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When the congregation of Wedgwood Baptist church, in Texas, sat down in preparation for evening services the night of Sept 15, 1999, quite likely the last thing running through anyone's mind was that a man would enter the building and shoot at least 45 bullets from a nine-millimeter semi-automatic handgun inside the sanctuary before turning the weapon on himself.

Probably none of the 7 persons shot and killed thought to himself earlier that day, "Today is the last day of my earthly life."

Most likely at least one of the 7 had some qualm, some tremor of unearthly premonition that something would go very wrong that day. If any did, they went to church in spite of it.

The transcript of a televised Bob Abernathy program from the time reads, in part, "As 150 young people celebrated to the pulse of a Christian rock band, Larry Ashbrook, a 47-year-old man dressed in black and smoking a cigarette walked into the back of the church and began shooting. Seven people were fatally wounded, and then the gunman shot himself." (1)

About the shooter, some things are known. His motive, however, is not. When police searched his apartment, they found evidence of a "disturbed mind" in hacked up family photographs, bomb-making paraphernalia, and boxes of ammunition stacked in rooms.

The congregation members might have other thoughts about his apparent "mental illness". They might, some of them at least, go so far as to say the act and the follow-up investigation provided evidence of satanic involvement in the incident.

However, according to the Sept 22, 1999 issue of the Christian Century, the gunman came in "shouting obscenities and antireligious comments" and began spraying the church with gunfire.

The managing editor of the Texas Baptist Standard, Mark Wingfield, said, according to The Religion and Ethics Newsletter, "They (the congregation) see this as symptomatic of the larger cultural war that's going, and as a result of a battle, a spiritual battle between light and dark in the world. while this may be a deranged man who did this, ..somehow the forces of darkness compelled him this way, and it's a part of a satanic attack, if you would, on Christians and on the church of God."(2)

Now, zoom forward to March, 2005. It is a Saturday night and the Living Church of God congregation at the Sheraton Hotel sees nothing out of the ordinary as a member of the congregation walks in.

Then, all in the space of about one minute, he opens fire with a 9mm gun and kills the pastor, the pastor's son, and five other church members. Four others lie wounded, and Terry Ratzmann, 44, has killed himself. (3)

Why? Some who knew him said he suffered from depression. Police found encrypted files from Ratzmann's three computers in the home he shared with his mother and sister in New Berlin, Wisconsin, though there has been no public revelation from those files as to a motive to this writer's knowledge.

Apparently Mr. Ratzmann had no prior police record or any other type of public information which might have foretold his violent actions.

He was said by those who knew him, as is often said of violent criminals, to be an average man; though there might have been some alcohol usage in his life, and, per reports, there seems to be no other indication he might do something so far beyond cultural norms.

Obviously, not all men who are depressed in their forties also become violent. Certainly there are few who load up on ammo and guns and walk into churches to shoot at the congregants.

So what was it about these two men, both in their mid-forties, both unknown to police before the events, both said to have been depressed, both known to be somewhat "stand-offish", what was it they thought about before they began the shootings?

More recently, an estranged husband and father, Anthony Bell, entered a church in Baton Rouge, La on Sunday morning, May 21, 2006, shot four people dead, badly wounded a fourth, kidnapped his wife and three children and took them from the Ministry of Jesus Christ Church. About 90 minutes later, a shooting was reported in a nearby apartment complex. Police discovered Bell had shot and killed his wife, but then he surrendered without further incident. (4)

Bell was estranged from his wife, so this event has the hallmarks of a domestic abuse case gone very, very wrong. Especially since of the four others he killed that day, two are said to have been in-laws of the shooter, but why did the family issues culminate in a shooting and kidnapping from a church meeting?

The most atypical thing in the three cases cited here are that the killings took place in church buildings, during the church meeting.

It seems, even having as a background something like George Jo Hennard's crashing a pickup truck into a cafeteria and opening fire on the customers, these three shooters have broken a far more serious cultural taboo by opening fire in a church building.

It is a bit peculiar then that the media, in all the church shooting cases, saw little to report in the killings.

In the Brent Morrison column of Sept, 1999, he writes, "The Sacramento Bee, for instance, initially buried the story on page A17. Electronic media attention was roughly the equivalent of A17, though I have since seen guilt coverage that has been about as timely and sincere as that given Mother Teresa's death in the wake .this front page often carries national news with local tie-ins; the headline the day after the shootings was "Medicare HMO premiums to jump 140%." (4)

Though as non-participants in the shootings, we can be sickened about the people murdered in that cafeteria, or buried in someone like Gary Gilmore's yard, or eaten (!) by the likes of Jeffrey Dahmer, we are almost more horrified by where these murders took place than that they did.

Though the media made little of it, the immediate feeling, by many Christians especially, was, "IN CHURCH?!" Sadly, the answer is "Yes, in church, in sanctuaries", and not only so but those killed were children, teenagers, middle age and older men and women: Shot dead in a place of worship, in America! Not Beirut, not Jerusalem, not some hot point in China or Africa, but in the good ol' US of A.

Although the church killings, when counted, don't make much of an impact alongside the sheer number of mass murders in America by any calculations, they are possibly the most shocking for location, second only to the high school massacres in Columbine and West Paducah, KY.

The two men of the Texas and Wisconsin shootings are dead by their own hands, so we can't ask them their motives, neither will Mr. Bell be likely to share his insights into what possessed him to enter a church building during services to shoot congregants and kidnap his wife.

But it would be enlightening to discover the motives of all three, and perhaps we'd find a common thread other than their murderous intents; maybe we'd find that there was a definite connection. And, just maybe, that was satanically inspired thinking coupled with a freely assenting will to kill.