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As GC to AME Church, Atlanta Bond Lawyer Witnesses Charleston Funeral

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DOUG SELBY, AN ATLANTA bond lawyer at Hunton & Williams, was an eyewitness to history last Friday. As the general counsel of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Selby sat on the dais with other church leaders at the Charleston funeral for Rev. Clementa Pinckney, the pastor of Emanuel AME Church and a state senator, at which President Barack Obama delivered the eulogy.

Pinckney and eight members of his congregation were shot to death during an evening Bible study two weeks ago by a white shooter, identified by police as Dylann Roof.

The funeral “was certainly an awe-inspiring event. The outpouring of support for the church and the family was really overwhelming,” Selby said.

The June 26 funeral, which Selby said lasted about 4½ hours, attracted a capacity crowd of about 5,500 to the College of Charleston’s TD Arena, a block away from Emanuel AME. Thousands more were turned away.



Douglas Selby

Zach Porter/Daily Report

“We were certainly struck by the overwhelming amount of support that came from the U.S. Congress and the South Carolina General Assembly and across all partisan divides. It was really quite moving,” Selby said.

About 40 members of Congress attended, including South Carolina’s two Republican senators, Lindsey Graham and Tim Scott, and about half of the state’s legislature, he said. South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley and Charleston Mayor Joseph Riley were

there as well, along with President and Michelle Obama, Vice President Joe Biden and his wife, House Speaker John Boehner and Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.

“I will tell you candidly I could not shake the image of the two little girls on the front row, suffering through an unexpected loss,” Selby said, referring to Pinckney’s daughters, Eliana and Malana, who were sitting with their mother, Jennifer Benjamin Pinckney, directly across from him. “I never lost sight of the

fact that Clementa had a family that was in incredible and deep grief.”

Even so, he said, the service felt uplifting. “It was not a sad gathering. It was a reflective, upbeat, hopeful gathering. ... It was not full of tears,” he said. “It was an effort to reflect on all the positive things that happened in Clementa’s life and the meaning that can be taken from it.”

Selby is an AME Church member with several relatives who have been pastors and church officers. He was asked to serve as counsel for the church’s sixth district, Georgia, almost a decade ago, and then became general counsel in 2011.

Selby said there were really two services in Charleston—a more religious ceremony led by Bishop John Bryant, the senior bishop of the AME Church, and then President Obama’s eulogy.

When Obama arrived, he said, “It became almost like a state funeral.”

Selby noted that Pinckney had been a member of the South Carolina Legislature for almost two decades. Political activism is part of the tradition of the AME Church, he said, and clergy-politicians are not an unusual combination.

“Maybe Clementa died doing all those things he seemed to be spending his life’s work on,” he said, adding that Pinckney had been in Columbia, the state capitol, the day of the massacre to debate revised legislation on requiring police to wear cameras—legislation that he had spearheaded in response to the epidemic of police shootings of African-American men. Pinckney left Columbia early that Wednesday to get back to Emanuel AME in time for the

evening Bible study, Selby said.

Selby added that the choice of Emanuel AME as the alleged shooter’s target was a purposeful act, as he was not from Charleston. “It is not lost on me that it is among the more famous AME churches and that one of its founders was executed because of his efforts to free blacks,” Selby said, referring to Denmark Vesey. Emanuel was one of the first AME churches in America, founded in 1818, and its members have a long history of fighting slavery and advocating for the civil rights of African-Americans.

Forgiveness and grace were a theme of the service, Selby said. “The humanity of the church members was the most powerful thing that we brought from this horrible past two weeks,” he said. “Their loss juxtaposed against this overwhelming sense of compassion and humanity.”

During the service Bishop Bryant said, “Someone should have told the young man, he wanted to start a race war, but he came to the wrong place.” Obama ended his 40-minute eulogy by leading the congregation in singing “Amazing Grace.”

Obama addressed Pinckney’s life and work, the AME Church’s history in the struggle for black freedom and human rights, gun violence and the Confederate flag.

“I was listening for what would be said about gun laws,” Selby said, noting that Obama referenced it, but “perhaps not as clearly as in his original commentary when he spoke to the nation after the massacre.”

Selby said he’s interested to see how

the debate on gun control evolves. It’s a debate that goes back to at least the Columbine High School shootings in Colorado in 1999, he noted. “There’s been one real attempt at gun reform that didn’t quite make it since then. This seems an indication that there may be another wind-up to that debate again.”

Obama also addressed the display of the Confederate battle flag outside government buildings, saying that taking it down would be “a modest but meaningful balm for so many unhealed wounds.” Haley and South Carolina’s two senators, Graham and Scott, have called for removing the Confederate flag from outside the South Carolina state capitol, but doing so requires a two-thirds vote of the state legislature.

“I’ll simply say that if after this, if all we gain is the loss of a flag, I think we will not have served the memory of Clementa Pinckney well,” Selby said.

He would like to see more discussion about the underlying issues that caused Roof to allegedly take a gun and shoot nine African-American churchgoers whom he did not even know. “What could be in the mind of this kid?” he asked.

Selby is familiar with watching Obama speak. As a law student at the University of Chicago, he took a seminar on race and the law from Obama in 1994 that he said was difficult to get into, because it was so popular. Obama assigned a heavy work load, Selby said. “Each week he assigned stacks of articles—mountains of reading that you couldn’t possibly get through.” 