

## The Charleston, South Carolina Church Murders

### David and Alida's Conversation with Polly Sheppard and Dr. Rose Simmons

At our September 9<sup>th</sup> 10:30am service we hosted two amazing women touched profoundly by the murders in their church. In 2015 a young white man, fueled by racial hatred, entered Emanuel Church, sat through their weekly Bible Study, and then killed nine people of that historic African-American Church.

Dr. Rose Simmons lost her beloved father, Rev. Daniel Simmons. Polly Sheppard lost so many friends, but she was left alive, the killer said, to tell the story. His intention was to start a race war.

David interviewed Rose and Alida interviewed Polly as the Sunday sermon. Their answers, the conversations, provide a most powerful testimony to Christian faith. At the conclusion, our packed church erupted in a standing ovation honoring both women.

The following is a summary of the interviews.

Rose and Polly both met this overwhelming tragedy with a faith even more overwhelming. That faith, in a very real God, in a very real heaven, in a very real church life immersed in God' love, is the foundation of all they have thought and done since. Rose said that her very first reaction, upon hearing of the death of her Dad, was joy, "imagining my father walking into heaven greeted by two lines of angels on either side, experiencing the welcoming presence of the God he had served his whole life and being united with his own mother and father." That initial joy prevented Rose from being angry, hateful, and bitter.

Polly's reaction was transcendent. The mass murderer of her church friends wanted her to use her life to further his message of race-based hatred and violence. Instead, she is using her life to tell His story – God's, not the murderers; the giver of life, not the murderer of life; the God of love, not the man of hate.

Indeed, Polly has chosen to take her life and faith to a new level, believing that God saved her for a purpose.

Describing the murderer as a "lost soul", they talked of praying for him, and forgiving him. Their commitment to forgiveness is absolute. "Unforgiveness is not an option", she said, "walking around unforgiving would be so much harder". With such words they got to the heart of Christian faith, rooted in forgiveness.

For both Polly and Rose their spirit of forgiveness is the direct result of lives lived immersed in Christian faith. It is as if forgiveness is in their spiritual DNA, it is essential to who they are. As

a result, at their darkest hour they had a reservoir of spiritual strength to draw upon. As Jesus promised, they were not left “comfortless”. Dr. Simmons said, “In my father’s honor I travel the nation spreading the ministry of racial reconciliation and forgiveness”. She asked that our church join her in making every effort to be a place for racial peace, harmony, and reconciliation. The terrorist murderer of Emanuel’s people wanted his terrorism to breed racial hatred – just like Charles Manson hoped. We, Greenfield Hill members, Fairfielders, Americans need to be the strong and clear response to such evil.

In the aftermath of the Emanuel-Charleston murders a number of memorable events took place. Profound words of encouragement were offered across America. Governor Nikki Haley courageously took steps to rid the state capital of hurtful symbols. And President Obama concluded his funeral sermon by singing “Amazing Grace”.

Rose and Polly are living proof of that self-same amazing grace. It is the recognition, the knowledge of a divine love beyond compare that calls us to emulate that love when the world least expects it.

Alida recently saw Polly and another Emanuel member on “The Today Show.” They offered one more perspective on this very difficult topic of forgiveness: it is a process, it is ongoing, not everyone is at the same point. But the important key is the humble acceptance that forgiveness, however hard or impossible or unfair it seems, is always the heart of the Christian story. God initiates, Jesus lives... and we are to pay it forward.

Rose and Polly did. They invite us to try just as hard. This was a day no one at Greenfield Hill Church will ever forget.

### **David and Alida’s Questions for Rose and Polly**

- √ What gave you the strength to get through that awful night, and become a voice for forgiveness?
- √ What has been the hardest and most difficult part of forgiveness?
- √ How can we help you in spreading the ministry of racial reconciliation?