

Preview of Next Month's Fourth International Crossings Conference

Colleagues,

Five years ago, in January, 2007, some 150 pastors, laypersons, seminarians, and theologians gathered in Belleville, Illinois, across the river from St. Louis, for the first-ever conference of the Crossings community, whatever that amorphous designation might mean. The meeting was billed somewhat grandly though also accurately as an "international" conference. John (Joe) Strelan of the Lutheran Church of Australia was on hand to present one of the keynote addresses, and other participants came from as far away as Singapore. Those of us who had a hand in organizing the event were delighted to learn in the aftermath that a good time had been had by most-so good and by so many that we promptly organized a second conference (Oct. '08) and after that a third (Jan. '10). Last year we caught our breath with a briefer and less elaborate seminar (Jan. '11). Prompted again by strongly positive feedback, we forged ahead with plans for a fourth full-blown conference, the onset of which is now less than two months away. Again we get to call it an international event. One of the main speakers will be flying in from Port Elizabeth, South Africa, and we hear that other participants are coming from Singapore and Germany.

For today's edition of Thursday Theology we've called on two splendid servants of Christ, both named Marcus, to tell you why you'll want to get there as well, by hook or by crook, via plane, train, or automobile. The dates are January 23-25, or 22-25 if you're interested in a day's worth of pre-conference

presentations and discussions. Once again we'll meet at the Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows in Belleville. See below for a compelling description of what you'll find there.

It's by no means too late to register, of course. It can be done online

at <https://crossings.org/conference/2012conf-reg-form.shtml>. For a complete overview of offerings, schedule, speakers, accommodations, etc., go to <https://crossings.org/conference/default.shtml> and click through the tabs.

And while we're still holding the microphone, a couple of quick reasons of our own for urging you to be there if at all possible:

- a. So we can meet you So we can rejoice together face to face in our astonishing calling to embrace, trust, and pass along the best thing going in the all the world, the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, Christ Jesus is his name.
- b. So you can spend time with others who care as deeply as you do about distinguishing Law and Promise and telling the Gospel accurately and well, the cross lifted high, the love of Christ proclaimed as the hymn exhorts.
- c. Because we'll be talking throughout about discipleship, apart from which the tasks touched on in a. and b. above can't and won't be done.
- d. And speaking crassly, because it's about the best deal to be found anywhere in the U.S. where theological conferences are concerned. Check the price list.

Speaking of deals, we've recently been informed by our key organizer, Cathy Lessmann, that a donor has stepped forward to underwrite tuition costs for any seminarian who chooses to attend. Do you know one? Pass the word! Underscore that all they

have to do is get to Belleville. Everything else will be covered, pre-conference expenses as well if they sign up for the Track A program. This applies also to pastors in their first post-ordination year of ministry. Tell them too.

Enough from us. On to today's main voices.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team.

About the Crossings Conference, 2012

1. *A Chief Reason for Attending*
The Rev. Dr. Marcus Lohrmann, than whom a finer pastor and pastoral theologian is nowhere to be found, is bishop of the ELCA's Northwestern Ohio Synod. A couple of months ago he wrote to some of his small-"e" episcopal colleagues about the pending Crossings conference. We got his permission to pass along a portion of what he said to them-

So often a discerning lay person will say something like, "I like my pastor and I like my congregation but I yearn to hear the Gospel." The marvel is that many of our leaders would say, "Yes, I am preaching the Gospel."

I continue to believe that "tending the Gospel" is linked to understanding Law/Gospel theology which seeks to "make use of" the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord Jesus. This is central to Lutheran identity and our contribution to the church catholic. Hence, I unabashedly commend the Crossings Community which seeks to be a resource for such holy work.

I'm planning on attending [the conference]...and "getting fed". I need to keep re-learning this stuff! I've also persuaded several budding/blossoming theologians in the

family to accompany me. I will plug this within our synod and hope that you will consider attending and encourage others to do so as well.

2. A Preview of the Conference *The Rev. Dr. Marcus Felde, pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Indianapolis and a member of the Crossings board, took on the task this summer of editing the quarterly Crossings newsletter. The next edition, due this month, tells about the conference in Marcus's trademark prose, ever a credit to the language he speaks best. Again with permission we pass along a large chunk of that, hoping also that this will tempt those of you who don't get the newsletter to ask for it (info@crossings.org). We also invite you to look at <https://crossings.org/conference/speakers.pdf> for more information about the speakers Marcus mentions here-* Let me quote the official synopsis of what our conference will be about:

What does it mean "to follow Jesus" today?

That question is often answered in self-help therapeutic and moralistic tones, as though "to follow" means "to imitate" Jesus, as if he were a model of common sense behavior and sensibility, as though discipleship were rooted in the demands of the law. But such a view of discipleship produces, at best, anxious Christians, and, at worst, presumptuous ones. This conference revisits the theme of discipleship in order to recover both its biblical and gospel basis. "To follow Jesus" means first and foremost to trust him and what he promises to do to and for us as we make our way with him in church and world. It means to follow him to the cross. At the

heart of discipleship, then, is the invitation "come and die with me," as Bonhoeffer observed. Exploring the counterintuitive power of this invitation to create a genuinely gospel-given life is what this conference is all about.

Besides revisiting the theme of discipleship, the conference will also "revisit" Our Lady of the Snows center and its Shrine Hotel, which has provided hospitality to each of our earlier conferences. We look forward to the quiet atmosphere, pleasant surroundings, the good conversation around round tables, fine meals including deluxe continental breakfast where you make your own waffles, and the nip in the air as you walk between the two buildings. This would be a great place to spend January 23-25 even if the topic were "Banality Revisited: Should Christians Be Good?"

But we are not gathering in Prettycity (Belleville?) to rehash the obvious. We want to reboot a concept which, used in the wrong way, can do actual harm to Christians. Remember section one of the Hippocratic Oath: "First, do no harm"? My hunch is, Jesus in his Nazarene twenties listened respectfully to a whole lot of preachers. He put up with their stuff for a few years, before exploding (mildly): "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them." Is that Matthew 23:4?

Revisit the concept with us. What does it mean to be a disciple, to follow Jesus? What on earth did Bonhoeffer

mean by his “come and die with me”? (Which is not what he wrote. Read the second edition, now available as volume 4 in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. Look up this footnote on page 87:

In the earlier English version of The Cost of Discipleship, Fuller translated this famous aphorism as: “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” The austere German text reads “Jeder Ruf Christi führt in den Tod.” Literally, that says, “Every call of Christ leads into death.”)

Revisit the aphorism. And wonder with us what he meant to communicate thereby to us. Especially given that he also equates “discipleship” with “being bound to the suffering Christ” and at the same time “nothing but grace and joy.” Huh?

Every time a Christian tells me “I’m not really very religious,” I suspect I have found one more person who thinks discipleship is for martyrs-in-training like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed at 37 for binding himself to the suffering of Christ, the suffering of Jews, the suffering of his country. Is it really that special and onerous? This is worth revisiting, so we can heartily commend discipleship without people only hearing what a heavy burden it is, and how hard to bear.

As for the structure of the conference, we are offering something different this time, which we hope will be an improvement on past conferences. Everyone will get to hear all the speakers, since each of them will address the whole assembly. Instead of having to pick and choose for breakouts, you will be addressed by-and have a chance to interrogate afterwards-a large number of speakers

addressing the big question from their own particular angle, or according to a particular question we have asked them to tell us about.

Steve Kuhl will launch us and set the course with three talks which will outline our days: "The Disciple and Christ," "The Disciple and the Church," and "The Disciple and the World." His subtitles indicate where he is going with those broad topics: "Faith Alone," "The Fellowship of Faith," and "The Hidden Discipline, or Faith Working Incognito." But he will not be sailing alone. He will have conversation partners under each heading. For part one, Mark Mattes evaluating contemporary views of discipleship and Robert Kolb offering a history of "discipleship" in the Lutheran tradition. For part two, Matthew Becker on the theologian as a disciple of Christ (is it possible??) and Martin Wells on the church executive as disciple of Christ. (Is this eye of the needle stuff, or what?) (Get over it. I'm just kidding.) For part three, Kathryn Kleinhans just in from A College Campus suggesting we "tweet" if we love Jesus, and (this I can't wait for) from South Africa Pastor Felix Meylahn on "Following Jesus when Things are Falling Apart." Whew.

If you like, you may come a day early to what we call the "pre-conference," a sort of "early bird special," an option with two tracks. "Track A" persons will spend the day with Cathy Lessmann and me (Marcus Felde) learning how to get all the good out of a text using the Six-Step Method for studying a Bible text, like when you are preparing to preach or to hear a sermon. If you are not sure why the weekly "Sabbatheology" text studies are organized in that manner, come and let us elucidate. We'll look at a lot of those, and teach you to do it yourself.

“Track B” will be terribly exciting, and I’m going to be sorry to miss it myself. In the morning Jerry Burce will lead people through a quick Crossings-style overview of the Gospel of Mark. In the afternoon, a couple of Bonhoeffer experts (Matthew Becker, Richard Bliese) will be leading a seminar on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who-did I mention it before?-wrote a book about discipleship.

Speaking of which, I like Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of Mark 8:31, to the effect that when setting the terms of discipleship, Jesus

begins remarkably by setting them entirely free once more. “If [emphasis his] any want to become my followers,” Jesus says. Following him is not something that is self-evident, even among the disciples [emphasis mine]. No one can be forced, no one can even be expected to follow him.

So I guess no one should be forced or even expected to come to the conference, since the disciple is not above the master. Still, we wish you would.

See you in Belleville, I hope.

In the Thursday Theology pipeline-

Next week: Best Christmas Sermon, selected by lay readers from submissions by an assortment of Law/Gospel preachers

December 15 & 22: Fr. Joest Mnemba, “Images of Christ in Africa,” a reflection well suited for days of recalling how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us

December 29: Jerry Burce, "Justification in Nickel Words," an essay that uses plain language and sharp image to dispel the clouds of abstraction that surround the idea of justification