

In Orlando, Unitarian church quickly reaches out

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Three miles from Pulse nightclub, UU congregation hosts grief counselors, blood drive, and gun reform groups.

JOSHUA EATON | 6/14/2016



Thousands hold candles in the air after a bell tolled for each of the victims, during a vigil Monday, June 13, 2016, in Orlando, Florida, the day after an attack on a gay nightclub left dozens dead. (Curtis Compton/Atlanta Journal Constitution via AP)

When the Rev. Kathryn Schmitz woke up early Sunday morning to check the news, she couldn't believe what she was reading. Schmitz is minister of First Unitarian Church of Orlando, Florida—just three miles from Pulse, a gay nightclub where 29-year-old Omar Mateen opened fire early Sunday morning, killing 49 people and wounding 53.

"It had a sense of being impossible, like these things happen somewhere far away," Schmitz told *UU World*. "It doesn't happen in the hospitality capital of the world."

Schmitz quickly swung into action. She contacted Rachel Christensen, her intern minister—who was leading that morning's worship service—to discuss how to best address the tragedy during the service, and she sent out Facebook messages asking people to come.

"Come to church today," Schmitz recalls writing. "We need to be together."

For the congregation, Schmitz says, the attack felt personal. Many members knew people who were at Pulse during the shooting, though none who were killed. The congregation also has a longstanding relationship with Orlando's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Minister emerita the Rev. Dr. Marni Harmony is lesbian, and the church has been active in supporting marriage equality and hosting LGBT support groups. After the Supreme Court decision last summer that legalized same-sex marriage across the country, it celebrated by marrying fourteen same-sex couples free of charge.

In a stroke of serendipity, the church had already scheduled a blood drive for that morning. The bloodmobile was quickly overwhelmed by community members wanting to donate, Schmitz said, and the church had to direct people to other donation centers.

Several members of the drag group the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence attended Sunday's service, according to Schmitz, after a congregant who's in the group invited them. About halfway through the service, Schmitz got a call from a local LGBT resource center, The Center, asking if the church had space to host some of its more than 600 volunteer grief counselors.

Schmitz is quick to say that she usually doesn't answer her cell phone during services, even when she isn't leading them. But she knew that she wanted her church to be available and responsive to others in this time of crisis.

Now, the church is hosting grief counselors from The Center in its education building. It's also opened its fellowship hall and library to community organizers from LGBT advocacy and gun reform groups who need a local space to work. On Monday, Schmitz said, the church hosted the Rev. Dr. Betty Deas Clark of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, the historically black church where Dylann Roof shot and killed nine worshippers last summer, who was in town working with the gun reform group the Brady Campaign.

Members of First Unitarian Church made up about half of the volunteers who helped set up for the vigil for shooting victims in downtown Orlando Monday evening, and Schmitz led the candle lighting at the vigil, which 7,500 people attended.

On Sunday afternoon, Unitarian Universalist Association President Peter Morales said he was "horrified and distraught (<http://www.uua.org/pressroom/press-releases/orlando-mass-shooting-uua-president-offers-prayers-victims-community>)" by news of the mass shooting. He expressed sympathy for all victims of the attack, and added, "Unfortunately, this is the kind of violence that is predictable when hatred and fear are aroused by demagogues and when firearms are easily available."

The motive for the brutal assault is still under investigation. On Sunday, authorities announced that Mateen called 911 during the massacre to make a pledge of loyalty to the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and that the FBI had investigated him twice for links to terrorism. That picture grew more complicated on Monday, as reports emerged (<http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2016/06/14/possible-motives-emerge-orlando-shooting/wKtNh3kFunR9S5vXjHj8IM/story.html>) that Mateen may have frequented Pulse himself and may have used a gay dating app.

Meanwhile, 27 victims remain hospitalized, according to the *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/15/us/orlando-shooting.html>). Doctors at Orlando Regional Medical Center said on Monday that they expect the death toll from Sunday's shooting to rise (<http://www.usatoday.com/videos/news/nation/2016/06/14/85878818/>) as six of the victims remain in critical condition.

As news continues to pour in and the investigation unfolds, the Orlando community is trying to make sense of the tragedy and take steps toward healing. As that happens, First Unitarian church is committed to offering a safe, open space for people to come together, Schmitz said. It's a need she saw in her church on Sunday morning, watching people embrace as they absorbed the news.

"People were just distraught," Schmitz said, "just clinging to something."

First Unitarian Church of Orlando is asking Unitarian Universalists to make their donations to Equality Florida's [Pulse Victims Fund](https://www.gofundme.com/PulseVictimsFund) (<https://www.gofundme.com/PulseVictimsFund>) and The Center's [Pulse Tragedy Community Fund](https://www.gofundme.com/29bubytq) (<https://www.gofundme.com/29bubytq>). For more information on how you can help, see the church's [Orlando United website](http://www.orlandouu.org/orlando-united/) (<http://www.orlandouu.org/orlando-united/>).



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Joshua Eaton (<http://www.joshuaeaton.net/>) is an independent journalist who covers security, human rights, and religion. His work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Al Jazeera America*, and other publications.

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Our new minister at the UU Church of Fresno, Tim Kutzmark, quickly organized a vigil in our sanctuary and then worked with our local LGBTQ community to attend the vigil they were planning as well. Strong interfaith presence, including our wonderful Muslim neighbors, at both events. It is heart healing to Stand on the Side of Love. Sometimes the darkest hours are when our faith shines the brightest.

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