

Starr King School for the Ministry

**PREACH IT!**

Spring 2015 Syllabus

The Rev. Dr. John Buehrens, Instructor

“The true preacher can be known by this, that s/he deals out to the people his [*sic*] life,  
— life passed through the fire of thought.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Divinity School Address*

**Course Instructor:** John Buehrens is Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco. He graduated from Harvard College in 1968, *scl*, with a degree in History and Literature, focused on the Renaissance and Reformation, and from Harvard Divinity School in 1973, *mcl*, with an emphasis on theology and ministerial practice. The recipient of three honorary doctorates, he has been cited as a “scholar, organizer, but above all, pastor,” and has served Unitarian Universalist congregations in Knoxville, TN; Dallas, TX; New York, NY; Needham, MA; and Carmel, CA. From 1993 to 2001 he was the sixth president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. He has taught history, theology, preaching, and the practice of ministry at Harvard Divinity, Andover Newton, and Starr King, where he was a full-time Visiting Professor of Ministry in the fall of 2001. He has spoken in over 600 churches, small and large, and has addressed public gatherings in both small rooms and on the National Mall. He has been an activist on a wide range of social justice causes, most recently as national co-chair of Freedom to Marry and as vice chair of the board of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

**Office Hours:** Appointments should be made by email ([jbuehrens@comcast.net](mailto:jbuehrens@comcast.net)) and are preferred on Thursdays, when Dr. Buehrens will be at the SKSM schoolhouse, or other times at his office in San Francisco.

**Course Objectives:** By the end of this preaching course, participants may expect to:

- +develop, write and deliver one or more full-length sermons, each grounded at least in part in personal experience and authenticity.
- +experiment with *ex tempore* speaking of shorter length
- +identify practices that contribute to conceiving, developing, and writing effective and authentic sermons
- +identify key experiences in the history of their personal conditioning and learning that have shaped and affected their “voice” and/or personal self-expression.
- +locate and describe key bodily sensations that enhance or verify authentic utterance
- +become familiar with some of the leading theoreticians of contemporary preaching.

**Course Format:** The class will meet Thursdays from 9:30 am to 12:30 throughout the Spring 2015 semester, in the Fireside Room. Starting date may be Feb. 12, not 5, and include a meeting during reading week.

## Required Course Texts

*Best Advice for Preaching*, ed. John S. McClure, Augsburg/Fortress (0-8006-2997-3; \$18)  
*Thematic Preaching*, Jane Rzepka & Ken Sawyer, Chalice Press (0-8272-3653; \$28.99)  
*Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process*, ed. Jana Childers, Chalice  
(0-87720-230-X; \$21.59)  
*Exorcising Preaching: Crafting Intellectually Honest Worship*, Nate Walker, Chalice Press  
(978-0-827208-44-5; \$16.57)

### Optional:

*Freeing the Natural Voice*, Kristin Linklater, Drama Publishers (13-978-18549-971-1; \$15.64)  
Additional articles, sermons, or texts may be distributed in class or posted on Moodle.

### Course Requirements:

 Students will be expected to

- +attend class and participate fully in discussions/reflections
- +actively explore their own voice and its self-expression and sources of authenticity
- +keep a personal journal and/or commonplace book
- +offer structured feedback on the preaching of fellow students
- +meet with the instructor for a personal conference twice in the semester
- +deliver at least one extemporaneous homily
- +conceive, write and deliver two or more short, prepared homilies
- +conceive, write and deliver one or more full-length sermons (15-20 minutes)
- +try to preach for SKSM chapel or for a UU congregation in the area

**Attendance Requirements:** Since the course depends heavily on active student participation, only one excused absence is acceptable during the semester course. Further absences from class, or significant instances of late arrival or early departure could jeopardize passing the course and would require a conference with the instructor.

**Educating to Counter Oppression and to promote Sustainable Community:** Authentic expression of one's own experientially-grounded voice, and the encouragement of that in others is inherently counter-oppressive, esp. when integrated with a realistic understanding of audience. Preaching and public address is a central activity/tool of ministry both in parish and community. Speaking authentically must be grounded in both self-awareness and in contextual awareness. Speaking "truth in love" must both challenge structures of oppression and reveal vulnerability.

**Grading Policy:** All grades will be pass/fail unless otherwise requested. Grading of preaching is inherently subjective. As in Olympic diving, there are "degrees of difficulty." The instructor will endeavor to make clear both benchmarks of sermon "success," taking into account differences in context and experiences behind the "authenticity" of each participant, and to urge practical self-assessment. Class participation, timely fulfillment of reading assignments, peer evaluation and appropriate participation in the evaluation of the contributions of fellow students will all be considered in the instructor's narrative evaluation and recommendations for further learning.