

'Violent murder in church,' Lutherans lament: George Tiller's congregation grieves

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The 690-member Reformation Lutheran congregation in Wichita, a part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, was “shocked by the violent murder” of physician George Tiller, 67, a “longtime member,” who was serving as an usher when he was killed on May 31.

Police arrested Scott Roeder, 51, who was charged June 2 with the fatal shooting. News reports identified him as an ardent antiabortion activist who once identified with antigovernment militia groups.

“Our congregation strives to be a safe place for all people,” said senior pastor Lowell Michelson and associate pastor Kristin Neitzel in a joint statement. “Further, we reject any notion that violence against another human being is an acceptable way to resolve differences over any issue.”

Calling the killing “unconscionable,” ELCA presiding bishop Mark S. Hanson of Chicago said Tiller and his wife, Jeanne, a choir member, were gathering with the congregation “to worship and to celebrate Pentecost—the coming of the Holy Spirit to God’s people.”

Hanson noted that the Wichita church’s pastors were assembling a team of crisis intervention specialists to counsel members of the congregation. “We pray for the courage to be peacemakers, rejecting violence as a means of resolving differences,” said Hanson.