

Testimony of Rev. Sharon Risher

On the Nomination of William Barr to be Attorney General

United States Senate Judiciary Committee

January 16, 2019

Good morning Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Feinstein and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. It is an honor to appear before you to testify on the nomination of William Barr to be Attorney General of the United States.

My name is Reverend Sharon Risher and I live in Charlotte, North Carolina. My life, like so many other people's throughout our nation, has been forever changed by gun violence - gun violence that is preventable with effective enforcement and common sense gun safety laws.

Wednesday, June 17, 2015, is the day that my life changed. As a hospital trauma chaplain I have experienced grief, tragedy, pain and loss as I worked to comfort patients and families in their time of need. But that night, I was the person in need of comforting when I received a telephone call that no American deserves to get: My mother and two of my cousins had been shot and killed in church along with 6 other parishioners at the Emanuel AME Methodist Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

In the Charleston community in which I was raised, when the church doors were open, my family was in the pews. That Wednesday was no different.

A young white man entered the church in the middle of Bible Study. In the spirit of our faith, he was welcomed by the congregation and sat near the Pastor. After studying the Gospel of Mark, attendees bowed their heads, closed their eyes, and held hands in prayer. That was the final moment for many in church that day because the young man pulled out his gun and started firing. Some hid under tables. Others tried to flee but were gunned down.

A House of worship is supposed to be a refuge from the storms of everyday life. But that young man robbed my family, and eight other families, of their loved ones. Five people survived and they must live with that tragedy in their hearts every day.

After the massacre in Charleston, I struggled to answer why my loved ones and so many others had been killed. I was disturbed to learn that the shooting was premeditated and driven by hatred. The shooter targeted parishioners at Emanuel simply because of the color of their skin.

Along with so many Americans, I was baffled at how such a hate filled man was able to get his hands on a gun. We later discovered that a loophole in our gun laws allowed the shooter to obtain the gun used to murder my mother, two of my cousins, and the six other worshippers in Charleston. That loophole allowed hatred to be armed to kill.

The person who killed my family members should not have been able to buy that gun. The National Instant Criminal Background Check System was designed to keep guns out of the wrong hands--including criminals, domestic abusers, and unlawful users of controlled substances. The Charleston shooter had previously been arrested for drug possession - something that should have blocked him from obtaining a gun under existing law. Yet, he was able to legally purchase one because of a loophole in federal law. You see, if the FBI does not finish a background check within 3 business days, the sale can proceed regardless of whether the check has been completed--and that's exactly how the man who killed my family exploited a loophole and got his gun. And he's not the only one: the FBI reported that in 2017 alone, gun dealers sold at least 4,864 guns to prohibited people before the background checks had been completed. These nearly 5,000 sales were primarily made to felons, domestic abusers, or like the man who killed my family, unlawful users of controlled substances.

A strong background check system is the foundation for common sense gun safety laws that keep guns out of the wrong hands. We can stop hate from being armed, but we need background checks on all gun sales, and law enforcement needs enough time to complete the background check. Keeping guns out of the wrong hands must be a priority for the next Attorney General, federal law enforcement, and Congress. To break this pattern of senseless gun violence we need stronger gun laws and an Attorney General committed to protecting Americans from gun violence and hatred.

Each day, I wake up motivated to ensure that hate will not win. As a member of the Everytown Survivor Network, I share my story to put a human face on our nation's gun violence crisis. Our community of survivors advocates for change to help ensure that no other family faces the type of tragedy we have experienced.

If he is confirmed as our nation's next Attorney General, Mr. Barr will serve as our nation's top law enforcement officer in a position of great power and influence. I hope he will make it a priority to prevent gun violence and work with Congress to update our laws and close loopholes that enable guns to get into the wrong hands--like those of the young man filled with hate that murdered my family.

Nine lives were cut short in Charleston. Today, I say the names of my mother, my two cousins and the other six people to honor them:

- My mother: Mrs. Ethel Lance
- My two cousins, Mrs. Susie Jackson and Tywanza Sanders
- A childhood friend, Myra Thompson
- The Pastor of the church, Rev. Clementa Pinckney
- Rev. Daniel Simmons
- Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton
- Mrs. Cynthia Hurd
- Rev. Depayne Middleton-Doctor.

I pray that whenever you hear their names, you feel empowered to help bring about needed change.

Thank you for listening. I will answer any questions that you have.