
The Violence of White Christian Masculinity¹

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Before coming to South Carolina in November 2023, what I mostly knew about mass shooter Dylan[n] Roof's church roots were what I'd seen in the Pulitzer Prize-winning article in *GQ* about Roof, written by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah. In that article, Ghansah attended church at St. Paul's in Columbia, and spoke briefly to the Reverend Tony Metze, who came across as a tragic mix of defensive and defeated, sad, broken, and also maybe insensitive or ignorant to the role of racism in his midst. Her article about Roof's roots was, rightly, a tragedy and an indictment of white American racism in general, about how the majority's inability to confront racism had emboldened a minority in our midst to carry out acts of violent hatred, again and again and again.¹

Metze and I had mutual friends on social media, and our lives intersected the way that lives often do in smaller and sometimes insular religious communities in America, despite the distance between my home in Minneapolis and his ongoing pastoral work in South Carolina. Other white Lutheran pastors in South Carolina told me that they didn't know Metze well, but that he was known to be more conservative, politically. Other South Carolina pastors told me that Roof's connection to our denomination had been underplayed. They said he'd gone to church camp, and that one of his cousins was an ELCA pastor.

Maybe it's for these reasons that I knew immediately when I took up the task of writing about young, white Christian men in America that I would have to confront the story of Dylann Roof. I would have to look in the eye of the racist hatred and violence that drove him, to see where it intersected with the stories of young, white Christian boys and men in America—to try and understand what had happened, and how we could tell the truth about it. Because I knew that part of what ails young, white Christian men and boys is the stifling silence of shame, fear, and unwillingness to tell the truth.

Part of that truth is that Roof's story is not singular. While it's unique in its connections to my own church and faith background, young white men continue to commit mass murder against Black people in America, leaving behind statements of racist hatred and

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fear. In August 2023, a white man walked into a Dollar General in Jacksonville, Florida, and killed three African Americans, then himself. Before that, in May 2022, an eighteen-year-old white man killed ten Black people at a grocery store in Buffalo, New York. He had written a 180-page manifesto about the need for racial purity before driving more than six hours to a place he'd researched in hopes of finding the most Black people gathered in one space to murder.² When a white New Zealand man killed fifty-one people at two different mosques in Christchurch in 2019, he cited Roof's

1. This article is an excerpt from Chapter One of Angela Denker, *Disciples of White Jesus: The Radicalization of American Boyhood* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2025) and used with permission of the publisher.

2. "Overview of Recent US Mass Shootings Motivated by Hate," *Reuters*, (August 28, 2023) <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-mass-shootings-motivated-by-hate-2023-08-28/>.

massacre in Charleston as an inspiration.

And Roof's racist hatred did not arise out of vapor, *ex nihilo*. While there's no evidence his family was involved in white supremacist activities, and Roof was known to have friends who were Black, Roof was radicalized online, and he was an active reader of and visitor to sites like the Council of Conservative Citizens, which denied responsibility for his actions and claimed to "responsibly report on Black on white crime."³ Roof mentioned the Council as part of his "awakening" in an unsigned, 2,444-word manifesto on his website, *lastrhodesian.com*, which also included photos of himself taken with a self-timer at slavery-related sites across South Carolina, and a mention of Seattle-based white supremacist organization Northwest Front.⁴

While there's a rightful caution against writing too much about mass murderers, for fear of the same contagion effect cited by the New Zealand shooter about Roof, I wonder sometimes if white Christians have used that caution as an excuse to avoid confronting the ways in which our own society and institutions have been home to boys and young men like Roof. There is a desire on the part of well-meaning white Christians to put people like Roof into some kind of alternative box, to avoid any way in which his life and actions might intersect with our own. I fear that our hesitancy to confront his story has been perilous for young, white Christian men and boys. Maybe by speaking about what happened with Roof we could head off this hatred and violence in other young white men and boys in our midst. Maybe they can learn to recognize it in one another and say something or do something. Closing our eyes and wishing it would go away, or pretending that the racism right in front of us is far outside our midst, has not worked thus far.

Still, everything within my body rebelled against me as I forced myself to make the drive to Columbia the day after I toured Mother Emanuel, retracing Roof's steps in reverse. I knew that St. Paul's Lutheran Church would feel familiar to me, and maybe I didn't want it to feel familiar. I was longing for that comfortable sense of distance that white people often employ to keep ourselves from having to confront the consequences of racism in our own lives, our own histories.

"My ancestors didn't own slaves."

"They were too poor."

"They hadn't come from Europe yet."

It is so much more convenient to locate the problem outside ourselves, to point to those who are increasingly radical and loud and other. I knew I would not be able to do that anymore when I came to St. Paul's.

There was something else too. I'd come to South Carolina with the intention to remember, not to forget, and I had promised to come with my entire self. Unlike years ago, when I'd come here on assignment as a sports beat reporter in my early 20s, this time

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I'd come to Columbia, South Carolina, not only as a journalist or as a white woman but also as a mother of two white sons. To watch your children grow up and to release them into the world every single day, in an era of school shootings and cyberbullying and revenge porn and nudes, is an exercise in abject terror. Even more terrifying, as a mom of white sons, is to imagine that your child is not only a victim of such violence and bullying but the perpetrator. I wanted to distance myself, not just from Dylann Roof, but from the idea that I could have been his mother. No, not possible. Make it go away.

Most of the white people I'd spoken to in Charleston told me that, in so many words, they were more moderate and maybe more evolved than the rest of the state. They told me that the kind of blatant racism and prejudice that many Northerners still associated with the South, like Confederate flags and racial slurs, were still prominent in the state's more rural areas, and I'd likely see more of it when I came toward Columbia. I was surprised, though, throughout the course of my drive, that I saw far fewer Trump signs or anti-abortion billboards or even Confederate flags than I was used to seeing on my drives throughout the Upper Midwest, including parts of rural Minnesota, Iowa, and northern Missouri. Instead, I mostly saw signs of accident injury lawyers and advertisements for pain clinics, two common sights in poorer communities across America, regardless of race.

Located less than a mile from both the State House and the University of South Carolina, like St. Matthew's and Mother Emanuel, Roof's home congregation of St. Paul's was also a historic church, according to its bulletin "ministering on the corner of Bull and Landing Streets since 1886."

3. "Council of Conservative Citizens," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Conservative_Citizens.

4. "Dylann Roof," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dylann_Roof.

It is not easy for churches to endure for nearly 150 years, especially in a climate where the religious “nones” are growing faster than any other faith group in America. Most people just don’t go to church anymore on Sunday mornings, and the story was the same at St. Paul’s, where Metze and Nola Freeman, the Director of Youth and Family Ministry at the church, were hosting a lunch after worship that morning to try and convince a few more families to sign up for acolyte duties, a tougher position to fill week in and week out.

St. Paul’s was much like I expected, and also not. I entered there prepared to be met with the trappings of conservative white Christian nationalism, defensiveness, suspicion. I was prepared for Metze to say he wouldn’t talk to me, not at all. Instead, I met Freeman during the service, and I felt my heart open a bit, as the choir sang a haunting and exquisite opening chorale in the loft. Freeman is the one who later invited me to stay for acolyte lunch, and then Metze agreed to meet me in his office after lunch for a longer conversation. I had lucked out: he had no afternoon plans, his wife was out of town, and I think we shared a sense of trust as two fellow ELCA Lutheran pastors doing the best we could in these post-COVID-19 church years with declining attendance and nonstop political tensions in the pews. Metze would tell me later that despite his reputation as a “conservative,” the church’s director of music and organist, Henry Fulmer, was openly gay, as were other members and church musicians.

“They ask him, hey, how’s your partner?” Metze said. “Nobody has a problem with that.”

But Metze, who has served as pastor of St. Paul’s since 2007, when Roof was thirteen, acknowledged that, in many ways, he felt he was holding the church’s politically divided congregation together. He wasn’t sure what the future would hold for St. Paul’s, after he left. Metze had steadfastly stayed under the fold of the purportedly “liberal” ELCA, even when his two sons became ordained as pastors in a breakaway Lutheran denomination that did not support gay marriage or openly gay pastors.

“I really wish you wouldn’t do this,” Metze said he told his sons, which surprised me, given that I had perceived Metze to be more aligned politically with the conservative breakaway sects. Ultimately, though, he was a dad and a pastor who loved both his sons and his church.

“I wish my sons were here,” Metze said, of the ELCA, remembering clergy events where he felt lonely.

The Sunday I attended St. Paul’s was All Saints Sunday in the church year, and so we opened the service by singing *For All the Saints*, and after the kids headed off to the Sunday school program with Freeman, that morning’s acolyte approached the altar to light candles as part of the *Rite of Remembrance*.

Metze read the names of those who had died from St. Paul’s in the past year, and I was surprised to read the third name listed in the bulletin insert: Benn Roof, Dylann’s dad. Metze told me after the service that Benn had died in a four-wheeler accident earlier that year.

“Benn always lived on the edge,” Metze said.

Tracing the roots of Dylann’s radicalization wasn’t so simple.

Here was a faith background that bordered on theologically liberal, a pastor who told me that one of his core beliefs was in an “inclusive” gospel. Here was a family who, despite divorce and some financial instability, spent time together, grandparents who were involved and active congregation members, a teenager who struggled in school, and with substance abuse, but never before seemed outwardly violent.

The Roof family was still a tangential part of St. Paul’s, eight years after the Mother Emanuel massacre. Dylann had been sentenced to death and was on death row in Indiana. His grandfather had died in 2022. His uncle attended rarely, and very infrequently they’d see Dylann’s mom and sister.

Metze told me about how he’d pulled a hood over his head and carried trash bags to the dumpster walking out of church in the months following the Mother Emanuel massacre, because the Roof family had asked him not to talk to reporters, and also because he didn’t know what to say. He had previously been called in to support other young boys and men in the congregation who had gotten into trouble for much more minor reasons, but in those situations, Metze had always had a sense of what went wrong, or how to fix it, or what words to offer to struggling parents. He recounted a time when one young man had gotten into trouble in the military, and Metze realized that his father had been totally absent from his life, unable to remember spending even fifteen minutes one-on-one with his son. Metze valued relationships, connection, the role of a father.

“Benn did spend time with Dylann, though, he did,” Metze said.

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There were Christian groups for whom white supremacy was an overt founding myth, American denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention who were founded in support of slavery. St. Paul's story was not that; its past and present included a racism that was more subtle, structural, like my own and like most white Americans' past and present. I noticed that the pillows around the communion rail at St. Paul's featured a white, blond Jesus, and the stained-glass windows, which had come directly from Germany, depicted European-looking biblical figures. But the same can be said for the majority of white churches across America.

It seems for Dylann that the problem was not an actively white supremacist identity but instead the lack of a positive rooted identity for himself. He struggled in school; struggled with friends. Anywhere he went, he was on the outside. He fit a profile of a teenaged boy I kept hearing about in my interviews with parents, pastors, and teen boys themselves: a kid who was always on the outside, who didn't have a sport or a hobby or a talent. He found his identity instead, ultimately, in hatred of others, and, as seems to be the case in stories like these, that identity of hatred festered and grew in social circles where people may have mentioned racism or prejudice but didn't confront it in our own midst, preferring to avoid uncomfortable topics or introspection.

After the service, during which Metze preached a sermon about the inarguable inclusivity of heaven, and its lack of divisions, Metze and Freeman invited me to join them and other church members for a traditional Southern lunch of slow-cooked green beans, shaved beef, scalloped potatoes, fruit jello, and sweet tea. I looked around the Fellowship Hall, somewhat similar to the basement space with the same name at Mother Emanuel, and noticed to my surprise that St. Paul's had been one of the first ELCA congregations to employ an ordained woman pastor. Her portrait hung near another pastor who was pictured in his military uniform. I share this detail to remind you, and to remind myself, that the most important work in raising our boys, these young, white Christian men—and combating the forces of their radicalization—takes place in spaces that hold within them competing truths about their history, bringing to mind the complicated truth about white American Christianity itself: that it has incubated both racial justice and racial hatred; that it has advocated for freedom and equality and concern for the poor, while at the same time embracing policies and people who would limit freedom and equality, and exacerbate the suffering of the poor.

Even as he sits on death row, his latest appeal being denied after Roof fired his lawyers and refused to entertain arguments of his own mental incapacity, Roof seems beyond contrition and rehabilitation. He is uninterested in repenting or repudiating his own racist ideas. He seems instead to cling to them, to the identity that they created for him. His story remains a tragedy, and that's probably the way it has to be.

More fruitful, more hopeful, perhaps—or at least more instructive as we consider the work of fighting the radicalization

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of young, white Christian men and boys—is Metze's story. After lunch, he and I sat in his church office, talking for hours before I would head back into Charleston that afternoon. We shared a suspicion and a distrust of the institutional church, and he carried a bit of a chip on his shoulder that I recognized in myself, well-worn for those of us who grew up with a legacy of working-class families in a clergy church hierarchy sometimes rife with elitism and private school privilege.

Metze told me that he tried to raise his kids with the example of an egalitarian marriage, in which he said he vacuumed and cleaned the house, just as his father had. But Metze was still deeply ingrained with a traditional teaching of masculinity all the same.

"Emotions . . . I've not done well with that, to be honest," he said. "If there's an Achilles heel for me, it's that."

Metze said he had always had a hard time expressing emotion, "sorting them" he called it. "This job doesn't help," he added.

He told me that he was stunned recently when he broke down into uncontrollable sobbing at the burial of a friend and church member earlier that year.

Metze hadn't publicly shared his grief or emotion after the Mother Emanuel massacre. He told me about trying to figure it out in his head, rationally sorting through the whole thing, retracing what he knew of Dylann and the Roof family. Some people in the community figured the Klan had to be involved, their shadow still lurking to the point that no one I spoke to wanted me to say they'd mentioned the Klan aloud. Metze said the South Carolina ELCA bishop mentioned the shooting every time he made a public address, noting that Roof had come from the synod. Every time people at St. Paul's heard it, Metze said, the sense of shame grew more and more unbearable. He felt it, too, and he didn't know quite what to do with it.

I wrote earlier that shame is silencing and suffocating, which is why it's such a powerful weapon in perpetuating hatred and violence. It was not the Black church or Mother Emanuel who wanted to shame the people of St. Paul's. They knew well that shame would only end up in racism and hatred going deeper underground, where it would be more powerful and violent and deadly. As Bennett reminded me, Mother Emanuel knew who they were—as a people and a church. They would not give Roof

the race war he wanted. They knew, correctly, that this was a white Christian problem: avoidable only when white Christians at-large would move past shame, or the desire to blame “other” white Christians for the problems of racism, hatred, and violence—and instead confess of our own participation in the systems that fed racism and shame, admitting the ways that shame and racism harmed us, too.

As our conversation drew to an end, Metze told me that there was a story he’d never shared before, and he wanted me to hear it.

“I met Clementa Pinckney,” he said.

Because of his work as a state representative, Pinckney spent a fair amount of time in Columbia at the State House, where he had gotten to know another one of St. Paul’s church members, who also worked there. It was February of 2015, and Ash Wednesday was coming up on the eighteenth of that month, the date when Christians gather to receive ashes on their foreheads to signify the beginning of the season of Lent, when Christians remember Jesus’s death on the Cross, often spending additional time in lament and contemplation, sometimes “giving up” indulgences like chocolate or alcohol, or engaging in other kinds of fasting, in a desire to seek repentance and complete acts of penance.

Metze said that the church member from St. Paul’s who worked at the State House was talking to Pinckney about the traditional practice of making ashes for Ash Wednesday, sometimes done by burning palm branches from the previous Easter season. She told Pinckney that Metze would be “making ashes” that week, and Pinckney was welcome to join.

So that February, just three months before Roof would commit mass murder at Mother Emanuel, the two pastors, Metze and Pinckney, gathered at St. Paul’s, home congregation to the Roof family, to make ashes, in preparation for their church members to come forward, receive the sign of the cross in ashes on their foreheads, and hear these weighty words that signified the beginning of the Lenten season: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

As Metze remembered it, he and Pinckney got along well, making plans to get together again in the future.

“He was a good man,” Metze said, with a thickness in the back of his throat. “He was a good man.”

“We said, we’ve gotta get together again,” Metze continued, his voice cracking, his eyes watering as emotion threatened to overcome him. “And then three months later he was shot dead in his church by my, basically, parishioner.”

In that moment I saw clearly before me the weight of grief and shame and how it lay upon Metze, how much he wished he could have done ... something? anything? ... to stop what Dylann did.

“They think this wasn’t personal,” Metze said, his voice catching again. “It was personal.”

I didn’t get the sense that Metze was looking for sympathy or compassion in sharing this story with me, nor that he was looking to be relieved from his or his church’s culpability in the forming of a racist mass murderer. Instead, I saw at long last an acknowledgment, so desperately needed in white Christian circles,

There is profit to be made, online, in white supremacist forums and groups, and in right-wing movements that teeter close to the edge of racist language, couching it as “anti-immigration” or “pro-Christian.” Many more young white men and boys besides Dylann ... are finding identity there. Most pernicious of the lies about white Christian masculinity is the one that weakness is something to be avoided at all costs, that showing vulnerability and emotion is a recipe for disaster, a potential upheaval in a society that has placed white Christian men at the top of a teetering house of cards.

of how inextricably connected we are to both hatred and love, to violence and peace, to life and death.

Dylann Roof had found and rooted his identity in hatred and violence. There is profit to be made, online, in white supremacist forums and groups, and in right-wing movements that teeter close to the edge of racist language, couching it as “anti-immigration” or “pro-Christian.” Many more young white men and boys besides Dylann had found identity there, are finding identity there.

Most pernicious of the lies about white Christian masculinity is the one that weakness is something to be avoided at all costs, that showing vulnerability and emotion is a recipe for disaster, a potential upheaval in a society that has placed white Christian men at the top of a teetering house of cards. To worship a crucified and resurrected Jesus instead is to know, as Mother Emanuel long has known, that the greatest strength is found in accepting weakness and vulnerability.

The forgiveness offered to Roof by members of Mother Emanuel was a showing, therefore, not of weakness but of strength. He had robbed them of their beloved ones, but they would not—could not—allow him to make them as hateful, angry, and alone as he was. In their vulnerability and grief, God had made them strong.

As I sat at St. Paul’s across the table from a wounded, broken, grieving Metze, I wished more white American Christians could

have seen this side of him, could have heard his personal story of loss and regret and shame. In sharing it, he freed himself. Forgave himself? Entrusted God to do the hard work of justice, punishment, redemption, and resurrection.

This example, this clear portrayal of what racist hatred does to white men themselves, is unequivocally more of what young, white Christian men need desperately to see: that the change, like the violence initially, could only come from within the heart of white Christianity itself.