

June 29, 2009

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 t