

Post and Courier Article

‘Living Your Truth’ Program at Emanuel AME Church Takes Honest Look at Racism, Social Injustice

**Hosted by: Social Justice, Racial Equity Collaborative:
Transforming from the Inside Out and Council**

Convened by The Sophia Institute

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Observer: Barbara Griffin

Alex Sanders and the Rev. Nelson B. Rivers III could have been in someone's living room having a chat on Tuesday.

Instead the two old friends were sitting in chairs in one of Charleston's most historic churches, Emanuel AME, discussing social justice and racial equality in front of a multiracial crowd of about 200.

The men, who have been friends for decades, were the speakers at the inaugural program in the "Living Your Truth" series, presented by the Social Justice, Racial Equity Collaborative and convened by The Sophia Institute.

They spoke of history and personal experiences, often bringing laughter — and sometimes nervous chuckles — from the crowd.

"Alex is one of the funniest people I know," said Rivers, the pastor of Charity Missionary Baptist Church in North Charleston and vice president of religious affairs and external relations for the National Action Network. "He's a good sarcastic observer of phoniness, lies and racism. He doesn't mind speaking truth to power, doesn't mind telling white men when they're wrong."

Rivers recounted stories of racism he encountered in the 1960s while growing up in Charleston, of segregation and integration - "And that was not so long ago," Sanders added.

Rivers talked about the "criminalization of education of black people," when a law was passed in 1835 making it illegal to teach any slave to read or write.

"Growing up in Charleston, every experience I had with a white person was negative," he said. "No matter how hard we try, we can never escape our history."

Sanders, former College of Charleston president, judge and legislator, agreed.

"Until we catch up with the truth, we will remain prisoners of our own history," he said.

Organizers of the event felt the Charleston region is ready to reflect on the truth and perspectives necessary for racial healing and transformation. It was held in the sanctuary, "in a place above where evil boldly robbed us of nine souls," said Carolyn Rivers, co-chair of the event.

Self-avowed white supremacist Dylann Roof was convicted in January of all 33 charges he faced in federal court, including hate crimes and obstruction of religious freedoms, for gunning down nine people at Charleston's Emanuel AME Church in June 2015. He was sentenced to death in January and transferred to a prison in Indiana that houses the federal execution chamber.

Tuesday's program was the first in a series of free events, according to Dee Partridge of the Sophia Institute. The next event has not yet been announced but will be held in July.

By addressing the challenges that emerge from structural and institutional racism, the Social Justice, Racial Equity Collaborative's goal is to transform Charleston into a more just and equitable place to live, work, and thrive.

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