

## **Our Church Never Closed**

By Rev. Tim Kutzmark

I am puzzled and troubled by the push of some churches and other houses of worship to “re-open” as quickly as possible. The church I serve as minister, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno, doesn’t need to re-open *because our church never closed*. On March 15, we simply reinvented how we come together and connect as a vibrant church community. As our mission compels us, *we’ve never stopped* loving inclusively, growing spiritually, serving gratefully and working for justice.

One of the ways we “love inclusively” and fulfill our mission is by continuing to gather virtually but not in person. Let me explain.

As Unitarian Universalists, our religious values call us to prioritize and protect the most vulnerable among us. In this time of COVID-19, the most vulnerable are our senior citizens, those of all ages with pre-existing conditions, and, as we are increasingly witnessing, our children and youth. The most vulnerable among us also includes our marginalized and underserved individuals and communities here in Fresno, Clovis, and the Central Valley.

Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, the national President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, of which our Fresno church is a covenanted member, recently wrote to us, saying: “This pandemic teaches us that our actions directly impact the health and well-being of our neighbors and so it is imperative that we make choices that keep our congregations and larger community safer. As COVID-19 disproportionately impacts people with disabilities, Black people, Indigenous communities, Latinx people, the elderly, and essential workers, a majority of whom are women and women of color, religious communities have a moral responsibility to do all we can to reduce risks for those already at such high risk.”

One of the most effective ways a congregation can reduce risks to ourselves and others is by not gathering in person for services.

Further, I am troubled by the mixed message we would be sending if we open our doors to the less than 100 congregants who, under new State guidelines, might be allowed into our sterilized and socially-distanced sanctuaries. We would be telling our seniors, those with chronic illnesses, our children, families, and some of our staff that “real church” is happening in the sanctuary, but they can’t come. It would fracture our beloved community into those who could gather together physically and those who cannot or risk their health and safety. At its core, religion’s purpose is to build bridges between people and help make things whole, not to separate and divide us.

At a time when money is tight, I also worry about the message that meeting in person would send concerning responsible stewardship of our congregation’s finances. Is it the best use of scarce dollars to purchase the myriad of products needed to meet the State’s strict guidelines and repeatedly sanitize the sanctuary and meeting rooms after each gathering, simply to enable a portion of us to physically congregate? Wouldn’t that money be better spent on retaining and paying staff, serving our community, upgrading programming, and expanding our outreach in the digital world?

Although I am not a Christian, the Jesus I learned about at Harvard Divinity School prioritized and protected the most vulnerable. Look at his words. Look at his actions. WWJD? I believe Jesus would be wearing a mask, practicing physical distancing, and, if he was planning on delivering the Sermon on the Mount this Sunday, he would deliver it on Zoom while urging his followers to “stay safe until we meet again in person,” at a time when *everyone* could gather to hear his words without risk of infection, illness, or death.

Rev. Tim Kutzmark  
Minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno