

The murder of Dr. George Tiller and the need for sanctuary

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By William B. Lawrence

There are at least two reasons why churches refer to all or part of their principal worship spaces as “sanctuaries.”

One is that they conduct sacred business there—things like baptisms, holy communions, and ordinations. The other is that churches offer a place of refuge or safety. People can confess their sins in the hope of forgiveness rather than vengeance. Believers can affirm their faith regardless of their social status in the world. In short, church buildings have sanctuaries, and churches provide sanctuary.

But on a recent Sunday, all of that came under assault, when a man was going about his mundane task of ushering people to their seats at a Lutheran Church in Kansas City. Then someone pulled out a gun in the sanctuary and murdered him.

To be sure, the victim was not merely an anonymous usher. He was a prominent physician, and he had been notoriously targeted by anti-abortion crusaders. He was one of the few physicians in the country willing to perform late-term abortions for women whose circumstances led them to exercise that perfectly legal and constitutionally protected freedom of choice. His willingness to continue doing so had already cost Dr. George Tiller a lot. It had cost him the privacy of his home, which people had surrounded, and the security of his office, which people had picketed, though he was providing a legal medical service. Now it has cost him his life.

The debate over having access to safe, legal abortions has preoccupied this country for a long time. Churches have brought multiple perspectives to bear on the issue.

In the late nineteenth century, some church groups opposed abortion not because they thought it was inherently evil but because they felt that surgical procedures were inherently more dangerous than natural ones. In the middle of the twentieth century, some church groups openly advocated for general access to legal abortions because they felt that such procedures were limited only to women whose wealth gave them access to private medical care.

Across the years, debates expanded in churches. Some Christians said that abortion is always wrong. Other Christians said that abortion is always a woman’s decision to make about her own body. For now, the law of the land is encoded in a thirty-six year old Supreme Court decision drafted by a Methodist named Harry Blackmun, who wrote for the court’s majority and who was one of the finest Christians I have ever had the privilege to know.

Having churches debate such matters is one of the values of a sanctuary. It is a safe place for sacred work. We lose a lot when we lose sanctuary.

To be sure, this is not the first time that a murderous act occurred in a sacred space. Archbishop Oscar Romero was slain while saying Mass in El Salvador. Several little girls died while attending Sunday School when someone threw a bomb into a church in Birmingham, Alabama. In each of those cases, the killer considered it his right to take life for some principles in life, to invade sacred space for some perceived notion of sacred duty.

What the world desperately needs in these difficult times is some safe space—where people can debate without danger and lift prayers to God without having to look around for guns. That’s why churches have sanctuaries. And one Sunday’s events proved again how badly the world needs them.