Club, again you can go to our website, Press.org. Thank you. We are adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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