

# **The Reverend Dr. Robert W. Bertram International Lutheran Theologian, Interpreter of Semtex by Ed Schroeder**

Robert Walter Bertram, Lutheran pastor and theology professor, active for over 50 years in many contexts domestic and overseas, died March 13, 2003 in Webster Groves, MO. Born on Easter Sunday March 27, 1921, in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Bertram grew up in the world and ethos of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. With parents, Dr. Martin and Emma Dau Bertram, being members of prominent "Missouri" families, his education was a foregone conclusion, all in the Missouri Synod: parochial school and college in Ft. Wayne topped off with a Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, theology degree in 1946.

Married upon graduation that same year to Ethelda Koch, Bob was one of the first few who went "outside Missouri" for graduate theological education, in his case to the University of Chicago. He first took an MA in psychiatric social work in 1948 and then moved to theology, receiving his Ph.D. in 1964 from the Divinity School of the U. of Chicago. His doctoral mentors were Paul Tillich and Jaroslav J. Pelikan. In 1953, he was ordained as a pastor in the LCMS.

While still in graduate school, he began teaching in 1948 at Valparaiso (Ind.) University, a Lutheran undergraduate institution, at first in philosophy and subsequently, for the major part of his 15 years there, in theology. During his stint as theology department chair he pioneered together with departmental colleagues a unique program of theological education for church-related schools, bringing other academic

disciplines into Biblical and ethical studies. The university's official history, just published, designates him "a visionary and reformer." The latter term is a pun on Bertram's own Ph.D. in Martin Luther's theology, which became the cornerstone of the new curriculum.

In 1963 Bertram accepted a call to teach at his alma mater, the Missouri Synod's Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. And for the rest of his life St. Louis was his home. Though fully engaged as teacher at the seminary, two new venues opened for Bertram after 1963.

1. He became a major voice in expanding ecumenical and international theological conversations.
2. When the "Kirchenkampf" brewing for years in the LCMS boiled over in 1974, and a "seminary-in-exile," Christ Seminary – Seminex, came on the scene, Bertram became a major architect of its internal governance and also its external interpreter to the church and the secular world. Beginning in 1983 when Seminex deployed to join other Lutheran seminaries, he taught at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, commuting weekly from St. Louis for eight years.

## **ECUMENICAL/INTERNATIONAL**

On the ecumenical/international scene Bertram worked in countries scattered across the globe: Estonia, Russia, South Africa, Namibia, India, Peru, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, and many of the countries of Western Europe. He was active as member and teaching theologian in a long list of entities:

- Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches
- Lutheran Council in the USA
- International Bonhoeffer Society

- Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology (Co-founder and Vice-President)
- The Crossings Community, Inc. (Founder, continuing the program pioneered at Valparaiso University to an international and now internet-linked clientele)
- Theology Commissions of the Lutheran World Federation
- USA Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue Group
- Lutheran – Episcopal Dialogue (St. Louis)
- International Congress for Luther Research
- Armed Forces Commission of the LCMS
- Fulbright Research Professor at the University of Munich
- Conference on Environment and Justice in Rome (Chair)

Back home in the USA he was a member of numerous academic societies: Society for Reformation Research, American Metaphysical Society, American Society of Christian Ethics, American Academy of Religion, Science and Theology Seminar. Locally, he held several offices in the Bi-State Chapter of the American Red Cross.

## **SEMINEX**

In the Seminex scenario Bob was nudged into leadership after John Tietjen was suspended from the Concordia Seminary presidency in January 1974. He chaired the “Executive Committee” that was Seminex’s corporate president, some said “junta,” for its first year until Tietjen’s case passed through the corridors of Missouri Synod canon law. After Tietjen assumed the Seminex presidency, Bob continued as chair of the department of systematic theology and although he “never missed a class,” he was constantly on the road as public speaker. He had two agendas: on the one hand interpreting Seminex’s “Here I stand” confession vis-a-vis the church that had expelled its 45 professors from Concordia as false teachers. On the other hand he was engaged in the ecumenical and international activities

indicated above. In, with, and under Bob published the theology he taught. His bibliography exceeds 100 titles.

After retirement from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in 1991 he taught classes at Washington University, St. Louis University, and the Lutheran School of Theology in St. Louis, where he was academic dean for several years.

Bertram's survivors are

*his wife*

*Ethelda, Webster Groves, Missouri;*

*children*

*Susan E. Rathke (Steve), Minneapolis, Minnesota;*

*Kathleen B. Simpson (David), Palm Harbor, Florida;*

*Timothy J. Bertram (Karen), Seattle, Washington;*

*Sarah B. Davis (Andrew), Solon, Maine;*

*John M. Bertram, Nederland, Colorado; and*

*Michael B. Bertram, Eden Prairie, Minnesota;*

*and two sisters*

*Lois B. Reiner (Walt), Valparaiso, Indiana; and*

*Winifred B. Scheips (Alfred), Oviedo, Florida.*

Bertram's legacy is more in his students, his living letters, than in his hundreds of publications and public addresses, although his speaking and writing were wide-ranging articulations of the "forward to Luther" theology he discovered during his doctoral studies and professed throughout his teaching career. The "living letters" constitute a world-wide community of students who call him their mentor. In his teaching style he was known for "taking the scenic route"—often in Socratic monologue (is that an oxymoron?) when students didn't rise to his dialectic come-ons—to get from the question posed at the beginning of class to the answer. But he regularly got there. And students cherished the "Aha!" that often came to them

just before the bell rang, as Bob's theological insights became their own.

A quote from one of those students in a recent book:

**"Open Secrets: A Spiritual Journey Through a Country Church" by Richard Lischer (Doubleday, 2001).**

*"In my final year at seminary, I took two courses with theologian Robert Bertram: one entire course on Luther's interpretation of Galatians, the "magna charta of Christian freedom," and the other on the philosophy of history, in which Marxist notions of the future were brought into dialogue with Christian hope. Bertram was as orthodox as they come, but, unlike my prep school teachers, he had a big picture of the world. He knew how to turn every statement of doctrinal truth into a declaration of power that did not exclude those who had come on other boats. He held the tradition up to the light, like a jeweler who patiently turns a stone until it yields its greatest brilliance, and he did it with low-key Socratic patience. By the time one of Bertram's classes ended, we were often passionate about truths we hadn't even suspected at its beginning." (p.38)*