

Lewis/Levine: Trying to mend a divided Fresno

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Fresno

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On Palm Sunday, our faith-rooted coalition of congregations and clergy converged on downtown Fresno's Eaton Plaza, united in two distinct calls to action.

The first — refusal to accept the recent gun violence in our community — was well covered in the media. Thirty shootings and six deaths in one month will get any news outlet's attention. We can never accept violence, and we can never accept violence as normal.

The second call to action is much more difficult to cover because it may strike a nerve for many residents and it cannot be explained in a simple sound bite or a statistic. But our second call needs to be addressed by city leaders, members of the community and parents across the city.

When those 30 shootings and six deaths happen largely in South Fresno and to those whose skin colors are black and brown, it seems to us as though they are valued less than if the victims had been north of Shaw Avenue and white. We refuse to live in a city where a crisis is not a crisis because those most impacted simply do not matter as much. As clergy and people of faith, we believe that all people are created in the image of God and, therefore, are as valuable as anyone else.

Unfortunately, our social and political climate is such that as soon as the topic of race is brought up, those who can afford to walk away. But when we say that a concentration of victims — of gun violence or any other tragedy — in South Fresno isn't considered a crisis by our city leaders and decision makers, we aren't calling those individuals racist. No, instead, we are asking that they acknowledge the role that race played and continues to play in getting us there: Our white brothers and sisters in this city are able to move north and we don't begrudge them that, but how about the discrimination, language, immigration status and education barriers that preclude too many of our black, Latino and Southeast Asian families from

simply "pulling up their bootstraps" and moving north? And why should a family even have to feel the need to leave their home and community because they aren't safe? The city needs to ensure their safety, not leave them behind in concentrated poverty and decaying public infrastructure.

Fresno's growth over the years — and the relatively unregulated sprawl that facilitated it — has left us with two very different Fresnos divided by north and south. Consequently, many who live in North Fresno are literally and symbolically cut off from South Fresno.

And that is what led us to our second message of decrying unconscious and systemic racism on Palm Sunday: We live in a city where injustices in one part of town — whether it be entire neighborhoods dominated by abandoned, boarded-up homes owned by an infamous property management company, or eight payday loan stores within a half-mile stretch of Southeast Fresno, or that until recently West Fresno had neither a full grocery store or middle school — are too often cut off from the rest of our beloved city.

But this need not be an obituary for Fresno's unity. We believe in, pray for and are actively putting our faith in action toward a future with one Fresno. Our city — with the nation's highest concentration of poverty and second-highest metropolitan poverty level, according to recent measures — faces immense challenges. But imagine how much more likely we are to overcome those challenges with the entire city working together toward it and recognizing that "whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly," as Dr. King so powerfully stated.

It is with that prophetic vision of Fresno in mind that we are organizing an event, entitled "Living a More Just Future: Undoing Injustice for the Next Generation," on Saturday, May 31, at 10 a.m. in the Fresno High School Auditorium. We invite all Fresnoans of faith and good conscience to join us as we imagine together a future for our city that is more united, compassionate and prosperous.

Going back to that first message from Palm Sunday: This isn't just about "no more shootings," though that is critically important. This is about building one healthy Fresno and community where all lives matter.

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