



CROSSINGS Connection

WHERE THE GOSPEL MEETS OUR DAILY LIVES

MICHAELMAS 2020 | Vol. 139 | From the Crossings Community

This issue of *Crossings Connection* marks the 35th anniversary of the Crossings newsletter.

It was first published in August 1985 as an annual report from the Rev. Dr. Robert W. Bertram and the Rev. Dr. Edward H. Schroeder, the founders of Crossings. It soon became a quarterly newsletter.

Both Bob and Ed were known for their charming and, at times, challenging wordplay, so it was no surprise when they used the word “Crossings” as an acrostic to encompass the newsletter’s content. To mark the 35th anniversary of the newsletter we are adopting that original format for this issue.

The Rev. Dr. Fred Niedner is the guest writer for this anniversary issue. As Niedner pursued his Th.D. at Christ Seminary—Seminex, he was a teaching assistant for Bob Bertram. Niedner is Senior Research Professor in Theology at Valparaiso University, having taught in the theology department there for 40 years. We are grateful for his insightful and inspiring contribution and give thanks that he speaks at Crossings conferences and writes for the Crossings’ *Sabbatheology* and *Thursday Theology* web columns.

— Bruce K. Modahl

C

is for **Coronavirus**, as in COVID-19

R

is for **Rant**, as in ranting and raving over racism

O

is for **Over**, as in “the same thing over and over again”

S

is for **Sick**, as in sick to death

S

is for **Swap** — a Sweet Swap, as in swapping places

I

is for **In**, as in “in, with, and under”

N

is for **New**, as in “all things new”

G

is for **Goodness**, as in “Goodness and Mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives”

S

is for **Shalom**, as in the peace that passes all understanding



Rev. Dr. Fred Niedner

N is also for noise,
as in Joyful Noise,
the kind that rises
from us to the Lord.

God Makes a Place for Us

C is for **CORONAVIRUS**, as in COVID-19, the microscopic, crown-like organism that has cast much of the world, and the United States most profoundly, into a wilderness. The virus has made of our nation a cautionary tale and left us individually alone, afraid, and angry. We are either appalled at others' recklessness or scornful of their trust in science.

C is also for **CRYING**, as in, "crying in the wilderness." We cry out in lament as the curve we sacrificed to flatten has now flipped and headed skyward. We find ourselves in crisis—a time of judgment, bereft of merciful words, and armed with critical, canceling barbs. Some condemn COVID-deniers as zealously as they denounce Holocaust and climate change deniers. Others mock the masked as dupes of the deep state. We are all keeping lists of the disgraced, those banished to outer darkness where they will forever gnash their teeth.

R is for **RANT**, as in ranting and raving in rage over the racism that has permeated and poisoned the social atmosphere of this country ever since we were colonies and wannabe states. As the coronavirus chased most of us into our closets, the poorest and most vulnerable among us still went to work and risked exposure to the deadly virus. They had to. We needed them. Few could afford not to work.

Then, when a Minneapolis policeman took a knee on a poor Black man's throat for twice the time it takes to sing the Star-Spangled Banner, another R-word came into play. **R** is for **REAPING**, as in reaping what we have sown. All hell broke loose, and heaven's rage, too, as a great lament rose up from the unseen, unheard, and discounted, plus some who stood with them. "Black Lives Matter," they cried out to the skies, the world, and to themselves. A time for repentance has come for all of us—if anyone still remembers how.

O is for **OVER**, as in "the same thing over and over and over again," a phrase used by the medical doctor in *The Plague*, Albert Camus' 1948 Nobel Prize-winning novel, to define the experience of a community in quarantine during a pandemic. Every day the doctor treated the same disease, filled out the same forms, offered the same condolences, and listened to the same phonograph record because he only owned one.

If only "I Can't Breathe" were merely an annoying earworm we had to hear over and over and over instead of a cry of terror from yet another victim of our current methods of lynching.

Over and over, the obscenity of one more bystander's violence-capturing video stuns us into becoming ostriches. We can't watch. We numb ourselves. The good that we would do, we do not. We can't believe we could make a difference. We've lost faith that even God can break the chain of violence that repeats itself over and over.

S is for **SICK**, as in sick to death ... of all the shootings and the subsequent cycles of blaming, denial, scapegoating, failed resolutions, and broken promises. We are sick to death of all the sanitizer in use around us, some to save us from COVID-19, the rest to wash our hands Pilate-style of the blood spilled all about us, much of it our own doing. The choices we make cost others their sustenance, safety, sanity, and sometimes their very lives. Washing all that away consumes every waking moment.

We are sick to death of the selfishness we witness everywhere. It makes us even sicker to see our own souls' self-absorption, and we hope like crazy no one else notices. Sick to death of sin, we hope and pray for a great repentance to break forth—among all those others whose sins are clearly worse than ours. Yes, *those* people must repent. Then the world will change, and we can all heal. (In sober moments, we know they say the same about us.) Mostly, we're all simply sick to death.

S is for **SWAP**, as in swapping places, or as our teachers—especially Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder—loved to call it, the “Sweet Swap.” They helped many of us grasp both the fullness of the Gospel and the depths of the abyss into which the good Word comes. Tasting and knowing the sweetness of the swap begins with recognizing and acknowledging the absence of sweetness that inevitably comes with being flesh and blood, born of a woman, under the law, in time and space.

To be sure, our brief chapters often include the sweetness of family, friends, loving, and being loved, but there is also the sickness unto death that sooner or later strikes down every sweetness and grinds it to nothing. “Ah, but we had our moment,” becomes our only consolation.

The Word made flesh got every bit of all this in the sweet swap. He had family and friends. He loved and was loved in return. He was also hated, plotted against, betrayed by a friend, and treated like dirt by two governments that believed themselves enlightened. He was tortured, taunted, hung up to die as a terrifying warning.

With his dying breaths, he asked the God who supposedly created an oh-so-sweet world, “Why? Why have you, too, abandoned me?” There, in that very darkness and infinite emptiness, is our place. He took it, takes it, makes it his own, and when he does, our bitter waters become sweet.

I is for **IN**, as in “in, with, and under,” which in Hebrew is, *Immanuel*, God with us—in us, under us, over us, always and to the end of all ages. There is no place we could ever end up, even Hades, Gehenna, or face down and ground to nothing on a street in Minneapolis, except even there, he is Lord for us. Buried with Christ by baptism into his death, each of us hears and grasps hold of the promise to all the fellow-crucified: “Today, even hanging here like this, nailed in place between heaven and earth, between bondage and freedom,

between life and death, you are with me already in the sweet creation of God’s own dreams.”

We are together, we in him and he in us, along with all the others crucified through the ages as far as the eye of history and imagination can see, bound up in, with, and under *Immanuel*. In every kind of isolation, when even our songs of rejoicing are stifled lest we breathe death on each other, the Spirit of *Immanuel* intercedes for us, sings for us, groans for us in sighs deeper than words, swaddling us in love, and inspiring in us new ways to see and hold each other close.

We look like bandits—the masked body of Christ risen and on the loose in the world—but all we mean to “steal” is despair that earth and life can never again be truly sweet.

N is for **NEW**, as in “all things new,” yet another promise we come to trust and inhabit thanks to that sweet-swapping *Immanuel*. Even for *Immanuel*, new life comes out of dying. From our brokenness—joined to Christ’s brokenness—comes a whole new way to see our neighbors in their brokenness, cussedness, and desperate self-absorption. Our hearts go out to them all, even to those goats on the wrong side of judgment. We gather them into the wombs of our compassion and nurse them with loving kindness.

N is also for **NOISE**, as in Joyful Noise, the kind that rises from us to the Lord. Most joyful noises are racket made new. The songs that rise these days from both our isolation closets and from the noisy streets full of demonstrators are mostly songs of lament.

The old and frail who haven’t seen a loved one in months cry out, “Remember me, Lord!” We live a nation that has thus far tried only cosmetic responses to the deeply ingrained racism that reigns pretty much everywhere. And we cry out, “We



Rev. Dr. Ed Schroeder
1930–2019



Rev. Dr. Bob Bertram
1921–2003

S is for
SHALOM,
... the peace
that passes all
understanding,
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crucified one.

God Makes a Place for Us

matter, Lord!” Sometimes, like now, a new thing happens, and by the power of the Spirit, lament becomes a joyful noise when folks of every color and tongue join in the streets and sing, “We are all brothers and sisters. Black Lives Matter!”

G is for **GOODNESS**, as in “Goodness and Mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives.” Truth be told, in the original of that beloved psalm, Goodness and Mercy don’t *follow* us. They chase after and pursue us. Indeed, they nip at our heels and bark when we stray. Every good shepherd has sheepdogs, and *Immanuel*’s are Goodness and Mercy. They keep us together, close to the shepherd whom we follow through the valley of the shadow. They’ve been there all our lives, even when we didn’t notice or found their barking a mere annoyance.

In turn, each member of Christ’s body plays the role of Goodness and Mercy. Hence, G is also for **GO**, as in go into all the world and teach the way by living it. Every disciple becomes a sheepdog, Goodness or Mercy, an embodiment of the Hound of Heaven. For all its variations, the barking always means the same thing: “I am with you. Come with me.”

S is for **SHALOM**, as in the peace that passes all understanding, which we have in *Yeshua*, the crucified one, whose name means literally, “YHWH makes a place”—for each of us and for all of us together. We do not, nay dare not, believe that God has willed and wanted us in every ditch and darkness where we have landed. There are accidents. Not everything happens for a reason. But the Sweet Swap means that every place in which we find ourselves becomes, by grace, *Yeshua*’s own place, and thus for us a place of peace, wholeness, and vocation.

S is also for **SEEING**, as in seeing through a glass darkly for now but living in hope of seeing and being seen face to face. “Then” and “there” (and surely “here” and “now”) we will feel *Yeshua*’s breath on us and know the peace he gives. Without worry or masks, we shall breathe on each other. We will unite our hearts and breath together in songs that will invite the mountains to join in, even as the trees clap the rhythm.

As for those whose hearts or minds shut out the company and the singing, Goodness and Mercy will come, and wait, with the infinite patience of the one with arms forever outstretched on the cross.

Co-Executive Director’s Message

Whether you’ve been with us for the last 35 years of newsletters or this is your first reading, we give thanks for your interest and support in our flagship publication. Your involvement in the Crossings community inspires all of us as we proclaim the promise of Christ now and well into the future. Please consider making a financial gift in honor of these 35 years—and the next 35 to come. Your gift now will make it possible for more people in more places to connect the Gospel with their daily lives. Thank you.

— *Candice Wassell, Co-Executive Director*



Rev. Candice Wassell



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Connection

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