Purpose
This is an introductory course in “systems thinking,” a leadership model that recognizes that people, structures, and processes interact within organizational systems to foster organizational health. Wherever your ministry takes you: serving a congregation; working as a hospital chaplain; supervising volunteers in a voter registration drive; even living in an Occupy encampment, knowledge about systems thinking offers you tools to respond appropriately to the needs of the system in which you find yourself.

Our study of congregations and other organizations will be rooted in anti-oppressive understandings of the interconnections of systems and ethnicity, class, gender, age, and disability. Our work will also take us into uncharted territory to explore systems thinking in relation to social media and non-hierarchical organizational systems. This class has been designed to meet Unitarian Universalist fellowship requirements, but all are welcome.

Course objectives
After completing this course, students will be expected to understand
*how individuals, and small or large groups interact within an organization
*the role of power and privilege in a congregation’s or organizations functioning
*how organizational anxieties create and shape leaders’ abilities to effectively lead
*how to use systemic forces to influence change in the direction of health and strength

Book list – books to buy
Most of what we read will be on Moodle. Pedagogically, because I know that people learn differently, I always try to offer a “buffet” of reading resources (some academic, some more popular); youtube and vimeo videos; audio interviews, etc. Do not be anxious about having more reading than you can handle. An effort to combine readings and audio/visual choices will be offered to suit your learning style. Get in touch with me if you have difficulties at any point.

The only paper book that is required is:
Leading Change in the Congregation: Spiritual and Organizational Tools for Leaders, by Gilbert R. Rendle, Alban Institute Publications (this is on the MFC required book list) [I noticed there are used copies online at abebooks.com]

Safe Congregations Handbook: Nurturing Healthy Boundaries in our Faith Communities, Patricia Hoerdoerfer and Fredric Muir, editors. UUA (available in paper and online) – it’s 184 pages so you might want to have it in paper on your bookshelf

Written assignments
Please don’t be anxious about written assignments. I am always available to talk with you on the phone to help you if you are unsure about what/how to write.

During the semester, preparation and discussion of seven brief case studies of problems in the practice of parish or community ministry – either from student’s own observation and/or experience or from conversations with student’s ministerial colleague or current minister.

Each case study will pertain to some aspect of a unit’s topic and will reflect on how systems thinking was or wasn’t used in the particular situation described. The case studies will be
A brief weekly “discussion” entry is asked of you every week – these informal discussion entries will be shared online with classmates, written in reaction to some aspect of that week’s topic that struck you personally or “triggered” something in you. Additionally, it will be expected that each student will respond to at least two other students’ discussion entries online – brevity is fine. Written discussion is the way that we communicate and support each other in online courses.

**Weekly topics**

**Unit 1. Weeks 1 and 2: Introduction to systems thinking, starting with theory**
The introductory section will introduce some of the concepts underlying systems thinking, and will introduce the roles of power and privilege as the cultural framework for our semester’s work. Included in our cultural overview, we will look at Barry Oshry’s (top/middle/bottom) “vertical” model of organizational systems.

Readings and videos for this two-week unit will include excerpted work by:
- Sister Gertrude Foley
- Peggy McIntosh
- Allan Johnson (video interview)
- Derald Wing Sue (audio interview)
- Barry Oshry

**Unit 2. Weeks 3 and 4: Starting at the center and working outward – Bronfenbrenner’s social-ecological model and introduction to Bowen family systems theory (FST)**
Our most important influence in life is our families of origin (sometimes called our “nuclear family.” We are shaped by our early family experiences. Families of origin profoundly affect us as adults; our thoughts, feelings, actions, in the ways we engage in our personal and work relationships. Theorists discovered that congregations function as emotional systems, and that family systems theory has proven invaluable as a tool for clergy and religious leaders to use in managing personal and organizational challenges.

Readings and videos for this two-week unit will include:
- Bronfenbrenner chapter (choose one of two chapters offered, or read both)
- Brief Allan Johnson video (about playing Monopoly)
- Introduction to Bowen Theory (video and/or written chapter)
- Nuclear Family Emotional System (video and/or written chapter)
- Differentiation of Self (video and/or written chapter)
- P. Steinke, video lecture
- G. Rendle, Chapter 3: “Beyond the Trees: Systems Theory as a Way to Look at Your Congregation (pages 49-75)
- R. Richardson, “When Bad Things Happen in Good Churches” (pages 11-40)

**Unit 3. Weeks 5 and 6: Family Systems Theory and Congregational Life**
These next four weeks we are deep in our systems thinking analyses of congregational life and leadership. There are many excellent resources that will enable students to grasp the basics of
systems thinking and its application in relationships and situations that religious leaders are likely to encounter in their work. In the last unit we covered two of Bowen’s basic concepts; this unit we will focus on three additional family systems concepts.

G. Rendle, “Welcome to the Wilderness: The Spiritual Journey of Congregational Change”  
G. Rendle, “Riding the Roller Coaster: The Emotional Cycle of Congregations in Change Triangles (video and/or written chapter)  
Emotional Cutoff (video and/or written chapter)  
Family Projection Process (video and/or written chapter)  
P. Steinke, video lecture  
E. Friedman, “Leadership and Self in a Congregational Family” (pages 220-249)

Unit 4. Weeks 7 and 8: Continuing our Exploration of Family Systems Theory and its Utility in Religious Leadership
Expanding on what we studied in the last two week unit, we will focus on the final three of the eight Bowen’s family systems concepts and will integrate all eight concepts as we look into organizations and systems. As Friedman writes in his prologue to Steinke’s book, using the tools we have looked at these weeks, gives us “… a new way of thinking about human relationships that can help religious leaders understand the waves that are engulfing them and here and there perhaps even turn the tide.” (p. vi).

G. Rendle, “Spinning Wheels Gather No Traction: Congregational Preferences in Change”  
G. Rendle, “A Postscript for the Faith Community: Behavior Appropriate to a Congregation”  
Bowen System Theory: Multigenerational Transmission Process (video and/or written chapter)  
Bowen System Theory: Sibling Position (video and/or written chapter)  
Bowen System Theory: Emotional Process in Society (video and/or written chapter)  
R. Richardson: “What Unbalances the System?” (pages 41-53)

Unit 5. Weeks 9 and 10 Resources for healthy and safe congregations
These two weeks we will study the system in which we, as clergy, function. We will explore resources for our own support, including topics of: self-care; safety; justice making; professional misconduct; clergy sexual abuse policies; mandatory reporting responsibilities; clergy longevity and burnout; communication/miscommunication and strategies; confidentiality responsibilities; Unitarian Universalist Good Offices resources.

Unitarian Universalist Association, Safe Congregations Handbook
K. Simmons Ruth & K.A. McClintock, excerpt from Healthy Disclosure: Solving Communication Quandaries in Congregations (pages 71-147)
F. Lehr, excerpt from Clergy Burnout: Recovering from the 70-Hour Work Week  (pages 10-47)

Unit 6. Weeks 11 and 12 Beyond congregations
There are profound similarities and also profound dissimilarities between religious leadership in a congregational setting and religious leadership/participation in religious and/or secular nonprofit organizations. Whether or not you are firmly committed to congregational service, it will be very useful to have a grasp of community organization systems thinking. Systems thinking is a basic competency of nonprofit leaders. We have spent a lot of time thinking in a congregational framework. These last four weeks will expand our horizons, as we focus on systems thinking outside of church.
Unit 7. Weeks 13 and 14: New systems models – rhizomes and networks

In this final unit, we will venture into new territory. Systems thinking – as it has been taught for many years – has been based on hierarchical organizational design – a small group at the top and a larger number at the bottom. But when we apply this model to what really happens – especially in light of our “network society” – we are discovering that this hierarchical model does not reflect networks and coalitions of people working to bring change. So these concluding weeks of the semester, we will consider the paradigm shift to a “rhizomatic” (network) model of systems thinking. We should always end a semester on a hopeful note, and these two weeks will do just that!

Readings and videos will include materials by:
Starhawk writing about “power-with” in her book Webs of Power
M. Castells writing about changing the world in his book Networks of Outrage and Hope
C. Fuchs, “The Self-organization of Virtual Communities”
M. Lima, an RSA animation video of his lecture “The Power of Networks”
Radio interview of members of Indigenous group “Idle No More”
C. Fuchs, “The Self-Organization of Cyberprotest”