

A Report on Crossings International Conference III, January 25-27, 2010

Colleagues,

For this week's ThTh post Crossings President Steven Kuhl reports on last week's get-together here in St. Louis.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

God's Promise, Our Mission: A Post-Conference Review

Last week 101 members of the Crossings Community gathered for the Third International Crossings Conference at Our Lady of the Snows Conference Center and Shrine in Belleville, Illinois, just a few miles east across the Mississippi River from St. Louis. If you were there you know both how full and how rewarding it was. If you weren't there, you can still reap some of the fruit, since soon we will have many of the major presentations and homilies posted on the Crossings website. Even so, there was no substitute for the face-to-face exchanges and the mutual conversations and consolation of Christian siblings that filled the three-day event.

The first thing to note is how international and diverse the Crossings Community is. We know from our website "hit" statistics that we have Crossings Partners in 120 countries, most of them unknown by name and face, yet united in Word, faith

and Spirit. These brothers and sisters participate in the Crossings Community and benefit from the Crossings Mission through some 47,000 distinct computers. From that "hit" parade representatives came from six different countries, including, Germany, India, Singapore, South Korea, Liberia, and Nigeria. Stateside participants hailed from Alaska to Florida and from California to New York. Half of the attendees were long time Crossings members and half were relatively new to Crossings, being introduced to Crossings through web-surfing or word-of-mouth invitation. While the majority of those in attendance were clergy and graying, nevertheless nearly a quarter were laity, and we were overjoyed to have 10 seminarians and a generous sprinkling of younger lay participants.

The theme was at once perennial and timely: GOD'S PROMISE, OUR MISSION: MAKING THE CRUCIAL LINK. Three keynote speakers unfolded the theme, each complementing and building on the previous speaker. Jukka Kaariainen (former missionary kid, doctoral student at Fordham University, pastor and campus minister at the Lutheran Church of the Messiah in Princeton, NJ) set the stage for the whole conference by giving us a systematic account of a Lutheran Theology of Missions. Drawing on the work of Robert Bertram (that "PROMISSIO is the secret to MISSIO") and Ed Schroeder's recent work on a Lutheran theology of mission, he pulled together into one place a comprehensive vision of a "duplex" theology of mission that is soundly seated on the three-legged stool of (leg-one) "the law-promise" (duplex) hermeneutic, (leg-two) the theology of the cross, and (leg-three) the hiddenness of God. This paper is a summary of the thought he is pouring into his nearly finished dissertation which goes by the title of "MISSIO Shaped by PROMISSIO: Lutheran Missiology Confronts the Challenge of Religious Pluralism." It is a must read.

The second keynote was presented by Jerry Burce, formerly a

missionary kid and later missionary in Papua New Guinea and presently a pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio. Jerry sang the kind of theology that was presented by Jukka, but “changed the key,” so to speak, by putting it into language that might better resonate with contemporary ears. Jerry said we use too many “walnut words,” words that are too hard for people to crack and too difficult for people to dig out the meat of the gospel.

He began with Luther’s distinction between “God’s alien work” (opus alienum dei) and “God’s proper work”(opus proprium dei) and designated them God’s two (distinct and different) “missions” in the world. One is God’s “alien” mission (alien = not God’s preferred option) and the other God’s “proper” mission (God’s preferred mission). Turning these two terms back into Latin, Jerry offered us “missio aliena dei” [MAD] and “missio propria dei” [MPD, with vowels added to make it pronounceable becomes MyPaD]. MAD is that work of God’s law that ultimately drives us to madness. MyPaD is that work whereby Christ prepares a place (“a pad”) for us to dwell in God. Jerry gave an example of how congregations might find language from their contemporary world that can be used to express the promise of God (MyPaD) in a fresh way in our MAD world. I cannot begin to do justice to the imaginative word-smithing Jerry does. Read it for yourself.

Third keynote presentation was given by Bill Burrows. Bill has quite a resume. He is a former Roman Catholic priest who is now married and who has been a missionary, the managing editor of Orbis Books, and president of the American Society of Missiology. His commitment to the idea of the “gospel as the promise of the forgiveness of sins” is both deep and wide, and he credits Ed Schroeder (and the friendship they established through the ASM) as nurturing that insight. Bill’s presentation came to us over internet connection because weather prevented him from being with us in person. What was impressive was how

well Bill used that medium to both present his paper and answer questions in the Q&A. Indeed, this last minute “fix” (thanks to Nathan Schroeder, one of Crossings’ technical geniuses) to what we thought was a condition that would derail the whole conference, actually inspired our participants from Singapore to ask this question: Might we not broadcast elements of future conferences to those gathered in churches in Singapore or other places around the globe? Amazing how the Spirit might use adversity to seed new mission opportunities. Bill’s fundamental contribution to our discussion was to remember that the promise is a LIVING WORD and that participation in it is fundamentally rooted in Word and Sacrament. Too often the modern missionary focus is on “social transformation” AT THE EXPENSE OF its proper focus as the “promise of the forgiveness of sins” extended concretely and unambiguously in liturgical gathering. Bill’s paper, too, is a must read.

As if that weren’t enough, the conference attendees also feasted on a wide range of topical discussions offered through 12 breakout sessions, a panel discussion with the keynote presenters, and three round table discussions, all aimed at helping us “make the crucial link” between God’s promise and our own unique mission placement. Such notables as Robert Kolb (Professor at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and co-translator of the Book of Concord), Fred Niedner (Professor at Valparaiso University, author and master teacher), and Art Simon (founder of Bread for the World) filled out those sessions along with other talented theological members of the Crossings Community. A special interview with New Testament scholar Frederick Danker on “Not Missing the Mission in Luke” and three Monday pre-conference seminars (one on exploring the Crossings method in text study with Steve Albertin and Marcus Felde, one on “Dusting off Elert,” featuring Matt Becker, Ed Schroeder and Bob Schultz, and one on Art Simon’s journey with Bread for the World, all

generated great discussion and sparked new enthusiasm for keeping mission and promise properly linked.

Finally, in fulfillment of the call Bill Burrows issued in his presentation, the conference was punctuated with liturgical opportunities for prayer, preaching and praise. Indeed, so edifying was the preaching in those liturgical gatherings (done by Steve Albertin, Marcus Felde, David Schreiber, and Mike Hoy) that the conference participants urged us to also place them on the website along with the conference papers. So, by popular request, you will find them too on our website. Of course, the pinnacle of our liturgical celebration was the Eucharist on Tuesday evening organized and presided over by Ron Neustadt. There Marcus Lohrmann (bishop of Northwestern Ohio Synod, ELCA) treated us to a model sermon that weaved the promise of God into the fabric of our lives equipping us to go out and enfold God's dear worldlings with that very same promise.

In closing, I want to thank all who attended the conference and all who support Crossings' "duplex" mission of helping Christians make the crucial link between God's Promise and our mission. Special thanks go to the Crossings Board of Directors, whom I introduced at the conference and who give generously of themselves to the Crossings Community. On the Conference Planning Committee were Steve Albertin, Marcus Felde, Cathy Lessmann, Jerry Burce, and Don Tanner. Lori Cornell edits the Sabbath Theology text studies, Mike Hoy edits the Crossings Newsletter, Carol Braun is working with Bob Schultz on a fresh translation of Elert's "The Christian Faith," and Ed Schroeder advises and edits Thursday Theology. One more behind-the-scenes person is Tom Law. He posts everything on the web. Because of him, the "must-read" materials from the conference become "get-to-read" materials for everyone.

Steven Kuhl, President

The Crossings Community, Inc.