

# A History of Crossings

Robert W. Bertram

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Recalling at the height of anecdotage, Crossings had its inception with early influencers whose themes crossed worldly questions with theology. Through University of Chicago graduate studies where a dissertation crossed Luther with thick earthly terrain, through Valparaiso University, Concordia Seminary, leaves of absence in Germany, the formation of Seminex and then Chicago again (LSTC), the six-step (diagnosis/prognosis) three-stage (grounding, tracking, crossing) method was developed. Students along the way were co-shapers of Crossings, the method evolving into Crossings, Inc. in 1986 with colleague Ed Schroeder to infiltrate the gospel with the intellectual movements of our time. We crossers were all following, we believed, a Christ who runs a-Cross and deep into the world, loving it as Christ does. Why else would he deserve such a death? (Stephen C. Krueger)*

Never ask a professor in his seventy-fifth year, the height of his anecdotage, to recall the history of something, least of all something he has been accused of “founding,” like Crossings. Given his long reach to the past he’s bound to ask, How far back dare I begin? Back to my Crossings-minded dad? Himself a professor, though not of theology but of profane literature, my father haunted his pre-seminary students with worldly questions

from Goethe and Schiller – never doubting it was Goethe and Schiller who had first been interrogated by God – and earlier had helped found a church highschool for secular vocations.

Or back as far as my Grandpa Dau? He **was** a seminary professor but then (as penance?) had to “Cross” his seminary theology with a whole arts-and-science university (Valparaiso) as its new president. His legacy loomed over our home, though not without some wry demythologizing by my mom. Or back at least to my own favorite seminary professor, Richard Caemmerer? His constant theme was “the church and the world” and under his spell I won an essay contest with “The Church When the Boys Come Home” – come home, that is, from a very World(ly) War II. Christ and war? Crossable? All four of the above mentors – Mom, more wistfully – relished the dearest Crossings of all, between humor and The Holy.

## Chicago

Or ought I begin only as far back as graduate studies in Chicago, where my patients in the clinic, my dispirited welfare mothers, my feisty Jewess supervisors pressed the sorts of questions which only God would press? There too, at The University of Chicago, my brilliant mentor-peers Jary Pelikan and Dick Luecke confirmed from history and philosophy what I had long suspected, that these questionings were the accusations which Luther and Paul and Jesus and the prophets had called God’s “Law.” So I tried history and philosophy but joy kept breaking through. Call it theology, though never without history and philosophy. No real gospel ever trivializes the Law. No Cross is complete until it Crosses with the world.

It was inevitable therefore that the Chicago doctoral dissertation, really my first big Crossings project, should be written on Luther but on Luther as gospel Crossover into thickly

earthy terrain, How theology – read: God– is about humanity. Nor was it accidental that my Doktorvater Pelikan asked one of Luther's later lessers (as Martin Marty calls them), Paul Tillich, to join my committee. Tillich had popularized a word from the Lutheran reformation, correlation: correlation between the culture's questions and the gospel's answers or, as Melancthon had said, correlation between Christ's promise and the sinner's receiving it. It was only a matter of time before I would have to call this Law-Gospel, Word-world correlation by the more christic pun, "Crossing."

## Valparaiso

Fast forward to only (ugh) forty years ago. What were probably the first Crossings courses in my teaching career were at Valparaiso University but, strangely enough, in its department of philosophy – whence I'd been moved from the department of religion. With the not so subtle support from the university's president, O. P. Kretzmann, we redesigned a whole series of "philosophy of . . ." courses (of art, of history, of science, and so on) of which the most popular was a philosophy of Christian theology. Sic! Obviously it was as much theological (and biblical!) as philosophical. Admit it, it was the Chicago doctoral dissertation in classroom form: Luther on Galatians in light of some nosy secular questions. During the summer term the course was repeated for bright visiting seminarians from Saint Louis, several of whom now appear in "Who's Who"– all of them, I trust, in The Book of Life.

One spinoff from that philosophy-of project was an extra-curricular study group formed by V.U. students themselves (Doering, Hiller, Steude, Theiss, Mohme and maybe a half dozen others) who presented papers "Crossing" the faith with their respective majors (law, pre-med, journalism, etc.) They were,

you might say, the first Crossings “Community,” anticipating by several decades today’s counterparts: Morgan’s and Lee’s and Koch’s “Greenhorns” in Saint Louis, the “Christ the King” crowd in Chicago, the lay-clergy clusters in Estonia and Australia. I still hear from those Valpo originals, as they do from one another. For example, one of them, Ray Bopp, now a retired cardiology prof from Yale recently provoked a thorny theological question about surgical intervention when it is life-taking. You can see why one side of O.P. Kretzmann abetted us early Crossers while his other side fretted about our public relations liability.

The same President Kretzmann needed a new chair for the department of religion, desperately enough to be willing to make a deal. (I now blush at the brashness of it all.) One of the preconditions – and this was only one of them, and not the most drastic – which this new chairman stipulated involved the departmental curriculum, immediately renamed “theology” rather than “religion.” Namely, the scripture lessons which were read in the university chapel’s Sunday service were to double as the basic, theme-setting readings in that week’s theology classrooms: gospel lessons for freshmen, epistle lessons for sophomores, Old Testament lessons for juniors. One thing which had not been possible with my Crossings courses in the philosophy department, where they risked being too academic and elitist, was this new link between theology curriculum and the community’s, the whole community’s liturgical life. Truth is, that is a struggle for our Crossings Community still today, to make Crossings more than merely mental and a concern of the whole congregation.

Back in the fifties at Valpo this benign “deal,” innocently named “New/Old Testament Readings,” would have been unimaginable without its exceptionally gifted young faculty, which in just a few years had to be almost trebled in size. Out of gratitude I

would like to name them, all eighteen – a third of them are still there – yet they might not all think of themselves as doing Crossings. One name I must mention, not from the department of theology but of geography: John Strietelmeier, a consummate lay theologian. Of all my dear colleagues at Valpo he probably has done most, not only through his writings but by his person, to nudge me toward Crossings. Within our own department there was a premium on the teacher's being a pastor, not as an alternative to being a theologian but as the fulfillment thereof. Crossings, too, for all its laicism, has always encouraged a high esteem of the pastoral office. Many of the students who profited from that lay-clergy symbiosis are still doing Crossings as lay theologians. How many? I'm not telling but I'll give you a clue: one of them is Gail McGrew. Another, from earlier on, is Carl Ziegler.

The single most Crossings-like feature of Valparaiso's new theology program, a feature which did carry over from the philosophy-of courses, was not just its connection between faith and life or even our reading that connection out of scripture but rather the **way** scripture was read **so as** to render it Crossable with life: namely, the way of Law and gospel. It must be admitted that O.P. Kretzmann, though he was like a second father and took it on the chin for supporting our venture (as did others of us) he was honestly skeptical, at least ambivalent about its explicitly Lutheran theology. Imagine his bemusement when it was that very Law-gospel feature, by whatever name, which attracted ecumenical and national interest in our program. For my part, to speak quite personally, that theology has been the persistent genius of Crossings, beginning as I've said years before my theology chairmanship at V.U. and going with me when I left there in 1963 to join the faculty at my alma mater in Saint Louis, Concordia Seminary –my Grandpa Dau's successor a few generations removed, and in reverse direction.

# Saint Louis

It was during my first years at Concordia that this Law-gospel method, now retitled "diagnosis" and "prognosis" and nicknamed "Crossings," acquired the definitive classroom form which it still has today. The course, titled "Biblical Message and the World Today" and devoted, as at Valpo, to the churchyear lectionary, was offered again and again. However, lest that be mistaken for a boast about the course's popularity, a disclaimer is in order. The key to the Crossings method, but not the whole of it, is a six-step unpacking of a given scripture text called "programming the pericope." (An example of such a text study, in this case Philippians 2, appears in the pages which follow.) Enthusiasts have often misunderstood this six-step, biblical diagnosis-prognosis to be the whole of the Crossings method when in fact it is only the beginning, what I've preferred to call the "Grounding."

As I had to learn the hard way at least as far back as graduate school, there must also be another step besides the grounding in scripture, namely, an appreciation ("Tracking") of the world or at least of some "slice of life" from the world. Only then are we in a position to shoelace the two, biblical Grounding and secular Tracking, together into a Crossing. For seminarians at Concordia the temptation often was to fixate on just the first stage, "programming the pericope." For isn't that all that a preacher would need for a ready-made sermon outline? (Isn't it in Joyce's Ulysses that a dock is defined as a frustrated bridge?) One of these well-meaning seminarians later based a whole doctoral dissertation on that fallacy and then, as my colleague on a subsequent faculty, taught his seminarians to preach the six-step outline, as such. At least that is how they perceived (or misperceived) his intention. So they rebelled, finding his approach too narrow, a form of methodolatry. That is

an abiding danger with Crossings.

## Germany

During those same years at Concordia there were two long leaves of absence in Germany. Though the writing I was assigned to do there was not meant to deal with Crossings as such but with some controversial theological issues in interpreting scripture, the fallout for Crossings was enormous. Another unintended boon was the practical laboratory which Germany provided for testing these new Crossings refinements. As a Fulbright professor, therefore with ties to our State Department, I had to interpret to German audiences in US embassies and consulates and to Germany's radical university students the theology of Martin Luther King, Jr., which I did via the method of Crossings. Also, as a civilian chaplain attached to our Department of Defense I programmed pericopes for European military leaders, not just chaplains but also line officers, on such biblical texts as Matthew 8, "The Complete Centurion." (Shades of "The Church When the Boys Come Home!")

By the time the leaves were over – there would be a third one during the Seminex years – the Crossings method had been thoroughly field tested for my seminarians back at Concordia, enough to try it in a new course, "Current Church Controversies."

## Seminex

Out of that class came some of the student-confessors who in 1974 helped lead almost the whole student body and faculty into exile as Seminex. Theirs was a confessional witness against a synod which was silencing both Law and gospel. For that they paid dearly. If I may say so, they **were** Crossings, putting their

life where their faith was. When one of them, Jim Wind, eventually managed to become ordained, Philippians 2 was the sermon text, based on (not parroting) the pericopic program referred to above.

Not only did the old Crossings courses come along from Concordia to Seminex. These were now supplemented with related courses, like "A Theology of Work" or "America Theologically Considered," which lay experts helped me teach and which more and more lay students began to take – at Seminex, mind you, a school traditionally reserved for clergy. (The resemblance with my dad's old Luther Institute was one which my mom of course did not fail to note.) Before long there were more and more Crossings retreats, local and out of town, bringing together clergy/seminarians with layfolk. These ventures were not inexpensive, especially since Seminex was in no position to subsidize them, so it was up to my shaky tincup to persuade donors and funding agencies like Danforth Foundation and AAL, all of them laypeople. Crossings was beginning to become an administrative preoccupation, a business, which itself is a lay calling.

Actually, before Seminex ever began or even before we had any idea of beginning it, a handful of us profs and students at Concordia Seminary had been faithless enough to fear that we alone, at most a dozen "church professionals," would be the only ones going into exile. But into exile as what? I still have the old typescript of my then wild proposal: go into exile as "Crossings." What! A little coterie of seminary-types should presume to do Crossings? Not monologically, I hope. Not without laypeople! Whatever happened to the old philosophy-of mix of Word and world? Remember, this was pre-Seminex. Fortunately we did not have to implement that underground proposal until nine years later. Meanwhile, blessed be God, we were given Seminex first, without which Crossings could never have matured into the

clergy-lay cooperative which Seminex made of it, reviving the original church-world hunches of Caemmerer and Chicago and Valpo's departments of theology and philosophy-of.

## Schroeder

Then in 1983, after Seminex had had almost a decade of toughening on its own, it folded its tents in Saint Louis and went out to join forces with other, non-Missouri seminaries in Austin, Berkeley and Chicago. It was at this point that my Seminex colleague, Ed Schroeder, helped write a whole new chapter in Crossings history. He was not in a position to leave Saint Louis with the rest of us Seminexers. But that loss was quickly parlayed into a gain, at least for Crossings. Ed found employment instead in Saint Louis as Crossings' first fulltime executive secretary. Suddenly we had a payroll to meet, which required intensive publicity and, yes, fundraising— for us, lots of fund. We became a legal corporation, not for profit of course. We began publishing a newsletter which eventually went into thousands of homes. And Ed himself went out to almost as many farflung churches and workshops — he can tell you exactly how many — to do Crossings with layfolk and clergy. For almost two decades Ed, as he understates, "stayed at home and minded the shop." The fact is, in that time Crossings — a name I'd coined years before but which people still get wrong ("Crossword," "Crosswise") — made a name for itself. No wonder Ed tends to date the beginnings of Crossings not much farther back than this recent, high visibility chapter in which he played a major role. By comparison with those glory days, everything prior to them must seem like mere prologue.

Yet all of us who today make a point of teaching and learning and practicing Crossings together do draw upon that whole, much older Crossings tradition, including its outrageous puns and

quips and jargon from as far back as the forties and fifties, its six-step or three-stage methods from Concordia Seminary and Germany, its earlier exegetical aha's, even the old Chicago dissertation. These components entered the Crossings tradition well before most of its current users did, as the more knowledgeable among them recognize. Ed Schroeder too, for that matter, is unstintingly generous in his appropriation of that older tradition. In his case, for especially good reason. I first encountered him, a whiz kid and a cross-country runner, in my first philosophy course at Valpo. By the time I became chair of the department of theology, Ed had returned to his alma mater as one of the two or three best minds and teachers in that department and an exceptional ally in the "deal" I brought with me. When I moved to Concordia Seminary, Ed in turn became Valpo's theology chair. And he too eventually came onto Concordia's faculty, in time to march into exile with the rest of us. Indeed, he also would have been rash enough to go along with that premature proposal, from which blessedly we were reprieved, to go into exile merely as "Crossings." Even though the Crossings of which Ed is the "co-founder" may be a more recent version of the original, he does know the longer tradition as few others do, much of it at close hand. Anyone can see why I prize him as my accomplice.

## **Chicago (Again)**

When in 1983 my fellow Seminexers moved up to Chicago and Schroeder stayed in Saint Louis, I did too – both. On weekdays I taught at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. On weekends I commuted home – where Thelda kept the homefires burning and made her own Crossings as librarian at Washington University – to teach Saturday Crossings courses in Saint Louis. In the new Crossings corporation I was merely the president, unpaid except for commuting costs.

I have to admit that personally there was a confessional motive for this bi-local vocation. But one of the great unanticipated boons at LSTC was the encouragement to share Crossings with that community. One course after another was a Crossings course, two or three even at the graduate level. Best of all, weekly suppers in graduate students' apartments (Mike and Dawn Hoys', Ann and Gary Pedersons') buzzed with Crossings-type theological talk.

LSTC students on their internships and later in their new pastorates brought Crossings into the life of their congregations. By now there are many ELCA parishioners – how many, I'm not telling – who associate Crossings not with Ed Schroeder or me (who were getting to be known elsewhere as “the Bob and Ed show”) but instead with these young messengers from LSTC: Jersild, Schneider, Cornell, Hansel, Hegland, Chamberlain, Walser, Deffenbaugh, Bieber, Hass. (Guess the rest.) Each year the seminary staged, for academic credit yet, a two-day Christ the King Crossings Practicum, where seminarians were joined by lay and clergy who came from afar at their own expense to Cross the gospel of the week with the many vocations represented in the group. Some of these laypeople later returned to LSTC as enrollees in the fullterm Crossings courses.

One whole new kind of Crossings project at LSTC has been Crossings-influenced doctoral dissertations by some of the church's brightest and best: Simpson, Yancey, Pierce, Pederson, Kuhl, Hoy, Martin, to name only the first wave. There are more on the way, also at other graduate schools (Princeton, Saint Louis University, The University of Chicago.) What goes around comes around, but these new dissertations are more than a match for that old one of mine, on Luther, from The University of Chicago. They break new ground – to be sure, with the same old Grounding –and are already breaking into print as books. They are doing what veteran Crosser, mathematician-theologian Charles Ford (another best friend) has long identified as the goal of

Crossings: infiltrate the gospel into “the intellectual movements of our time.”

Recently LSTC dramatized that Fordian goal in a novel way. The seminary commissioned one of its visiting lecturers on church art, Richard Caemmerer, to do a painting entitled “Crossings.” This Caemmerer, the son of my old seminary prof and a onetime co-teacher in my Philosophy of Art course at Valpo, went about doing the painting by surrounding himself with LSTC Crossings students. They plied him with suggestions, he complied with his brush. The result is a bold, colorful crucified Christ whose cross extends horizontally and vertically into all the world. Whatever I’d hoped to teach the students at LSTC about Crossings they’ve more than reciprocated, and improved on.

## The World

The Caemmerer painting makes one thing overpoweringly clear, who The Founder of Crossings truly is. But of course, who else but he! That is why, if truth be told, Ed Schroeder and I look forward to retiring—literally forward, not backward. For we are not so much retiring from Crossings’ leadership – really only from its corporate offices – as we are relearning from its Leadership, from the One who up ahead calls us to follow him. Only then, as followers behind this ancient tireless Youngster, might any of us catch up to being even co-founders no matter how many miles we may have logged so far.

Clearly this Christ is surrounding us veterans with plenty of new-generation models. For example, Cathy Lessmann. She now is minding the corporate shop, low budget, with a payroll which is almost nil and with an almost nonchalant disregard for statistics. (Werner Elert said the best church history is the kind which keeps the statisticians guessing.) But oh, what a co-founder she is, that is, a selfless follower of

the cruciform One in the Caemmerer painting. The rest of us oldtimers, puff-puff, will have to run to keep up. Ed symbolizes that as the former cross-country runner, except that we are no longer just cross-country. For where all does the Caemmererian Christ run out to? How does Jim Squire put it? (Or is it Ford? Or Bob Fulton? Or Marie Prange? They all alike sound like Dietrich Bonhoeffer.) Answer: Christ runs a-Cross and deep into the **world**. For he loves that world as it is. Why else would he deserve such a death? Good answer. Good question.

Robert W. Bertram 1996

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