

Thursday Theology: The Crossings-Seminex Connection

Co-missioners,

Today's post is largely a reprint of an item buried in the corner of our Crossings website where old newsletters get lodged. The date on this one is Advent, 2006. It was published a month or two before our first-ever Crossings conference and devotes some space to touting the event. It was an ambitious conference, to say the least. It featured four plenary speakers, two of them flown in from overseas. Fourteen others were involved in leading workshops. Dr. Robert Kolb of Kolb/Wengert fame was one of them. Such was the bang that launched these gatherings as a regular feature of what we do at Crossings.

All of which, however interesting, is beside the point of today's post, where we start to address some questions that may have occurred to a few readers last week. Why should Crossings be beating the Seminex drum this year? Why the attention to an institution that flared so briefly and so long ago? Is this mere nostalgia of the sort the elderly indulge in when seized with a sense of their increasing irrelevance to a world that moves on? If one is new to Crossings, what has Crossings to do with that all-but-forgotten Seminex thing? Or again, if one is a Seminex veteran, where does this Crossings outfit get off waving the old flag as if this were somehow its own?

It's with such things in mind that we unearthed some material from [that old newsletter](#). Most of it consists of Ed Schroeder in one of his many bouts of recollection. Stream-of-consciousness is the prevailing style there, so we've done some cutting and pasting to piece together a coherent and quick response to two questions in particular. First, what are the roots of Crossings?

Second, how do these intertwine with the Seminex story? Our editor, Jerry Burce, has added some commentary to help this hang together for those who are new to the story.

As to the larger question of how this matters, if at all, to the life and mission of the church today, keep your eye on future posts.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossings Community

The Crossings-Seminex Connection

Edited Recollections by Edward H. Schroeder

The Roots of Crossings



. Robert Bertram and Seminec class, ca 1978.

rist Seminary Seminec Photo Subject files, box 1, folder 26 Classes.

CA Archives image.

<http://www.elca.org/archives>

Crossings today could be described as a community of theological practitioners—pastors, academics, lay people—who use a tool called “the Crossings method” to organize their thinking. [This six-step device](#) is designed to help us notice how God’s two great words, Law and Gospel, are at work in the world today, and especially in the everyday lives of baptized people. Its aim all the more is to help us hear the Gospel in all its undiluted richness as God’s promise of rescue and life in Christ Jesus.

This tool was crafted by the founders of Crossings, Robert W. Bertram and Edward H. Schroeder. Both grew up in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and received their basic theological training at its flagship school, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Both were launched in their teaching careers at Valparaiso

University. From there they were called to the faculty at Concordia. Bertram was the senior of the pair, with Schroeder honoring him as his teacher as well as his colleague. Bertram would also emerge as one of the key spokesmen for the faculty majority in the controversy that spawned Seminex in 1974.

Here's how Schroeder describes the origins of the Crossings method—

[It started with] the “new religion curriculum” at Valparaiso University beginning in 1957, brainstormed by Bob Bertram with Robert Schultz (who arrived at VU in 1956), and Ed Schroeder (who arrived in 1957) becoming the curriculum-creating subcommittee. That's spelled out in great detail in Bob's own “History of Crossings” on the Crossings website. And prior to that was Doc Caemmerer and the reformation of preaching the gospel in the LCMS in the 1940s and 1950s at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. In my mind the impact of Caemmerer shows in the six-step sequence for text studies that has become the Crossings tradition. Caemmerer had only three: what is the malady pinpointed in this text? What is the text's goal? And what is the means by which to get from malady to goal?

In Crossings' six steps Caemmerer's first step was expanded to three levels of diagnosis (initial, advanced, final) and that in keeping with the understanding of sin portrayed by the Augsburg Confession and its Apology. The means by which to get to either of Caemmerer's two goals for any particular sermon, the crucified and risen Christ, became step 4 in Crossings. And his two types of goals—“Lord, increase our faith” and “Lord, increase our love”—became the Crossings steps 5 and 6.

(In the above, “Doc Caemmerer” is the great Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr., the professor of homiletics who trained at least two generations of Missouri Synod preachers and spent his final years on the Seminex faculty. He was featured in our [Thursday Theology post of December 1, 2022](#).)

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The First Use of “Crossings” as a Designation

It happened as the Seminex storm was about to break at Concordia, St. Louis. Here’s how Schroeder recalls it—

The earliest document I know of with the word Crossings in the caption is dated January 6 (Epiphany—it was a Sunday), 1974. It was Bertram’s proposal for what some of us might do if Missouri Synod President. J. A. O. Preus continued his apparent program of picking off the notorious liberals on the Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) faculty and thereby resolving the problem of alleged false doctrine being taught by that faculty. I remember a short three-page version and a longer five-page version of Bertram’s proposal ([available online](#)). As I recall, there was no specific focus on “Crossing” the theology of the pericopes into the daily work world of Christians in secular society. Seems to me the extent to which Bob spelled it out was in the direction of the semester-long courses that Crossings began to offer when Seminex left St. Louis in 1983.

Exactly fourteen days after Bertram’s initial Crossings proposal, almost to the hour, John Tietjen was suspended as president of Concordia Seminary by the Seminary Board. The initial purpose of that meeting on Epiphany evening had been to brainstorm how those of us on Preus’s “hit list” might continue our callings even though we too had

been dismissed from our positions as seminary faculty. That had already been happening with [Professors] Arlis Ehlen and Paul Goetting, I think, as well as with the “forced retirement” that the Board was proposing for half a dozen senior faculty colleagues who were on the “wrong side” as far as Preus was concerned: Arthur C. Repp, Arthur Carl Piepkorn, Richard R. Caemmerer, Alfred von Rohr Sauer, Herbert J. A. Bouman, maybe Leonard Wuerffel.

Within twenty-four hours of Tietjen’s suspension the student body addressed the Seminary Board, declaring a moratorium on class attendance “until such a time as you designate who the false teachers are that we should no longer listen to.” Twenty-four hours after that the faculty joined the students in that decision. So it was not more isolated faculty villains being selected for sacrifice, but the whole faculty majority (45 folks) who four weeks later were summarily dismissed by the Board for not returning to work under the newly-appointed interim seminary president who was the major voice in the heresy charges against all the rest of us.

Thus Seminex was underway, although on that Epiphany weekend nobody was talking like that. And when Seminex then did become the direction for our continuing teaching and continuing learning, the Crossings option was put on the shelf. It didn’t fit what the facts now were.

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The Emergence of Crossings as an Organization

When Seminex disbanded in 1983, Schroeder declined to join his fellow faculty members in a reassignment to other seminaries and chose instead to remain in St. Louis. He sometimes described the emergence of Crossings as a way for him to keep earning a living

as a teacher of theology with a new focus on schooling the laity. In that newsletter we're quoting from here, he goes into greater detail—

In the last couple semesters that Seminex was operating in St. Louis, Bob Bertram offered a couple seminars on The Word of God and Daily Work, and I'm not sure, even at this point, whether the word Crossings was used in publicizing what this seminar was going to do.

Bob wrote an extended early history of Crossings in 1996 ([also available online](#).) As I recall, Bob links Crossings to large sections of his own personal theological development, tracing it back to his own graduate studies at the University of Chicago in the late 1940s and his initial years of teaching at Valparaiso. .And that's not inaccurate, though I was a much more public figure of the operation during the ten years I was executive director, 1983-1993.

Here's how I once described the origin of Crossings when someone asked:

In the late 1970s two seminary professors in St. Louis listened to the plea of some lay Christians. "Can you help us live out our faith in the world of daily work?" they asked. "Can you help us connect Sunday worship with our lives the other six days of the week?" That is how Crossings was born. It is a community of Christians studying both the Word of God and the workplace in order to bring them together, to make them "cross." As the two professors, Robert W. Bertram and Edward H. Schroeder, gained experience through the early years, two Crossings programs evolved. The first was the direct result of the original request. Weekend workshops around the world were

geared to assist participants cross the world of work with the Christian faith. As the word spread, hundreds of congregations asked for workshops in their areas and Crossings Community members gladly obliged.

The second program was an outgrowth of the first. Semester-long Crossings courses were offered, some in seminaries and others wherever interested students were found. These longer study sessions ranged far and wide beyond the workplace and into the many areas of the secular world where God's people live: politics, economics, education, health care, popular culture, family life, the media, technology, etc. However, the goal was always the same, to "cross" the world with the Word of God.

(A quick note: when Ed speaks above about how "the word spread" so that "hundreds of congregations" invited him and Bob—others as well that these two had certified—to lead workshops on their premises, he fails to note the vital importance of the Seminex connection in making this happen. Those inviting congregations were led largely by former students and colleagues who remembered how well these two had taught them. They jumped at the chance to have their gifts shared with the saints they now served.)

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The Tie Between Crossings Then and Crossings Now



Edward Schroeder

Bob Bertram died in 2003. Ed Schroeder followed sixteen years later, in 2019. When Ed spilled the set of recollections we're drawing on here, the leadership of Crossings was already passing to a next-generation of people who had learned from these two, whether at Seminex or in their multi-week Crossings courses. Few if any of them were able to devote their fulltime energies to Crossings as Ed had. They weren't at liberty to travel as Ed did. As a result, the program shifted. Annual conferences and seminars supplanted weekend workshops as the main venue at which Crossings-connected people would meet face to face. The internet emerged as the key pipeline for making Crossings-style Law-and-Gospel theology available to the world. When Covid came along in 2020, Zoom became a platform for new offerings to hold the community together.

This year the Crossings Board of Directors will devote considerable time to reviewing our current programs and exploring ways of sharing our gifts with a third generation that knows nothing of the LCMS/Seminex crucible that Crossings sprang from. Not that it needs to know this. What matters is Christ and the crucible of his death and resurrection from which God's new

creation continues to gush for their sake as much as anyone's.

In that 2006 newsletter, Schroeder puts his finger on the thread that ties Crossings then to Crossings now, and after that, to whatever Crossings will be ten years from now. He does so by taking us back to the defining "Crossings method"—

[Workshop] participants often say that the best thing about Crossings is the Bible study method, the "grounding" that anchors all Crossings work. First the Scripture is examined on its own terms, in its literary, historical and cultural context. Then in light of Scripture's promise to give us everything needed for life and godliness, the text is studied as problem-solving literature. What is our problem and does the Bible offer us a solution? Students do not rest content until they have gotten to the bottom, to what Scripture says is the problem's deepest level. Likewise, we also look for God's solution to the problem just uncovered. Christians anticipate, of course, that Christ himself will be at the center of all such solutions, but we let the Biblical witness speak of the Good News in Christ and how He meets the exposed problem. This study mines the depths of the Good News that's available in the text so that we can meet our problems head-on, cross them with that Good News, and take the solution out into the world for others.

This, finally, is the mission of Crossings: to do what we can so that God's Good News at its Best will continue to ring out for generations to come.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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