

CROSSINGS Connection

WHERE THE GOSPEL MEETS OUR DAILY LIVES

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2019 Crossings Conference Highlights

“When God Is Silent,” the theme for this year’s Crossings Conference, grew out of a pastoral concern for those who long for God’s presence but experience only absence. Lutheran theology explains God’s hiddenness as twofold. God is hidden in the mayhem of the world by which God judges human sin. Secondly, God in Christ is hidden in human suffering. God is present in Jesus as friend and companion with those who suffer.

Fred Niedner “Crossing in Silence”

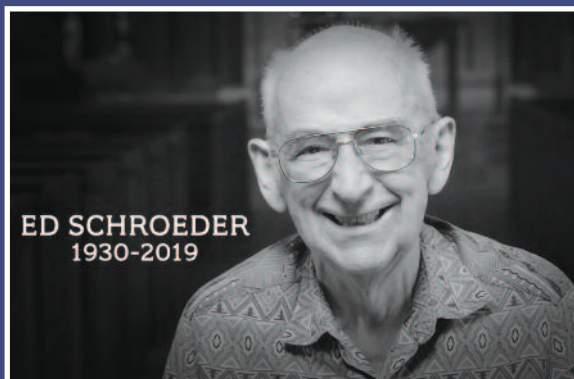
In the first keynote address Fred Niedner said “More and more, I am troubled by the need to find consolation for devout consciences that suffer and find themselves estranged from God for reasons that have nothing to do with sin, or at least no sin that has any connection to the suffering that occasions their estrangement.”

As examples he cited one writer’s search for what happened to six family members who perished in the holocaust. One of them, a 16-year-old
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Nathan Hall preached for the conference Eucharist.

“It is rather astonishing that God would choose to sneak into the one place God cannot logically be. God managed to sneak into God forsakenness.”



We mark the death of Ed Schroeder, who along with Bob Bertram founded the Crossings Community. The success of this year’s conference was due to following Ed and Bob’s pioneering spirit in bringing law and promise theology to all, especially the laity. Ed’s enduring success as a teacher is attested by the fact that even as this writer puts down these words he can hear Ed’s challenge, “Is success your false god? What is this success upon which you pin your hopes?” Yes, Ed. The one upon whom we rightly pin our hope and our faith is Jesus Christ in whose presence you now stand.

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girl, was made to strip naked and take her turn with dozens of other teens jumping up and down on a board suspended over a pit as Nazi soldiers took target practice on them.

Secondly, former students and dear friends had a child born with a rare genetic mutation making it impossible for her to live outside the womb. When not heavily sedated the child screamed in pain for the eight weeks of her life. The parents could not hold her, not even touch her, but only listen to her screams.

Niedner said, “If God is not going to show up at times such as these, please don’t mock those children with prayers about your misplaced car keys or help at winning a ball game.”

Niedner said Mark’s gospel speaks to this experience of God’s silence and abandonment. “Mark’s gospel begins with the very thing for which the prophet begs, a heaven-rending, and the Son of God slips into the world quietly, unnoticed. He carefully keeps himself hidden, and even when he rides into Jerusalem acclaimed a successor to David, no one notices. He retreats to Bethany. When he returns for the festival, he faces wild, untrue accusations, betrayal by a friend, an unjust trial, and finally, execution. He doesn’t make speeches as in other gospels, but remains silent. In the end, alone in the darkness and abandoned by everyone, he speaks only the words of a psalm of lament and abandonment, ‘My God, my God, why...?’ And once again, when the heavens, this time as depicted on the great tapestry of the temple curtain, are

ripped open, a voice declares him ‘Son of God.’ There, on the cross, in the darkness and emptiness, is the great revelation. Somehow, God’s presence is—and is known—precisely in God’s absence, as the Son of God joins all of us who fall and die in the darkness, abandoned by everyone. And then, whoever falls into that abyss, or you whenever your time comes, finds the crucified one who landed there first is there to meet you. You are never alone.

“The rest of the crossing we do with that text is to observe the charge of the *neaniskos* (the ‘young man’) who meets us at the tomb. ‘Go to Galilee, there you will see him, even as he told you,’ and soon enough, re-reading Mark often enough, you realize he also meant, ‘Go to Galilee, there you will *be* him, even as he told you.’ Which means we who are the body of Christ roam about here in the darkness, in the absence and silence of God so many suffer, often including we ourselves, embodying the crucified one who broke the silence and ended the abandonment. None of us is alone. Precisely in the absence of God we know God’s presence.”

Rob Saler “Practicing the Hidden God”

“Go to Galilee and there you will be him,” said Niedner. Rob Saler picked up that declaration, calling us to be theologians of the cross by performing the cross. He said, “Luther did not talk about a theology of the cross but theologians of the cross. The distinction is important. A theology



Fred Niedner



Rob Saler



Adama Raymond from Nigeria and Rosalind Norman receive communion from Steve Kuhl.

of the cross is a proposition. Theologians of the cross are embodied. Luther's theology was incarnational, a theology to be lived. We perform the cross."

Saler spoke of the life and theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to explain what it means to perform the hiddenness of God and how this life is formed in us. Bonhoeffer witnessed the Nazi regime enlist the church in its search for power by saying the country had lost its moral center because the church was no longer at the center of national life. "Stick with me," Hitler said in effect, "and I will restore the church to the center of national life."

By and large the church in Germany was taken in by this logic. According to Saler, Bonhoeffer countered by saying, yes "Christ is at the center of the church's life, but Christ is found at the margins. Therefore the church's center must be at the margins." The Sermon on the Mount was key for Bonhoeffer. Saler explained, "Without diminishing what God has done for us in Christ, God actually wants us to do these things. So it is Bonhoeffer distinguished between cheap and costly grace in *The Cost of Discipleship*. 'Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is... the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble.' For Bonhoeffer discipleship is following Jesus as he is embodied in the Christian community."

Saler concluded by presenting ideas for "what it means to be formed by God's hiddenness as practice." He calls for worship that is deeply sacramental with Christ as its basis. He challenged

us not to rescue our people from Jesus in our sermons. He noted how often we soft pedal the challenging words of Jesus in passages such as the Sermon on the Mount.

Emmy Kegler "Transgression, Depression, Oppression: Sin & Justice at the Margins of Faith"

In between Niedner and Saler we heard from two theologians of the cross, two practitioners of the hiddenness of God. The first to speak was Emmy Kegler. She ministers in her congregation to a community living on the financial margins and to those marginalized in the LGBTQ population.

She called upon us to have a compassionate imagination. She asked, "In the silence of God how are we speaking our understanding of sin?" Sin defined as pride is not fitting for many living on the margins.

She continued, "How does the law land for one who is already broken. For them it can be a confirmation of just how wretched we already knew we were and the implicit teaching that our wretchedness also killed the Son of God." She urged us not to ignore the fragmentation of those already experiencing the brokenness of the world.

Next she asked "When we are tasked with caring for, ministering to, and preaching to those who live with mental illness, what are we speaking into the silence of God? Mental illness is an illness. It can, however, be caused by trauma inflicted by the sins of others."

Sin as oppression became the occasion to talk
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Emmy Kegler



Sherman Lee and Ruth Hanusa crossed the Word of God with their vocations.

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about John 8 and the woman taken in adultery, the hostility toward other ethnic groups in Ezra and Nehemiah, and the exclusion of the eunuchs from the temple. She led us in a consideration of the counter stories such as the Ethiopian eunuch, baptized by Philip into Jesus, the living temple, and Peter's vision in Acts 10 leading to the council in Jerusalem. She noted how sin can be communal and lamented the absence of any sense of communal sin in the liturgies of our church.

She closed by asking, "How will we speak the kingdom of God into the presence of those who now hear only the silence of God?"

Liv Larson Andrews "Hidden in these Pews: Space for Rage, Space for Hope"

Pastor Larson Andrews placed a bowl of water on the table in front of the assembly. She quoted Bishop Oscar Romero, "There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried."

She continued, "If our water, our tears, is holy water, that tearful seeing is baptismal seeing. So encountering the sheer silence of God in the depth of suffering or experiencing abandonment are ways of seeing the world that are an important part of the story and journey of faith."

She brought us "stories that flow from the baptismal font" of her congregation. These stories, she said, "correspond to the sacramental life of the

body of Christ, the rituals and signs that re-member us even as we experience fragmentation."

One of the stories she shared was of a young man who died of an opioid overdose. When she got the news of his death she wept. "After tears," she said, "came rage. I walked the neighborhood and raged at it: how many dealers are hiding here. How many will die before justice comes for them?"

"That rage," she claimed, "had a holy space carved out for it. Hidden in these pews of our congregations is ample space for hope." Pastor Larson Andrews recalled the time this young man scooped a double handful of water from the font and splashed it over his face and head. She said, "His gesture pointed to his future on the other side of a painful death."

She concluded, "I believe the gift of flowing water, baptismal water, makes space in the life of faith for rage and for hope. Some things can only be seen through tears. Mary saw the Risen Lord through her tears beside the empty tomb. So, go to Galilee, go to your neighborhoods and homes. Bring your tears, bring your stories and there you will be him, there you will be him."



Liv Larson Andrews



Kris Fahey presided at the Eucharist held in Christ the King Chapel at the Conference Center on the final night of the gathering.



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QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

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