

# True or False: The Vocation of Christian Congregations is to be “Public Companions with God in Civil Society.”

Colleagues,

At last fall's Crossings conference, keynote speaker Mary Sue Dreier argued for the affirmative on the topic sentence above. Because of schedule crunch, there was little time for discussion, and what did ensue didn't get to the issue that rankled Phillip Kuehnert. Before Mary Sue's presentation Phil had done a “small-group” session where he was in effect giving an “op ed” to what she presented as her keynote. Phil came over to me after Dreier's presentation shaking his head. “Well,” I said, “when her full text is available on the Crossings web site, send me a review and response.” Both Mary Sue and Phil are seasoned Lutheran pastors, both with earned doctorates. She's now a professor at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. He continues in the congregational pastor's office. They didn't interact—so far as I know—before the conference closed and we all went home.

Phil agreed to write up a response, but his pastorate is in Fairbanks, Alaska, and it got cold right after he got home in October and he had other fires to stoke. Even last week it was still well below zero up there at Zion on the Tundra. But the days are getting longer, the vernal equinox has just passed, and he's gotten the job done. So here it is.

To see Mary Sue Dreier's original full text GO to the Crossings web site <[www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org)>. Click on “Conference.” Scroll down

to her text: "Missional God Outside the Box: Law/Promise and Congregational Vocation."

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**Review of Dr. Mary Sue Dreier's Keynote Presentation: "Missional God Outside the Box"**  
**By Dr. Philip R. Kuehnert**  
**Crossings Second International Conference, Oct 19 – 22.**

**Our Lady of the Snows Retreat Center, Belleville, Illinois.**

Mary Sue Dreier could not have been more self-effacing. Her sincerity and her passion for her work was obvious. Her sense of humor, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore," brought a wave of laughter. And the disciplined approach to her topic showed all the signs of a fine-tuned academic paper with research, footnotes, etc.. But having said all that, I felt like I had missed something when her presentation was done. I also had the feeling that something important had been said that I wasn't able to wrap this frozen brain around.

As a parish pastor, I was particularly interested in her presentation, even eager, especially when she promised that "the law/promise distinction motivates and shapes missional congregations to take up their vocations." What was brand new to me, and on first hearing sounded like politically correct theological doublespeak, was what that vocation was: "public companions with God in civil society." For a parish pastor of almost 40 years serving congregations variously in the lower 9th Ward of New Orleans, in Buckhead in Atlanta, and presently in

the frontier, independent-minded mentality of the interior of Alaska, this was off my chart.

When I arrived at Zion Lutheran congregation in Fairbanks 14 years ago, I found that the mad rush for congregations to form mission statements had come and gone. When I questioned the process by which the congregation had arrived at its mission statement, I got rolling eyes and the distinct sense that the process was not pleasant, very possibly a waste of time, but in any case “the statement” was not to be messed with. In spite of its awkwardness, the statement has served our congregation well. As time has gone on, I have generated a great deal of respect for it and we are using it now more than ever. The purpose of ministry at Zion Lutheran Church is to proclaim Christ’s gospel to all people, nurturing faith and making disciples through worship, education, fellowship and service.” More or less, this is what I assumed the vocation of a Lutheran congregation would be in whatever setting.

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*[EHS note. For possible newcomers to this listserve, Phil uses Crossings lingo below in abbreviated form. D1, D2, D3 are the ever-deepening steps of diagnosis, when the Word of God zeroes in on the human malady. First step, D1 = the “sickness” readily seen on the outside. Second step, D2 = the “sickness” on the inside—stuff in the heart—not easy to detect apart from God’s own X-ray, which does indeed expose it. Third step, D-3, focuses the X-ray on the “sick” God-connection—better said, the God-disconnection—at the root of the malady. It’s never a pretty picture. But that’s where healing must happen if any of the other symptoms are to be remedied. In the sequence Phil is using, here comes the shift from God’s “law-analysis” to God’s Gospel-healing of the patient. We call it a new prognosis [“P”] which comes when Christ THE healer enters the sickbay. That too*

*matches the diagnostic steps on their way down to the root, with parallel steps for the way back up: P1, P2, P3.*

*P1 = that first healing step to remedy the root-problem identified by D3 X-ray film. P1 is always and ever some form of proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ, the wounded healer of the “God-problem” afflicting the human race. P2 is the next step “up” to heal the D2 inner illness, and finally P3 traces that healing-at-the-root back to the “outside” where all of us live in our life and relationships in the world.*

*Sometimes Phil will refer to these two sets of three as a “six-stage” or “six-step” sequence where D1,D2,D3 are steps 1,2,3, and the P1,P2,P3 become steps/stages 4,5,6.]*

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I also realized that although I have used the Crossing matrix for the past 12 years in preaching and teaching, I had never attempted to apply the dynamic to congregational life. It's a theological model – not a practical theology model. But why not? The implications for the congregation in D1 and P3 are profound. The interaction on the “internal” levels of D 2 and P2 leave one at the same time paralyzed in shame and energized for engaging the world. But the “crux” is finally the D3 and P1 – and the context for that is the teaching and, primarily, the proclaiming function that takes place in congregation gathered around Word and Sacrament. I was ready, long over due ready to apply the CRUX to congregational life.

From Luther Seminary's Assoc. Professor of Congregational Mission and Leadership, I was expecting more. But at the same time I got more than I could digest . So my review centers first, around three deficiencies; and second, three exciting ignition points which has the potential of encouraging the

Crossings Community to engage explicitly the practical aspects of congregational life.

The deficiencies: First, her admitted lack of a working knowledge of the “crossings model.” Second, Jesus, i.e., her paper does not “necessitate” Christ. Third, the congregations she describes are social service agencies; they lack the marks of Augsburg Confession, Articles V and VII.

Ignition points: First, the point of differentiation between a “civil society organization” and a Lutheran congregation. Second, “God’s renewal of the church today for mission.” And third, “law/promise mobilizes and energizes us.”

## **The Deficiencies**

1. Be Prepared! It seems to me that even a cursory review of any of the hundreds of “crossings” text studies readily available on the [Sabbatheology@crossings.org](mailto:Sabbatheology@crossings.org) web site would have provided Dr. Dreier a basic understanding of “Crossings: A Model for Connecting Scripture and Life.” In my final analysis, this is what left me so disoriented at the end of her presentation. She was attempting to relate to something that didn’t exist. In the beginning of her presentation, I did not take as seriously as I should have her disclaimer “I do hope that, despite my relative unfamiliarity with the insights and complexities of the Crossings law/promise matrix.” Her reference of the “cross over” from stage 6 to stage 1 is something that does not exist in the crossings model. While I feel petty in pointing this out, it would have been courteous for her to explain why she chose to talk about “stages” rather than the crossings language of “steps” or more specifically D1, D2, etc., the explicit steps of ever-deepening diagnosis and then P1, P2, etc., the explicit steps in the ever-

increasing good-news, the new prognosis that comes when Christ enters the diagnostic scene. This was, after all, a Crossings conference. In her defense, not having a functional knowledge of the model, she needed to create this “cross over from stage 6 to stage 1 to answer the questions that she poses for the congregation.

2. Where's Jesus? The questions that she poses, e.g. “Beyond individualistic efforts, how might congregations turn their attention to the care of their communities in the face of those assaults? How might they live hospitably with God's mercy and justice among the people in their communities? How does the Spirit of God cultivate imagination and capacity within congregations for this work?” – and which provide the foundation for the rest of her paper – do not necessitate Christ. In other words, the “guts” of the crossings model are not referenced. The “guts” is the hard work of applying God's accusing activity to the contextual milieu of the congregation (D1), acknowledging the crushing despair and depression for the pastor/parishioner in confronting their idolatry of self and the attending “theology of glory” models of ministry (D2), and finally experiencing the terrifying judgment of God upon all of that, which only God in Christ can resolve (D3). This is the dizzying, overwhelmingly hard work that can be done only by abandoning the language of human wisdom and philosophers ( I Cor 1) and adopting “the message of Christ's death on the cross. the power of God and the wisdom of God” (again, I Cor 1). This for me is the heart and genius and unique contribution of the crossings model, the contribution that is so well laid out and demonstrated in Bob Bertram's book, A Time for Confessing. This provides the detonator for one of the igniting points.

The turn, the CRUX, is “a Time for Confessing.” And while

there have certainly been those grand moments in history for confessing – as again identified in Bertram's book – in which Christ was proclaimed, I cannot imagine a time in a congregation's life, especially a congregation that is intentional in doing the D1 and D2 work, that does not call for confessing Christ. This is where things get exciting for those who work the model and why Mary Sue Dreier's language of "Congregations as Public Companions with God in Civil Society" is almost offensive, if not funny and certainly confusing. How can Lutheran congregations allow themselves to ignore their primary identity around Word and Sacrament? Are they ashamed of Jesus? (Romans 1:16)

The combination of the Gospel's proclamation and signage (sacraments), and the power of God it accesses, stands in sharp contrast to so much in congregations which are counterfeit gospels or "gospel plus."

3. Civil Societal Organizations? Which brings me to my final point; are Lutheran congregations, in the world, in their contextual milieu, called to be more than social service agencies? Allowing the really hard work to be done by "God in Christ," the pastor/congregation is now freed and powered up to address those internal issues that paralyze pastors and parishioners when facing the vicissitudes of their own lives and the life of their congregation. I want to engage someone in conversation where the differentiation emerges between the internal life of the pastor and the internal workings of the congregation. I hope that might be Mary Sue Dreier. And what are the implications of the overlays of the internal workings of the synod/district and national church body for this process? Because if we go "public" dare we risk the Son of Man being ashamed of us when he comes in the glory of His

Father with the holy angels, by not confessing his name? But this is the point at which Professor Dreier's paper hints at, if not provides at least three ignition points.

### **Ignition points:**

1. What's different? All through her paper, Dr Dreier works on the assumption that there is something different about the congregations she describes. I hesitate to say "Lutheran Congregation" because I fail to find in her paper the distinguishing marks that set Lutheran congregations apart from other worshipping communities. The unique strength of the of the crossings community is its insistence that the Lutheran confessions and Luther have it right when it comes to the twin no-no's of "no gospel at all" or "gospel plus." The ignition point that she provides is her extensive work on what she calls Stage 6 and Stage 1. Congregations, congregational leaders and above all, Pastors need to be in the world diagnosing D1, and in the world prognosing P3. In section 2 of her paper "Law/Promise Congregational Understanding" Professor Dreier comes so close when she addresses "Purpose." But close enough to give us an exciting ignition point as the first and last step of the crossings matrix are contextualized for the congregation in place.  
"...it gives us purpose. We have been given our purpose in our baptisms. Lack of purpose and general dissatisfaction in congregations are not the symptoms of our problem but are at the core of our problem itself. We need not diagnose them, but they are the law diagnosing us and our need for the redemption and transformation, forgiveness and renewal through Christ's death and resurrection by the power of the Spirit. I believe the arrow that propels us from Stage 6 to Stage 1 provides exactly the purpose our congregations need: it's our neighbor's need.



Ouch! The problem is sin, exposed and deposed to the wrath and judgment of God. Our neighbor's need cannot be the "purpose". Without the "guts" of steps 2 – 5, we are left with the stringent analysis of community organizers and their purpose of making the community a better place. Ironically, the above section is immediately followed by this sentence:

*Our purpose is for Christ to be central in our congregations – to be received, claimed, and lived in the community Christ died to save – and then borne to the neighbor and shared with the neighbor.*

Yes! Here is where Dr Dreier reveals her bias that the congregation is more than a civil societal organization. But what does she mean? And can she mean that without the power of the gospel?

2. Whose Church? "The law/promise framework helps us participate in God's renewal of the church today for mission." Without a doubt the most moving and personal part of the presentation was when Mary Sue shared her daughter's response to having survived a terrible car accident. Something happened to that young woman in the CRUX of her experience that propelled her to be part of the renewed church engaged in mission. That something, I humbly suggest, is seeing and experiencing the proclaimed Christ as the one who took her death (sweet swap) and gave her His life. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" – if my 45-year-old confirmation memory work serves me right, this is the way the KJV puts step three, D3, into language. Someone, and I suspect it was her mother, told her at some time in her life about Jesus and related that to her baptism. Again the 2nd section: Professor Dreier

presents “some of the ways this law/promise matrix addresses our callings and our challenges in congregational life” and the first is baptism all over the place! But the fuse is damp and she loses spark by getting caught up in some weird story of corporate confession done by Bishop Hansen’s hands for “all of us.” Yes, the church’s mission begins with baptism which at its core is the crux – Jesus dying and rising again – and our daily drowning and regeneration. Our participation in the mission begins in baptism, which takes the individual and the congregation and strips both personal and corporate sin and replaces it with the freedom to “nurture faith and make disciples” which then becomes reality in “worship, education, fellowship and service.”

3. Whose Power? Professor Dreier’s fourth “way” is that the “law/promise mobilizes and energizes us.” This potentially carries more fire for the ignition of local congregations than anything else. St. Paul in one of his nastier moods says (again KJV) “knowing therefore the terror of the Lord we persuade men.” In Paul’s better moods (Romans 1 and I Cor 1 and many other places) he makes it clear that the message of Christ’s death on the cross is the power (and wisdom) of God. “He died .that those who live, should live, not for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again.” This ultimately means confronting sin and evil. Without the acknowledgment that in the proclamation of “law/promise” something more than the battle of good and evil is being waged, Star Wars like, there is no power or plan to move in mission. Congregations need power and plans. And both power and plan begin in working the law against the promise and the promise against the law. Philip Jenkins in his *The New Faces of Christianity* makes the amazing observation that “Surely, though, it is wildly improbable that modern Northern-world Christians – the

mainline denominations, at least – might accept a belief in the demonic or in spiritual warfare, even as metaphors. Yet the further Christianity moves from ideas of evil, the less intelligible doctrines such as salvation and redemption become: salvation and redemption from what?” p. 184. What the crossings matrix offers Professor Dreier is the invitation to consider the heart beat of the Lutheran congregation its primary commitment to proclaim Jesus. That means making acceptable the belief in the reality of sin and God’s wrath, acknowledging the terrible effects of God’s accusing activity in the world and in our communities. This then, necessitate the proclamation of the Gospel.

What Professor Dreier’s presentation offers the Crossings community, is the invitation to be more intentional in its D1 and P3 work. Heeding her example and her research, the Crossings community and its work will be enriched in those areas where the greatest damage (D1) and the greatest good (P3) are experienced.