

# Faith under Fire

**Members of the clergy search team** at Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kan., were candid when they offered Lowell Michelson the position of senior pastor last year. They explained that the congregation was dealing with the morally and politically contentious issue of abortion. Some families had left the congregation in protest of the medical practice of Dr. George Tiller, a longtime church member and physician who operated an abortion clinic, and pro-life advocates occasionally picketed church grounds. “It’s been an issue here for several years,” says Michelson, who accepted the search committee’s call and joined the staff in August 2008.



Although this was his first senior leadership assignment, Michelson was well prepared for the job. The son of a pastor, he had majored in religious studies at Wittenberg University, worked in campus ministry, graduated from Trinity Lutheran Seminary and interned at a large Oregon church.

Before relocating to Wichita he had participated in Lilly Endowment’s Transition-into-Ministry (TiM) initiative, which funds residency programs that help

new pastors make the transition from seminary students to congregational leaders. He completed his two-year TiM residency at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Davenport, Iowa, where he and other program participants worked closely with their mentor, senior pastor Peter Marty.

“One of the beautiful features of the Transition-into-Ministry venture is the lifelong friendships that form,” says Marty. “Two years of pastors mutually wrestling through challenges and discovering new insights together forge a bond of trust that’s hard to shake.”

## **Friendship and tragedy**

This bond proved invaluable when tragedy struck nine months after Michelson began his ministry in Wichita. During Sunday morning worship on May 31, 2009, a gunman entered the entrance area of Reformation Lutheran Church and fatally shot Dr. Tiller while Mrs. Tiller was in the choir.

The national media descended on Wichita, and for several days Michelson responded to countless media inquiries as he consoled the grieving family, counseled his stricken faith community, and prepared to officiate at the high-profile and emotionally charged funeral. Close friends from his TiM residency, now scattered across the country, rallied in support.

“My Transition-into-Ministry colleagues and Pastor Marty know me in ways that nobody else in the world does,” says Michelson. “They helped me think things through and kept me in check as no one else could have.”

Encouragement also came from members of St. Paul Church in the form of phone calls, e-mails and text messages throughout the summer. A professional therapist made two trips from Davenport to Wichita to assist Michelson and the ushers most directly affected by the shooting. “This doesn’t happen when a bond is shallow,” says Marty, who believes the TiM program creates the sort of “unity of spirit described in Scripture, one that doesn’t require the physical proximity of a fellow believer to remain meaningful.”

With ongoing support from his long-distance network, Michelson continues to guide his congregation’s healing. “Everyone grieves differently,” he says. “A lot of folks are still trying to sift through what happened. Some say, ‘Enough already, let’s move on,’ while others have difficulty reconnecting and ask, ‘Is this the place for us?’”