

What Crossings Is/Was/Might Be

Robert W. Bertram

[Meeting of Crossings' board of directors, 16 July, 1989]

1) It was when Crossings' board of directors came together recently to get some professional advice on fund-raising, specifically through direct-mail methods, that one of the directors brought us back to what I think is the heart of the matter. He asked the basic question –he being one of the first co-teachers I ever worked with in Crossings classes, long before there was a corporation called The Crossings Community. Terry Ihlenfeld's question was deceptively simple, "What is Crossings?" As the perpetrator of Crossings I cannot in good conscience evade my old accomplice's question. For me his query has been a forceful reminder.

2) The Crossings program as we know it really came into its own as a way of teaching seminarians, that is, future pastors. Precisely because the Cross is for the whole people of God and for their whole lives, therefore the pastors whom they call to proclaim that Cross to them must themselves perceive how it crosses into life, all of life. It is the people's own faith-life which, so to speak, is the end of the food chain. That is why they have a right to expect that the Food they hear and taste from their clergy makes for real-life Crossing. An earlier meeting of the Crossings board of directors referred to "the Ihlenfeld maxim: 'help the pastor get from good theology to the nitty-gritty'." (Minutes, 6/1/'86) "Help the pastor," I take that to mean, for the sake of the people.

3) That transaction, to "get from good theology to the nitty-

gritty," is the responsibility of every thoughtful Christian but most immediately, as the Ihlenfeld maxim says, of "the pastor." There was a day, back at Valparaiso University, when some of us were already teaching a kind of would-be "Crossings" curriculum, however not to future pastors but directly to university students all of whom were laypeople. Yet isn't it significant that, because that teaching was noticeably having a Crossings kind of effect upon the students, we the teachers were described (both by our critics and by our supporters) as acting like "pastors". We agreed. In fact we, the profs, spent many hours in in-staff training cultivating a Crossings kind of theology. As professors-pastors we did.

4) The move in the early sixties from Valparaiso University to Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, would seem, wouldn't, it, to be a move away from anything like Crossings, away from the "nitty-gritty" of engineering students and fraternities and majors and minors and paying off student loans and intra-departmental tensions, away to the seminary's all-expenses-paid ivory tower of just "good theology"? For isn't that what a seminary is supposed to be, just "good theology" without the distractions of the "nitty-gritty?" If so, then no wonder that so much of a pastor's energies, once he or she is graduated from seminary, supposedly goes into bringing "good theology" and "nitty-gritty" back together.

5) But how is it, then, as I suggested earlier, that Crossings actually "came into its own" in a seminary? That does seem strange when you think of how little contact the average seminary classroom has with the day-to-day lives of laypeople and yet how much Crossings depends on those lives for its very theology. True, even with the move from Valparaiso University to Concordia Seminary, as my old syllabi and correspondence files reflect, there was a conscious attempt – more conscious than ever at Valparaiso – to bring laypeople's lives and, as much as

possible, laypeople themselves into seminary classrooms or even to take the seminary classroom out into the lay world. That has always been a hallmark of Crossings, doing “good theology” with the lay Christians – not for them but in partnership with them – whose lives were being “Crossed.”

6) In fact, that one feature of Crossings, doing theology in face-to-face dialogue with laypeople, has gotten so much attention – with plenty of help from ourselves, our slogans, our publicity – that our publics get the misimpression that that is what makes Crossings what it is. Really, that is only one dimension of Crossings – pretty indispensable, I believe, yet not the most essential. Whether the students in a Crossings class are only laypeople or only clergy or (what I prefer) some of both, none of these personnel arrangements by itself comes even close to answering the Ihlenfeld question What is Crossings?

7) What does come close is the Ihlenfeld answer, connecting “good theology” with the “nitty-gritty.” In fact the theology I have in mind is not truly “good” theology, at least not Crossings theology unless the “nitty-gritty” is itself an essential component of that theology. And by “nitty-gritty,” what do we mean? Just the “worldliness” of life? The “cost-benefit” realities? The daily grind? The rough and tumble? The jungle? Yes, all that. But more than that, worse than that: the Godlessness, the God-forsakenness of life, real or apparent. The classroom ham in me is tempted to quip, Remember, class, N.G. stands for nitty-gritty or, what comes to the same thing, No God! And where God has withdrawn, or has seemed to, isn't that a verdict on our lives as well, No good? Biblically, that is a real possibility.

8) We can dare to diagnose as drastically as that, to drain the swamp so utterly, only because of a God who as one of us has

crossed over into those very depths and now there, in those same nitty-gritty depths of the world, is fondly re-creating us as junior co-creators. Isn't that the way – The Way – the nitty-gritty gets Crossed, in every Christian's life, lay or ordained, every day over? Isn't that what Crossings is?

9) Having said that, I should be the first to admit that that radical kind of Crossing is the most difficult thing I know – the most difficult to grasp, and not just intellectually, because it is the most difficult to believe. It is especially difficult to communicate to others, believably and winsomely and livingly. But that is exactly the calling of the pastor. A few weeks ago Pastor Lee Heine, who at the time was taking a week-long Crossings course with Ed Schroeder in Chicago, commented that the whole Crossings experience seems to be even harder for pastors to grasp than for laypeople. He may have a point.

10) I suspect that that had something to do with why, in the move from Valparaiso University to Concordia Seminary, Crossings came into its own in a new way amidst the training of future pastors. For them the very prospect of Crossings (though not necessarily under that name) posed a fundamental challenge: their life's work. At any rate, almost immediately after that move to seminary teaching, at least as early as 1964, the entire rationale of Crossings had to be spelled out in course syllabi, new lingo, different know-how, even the pun "Crossings," maybe even a somewhat altered (more nitty-gritty?) pastoral lifestyle. By hindsight it seems that under those circumstances, Concordia Seminary a quarter century ago, Crossings had no choice but to come into being as it did.

11) Later on, God sent Ed Schroeder also from Valparaiso to Concordia. Still later, Concordia became Seminex. I would like to think that Crossings as a way of teaching-learning, maybe even as an aid to "confessing," had been put in place at

Concordia as some modest preparation for their (Schroeder's and Seminex') coming. Both of them have made good use of it. With what results? "To help the pastor get from good theology to the nitty-gritty," or more exactly, to get to the nitty-gritty of good theology.

12) "To help the pastor," notice, –never the pastor without the people whose lives the pastor is to help Cross, but certainly also not the people without the pastor. For if anyone should, the pastor should initiate and co-suffer the people's Crossing. I admit, there has always been a strong temptation for Ed Schroeder and me to step in and do the pastors' Crossings work for them, directly between us "professionals" and their parishioners, with the pastors mostly looking on or maybe absent altogether. Often it has been the pastors who have preferred that, reducing their own responsibility to providing the congregation with an "outside speaker" or a weekend "program," rather economically at that – that is, for those congregations which can afford us at all.

13) To excuse this problem, this relieving pastors of their own responsibility/opportunity, it can always be argued that Ed's and my Crossings programs are after all much more ambitious and sophisticated than any ordinary parish program could be. But that is only half true. Worse, it is too true, the fault being ours as much as the parishes'. Granted, there are some parts of Ed's and my Crossings ministry which do range beyond what local pastors or even their congregations could be expected to provide, for instance, the semester-long courses for academic credit, the Crossings newsletter, some few workshops – but only some.

14) Many of our workshops, I suspect, should prompt the question, Is this trip necessary – not necessary for Crossings' own finances but for the congregation(s) involved? Oughtn't they

rather be working us out of that job? And oughtn't we be helping them to make us dispensable? Instead, we have been perfecting methods for coaxing parishes and pastors to purchase our expertise. And since their purchase price does not nearly cover the cost of our expertise, let alone the cost of our coaxing, Crossings has become a very consuming effort in fund-raising as well.

15) Granted, a major part of Crossings' work still goes on as it did from the outset, in a seminary classroom, at no cost to The Crossings Community, Inc. Yet that major part of our operation, maybe just because it costs us nothing and needs no fund appeals,

can hardly be said to be the tail that wags the dog or the wheel that gets the grease. The Ihlenfeld question is timely, What is Crossings? In the minds of our growing public, I fear that Crossings too often comes across as that specialized ministry directly to laypeople for which pastors are ill-equipped and therefore for which one is expected to hire Ed Schroeder or Bob Bertram – what Trudy Smith so aptly calls “The Bob and Ed Show.”

16) On the other hand, if what Crossings still is, or what it is for, is “to help the [people's] pastor get from good theology to the nitty-gritty,” so that more people will do likewise, then the most opportune place and time to provide that help is in future pastors' seminary education, as part of the daily diet in their theological and pastoral formation, at the hands of teachers who are members of the same seminary community, when there is still plenty of time for the student to experiment, to get it wrong, to fight with it, to check it out biblically and with its faculty critics, to test it on internship and in courtships and in life- planning, to find in it a motivation for being ordained. However, that part, the seminary- based part of “The Bob and Ed Show,” has for the past six years been down to just “The Bob Show” – never much of a show to begin with – and

two years from now even that part will be retired.

17) The request I now wish to make of the board pertains to these next two years, and beyond, if there is to be a beyond. The request is twofold. First, will you please grace the rest of this hour on our agenda by saying what you think we in The Crossings Community might do about the issues I've raised concerning Crossings' identity, especially its identity in the near future? Second, depending on the direction our discussion takes, will you give me encouragement to explore ways by which Crossings might continue the original seminary-based part of its ministry after 1991?

18) I must admit, I have almost no inkling as to what those ways might be. Not yet I don't. Naturally, I still wish that Ed Schroeder could do his Crossings ministry as a fulltime faculty member at a seminary like LSTC, but I suppose that wish is paternalistic and (by now) unrealistic. Surely we should continue to seize every opportunity for in-service training programs with clergy who are already in the pastorate, second-best though those experiences might be. Better yet would be long-range training programs for pastors who could step in as workshop-leaders and retreat-masters replacing "The Bob and Ed Show." Still better might be Lois Danker's scheme, utilizing Crossings' accredited curriculum for the ELCA's lay "Associates in Ministry," though that seems highly unlikely.

19) But best of all would be for Crossings to continue as a natural stock-in-trade at an existing seminary in the person of some seminary faculty member(s) already sympathetic with Crossings' theological hopes and willing to put in the many extra hours of recruiting resource persons for the lay-seminarian dialogues. At least I think that would be best, though it may be too much to hope for. What if, say, LSTC were interested in calling to its faculty some such Crossings-minded

“successor”? If so, and that is a big if, might The Crossings Community then help to subsidize that position or at least those aspects of the position which most explicitly embody the Crossings vision? Also, seminaries like LSTC now have as part of their institutional operation such “centers” as the Center for Global Mission or the Chicago Center for Religion and Science. That might suggest an option. At any rate, and first of all, what do you think?

Robert W. Bertram
Meeting of Crossings’ board of directors
16. July, 1989

[WhatCrossingsIs \(PDF\)](#)