

## **DRAFT SYLLABUS**

### **Introduction to Systems Thinking**

**RS 8400-01**

**3 credits**

**Starr King School for the Ministry – Graduate Theological Union**

**Spring 2017**

#### Instructor Information:

Rev. Dr. Devorah Greenstein

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Available by email or skype/phone office hours

#### Meeting Dates and Times:

This is an online course. It is entirely asynchronous.

#### Course Description:

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 or dysfunction. Wherever your ministry takes you: serving a congregation; working as a hospital chaplain; supervising volunteers in a voter registration drive; even living in a protest 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 family systems, congregations, and other organizational systems will all be rooted in anti-oppressive understandings of the interconnections of systems and ethnicity, class, gender, age, and disability. Our work will also be to explore resistance to systems of power and community organizing.

#### This class fits into:

MFC Competence 2: Pastoral Care and Presence

MFC Competence 4: Social Justice in the Public Square

Required textbooks will include three books from the required reading list.

There will also be several chapters from required and “Additional Resource” books. These will be on Moodle and you do not have to buy the books.

#### Course outcomes:

After completing this course, students will be expected to understand

- how individuals, and small or large groups interact within formal and informal organizations
- the role of power and privilege in a congregation’s or organization’s 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

#### Course policies:

As stated in the Starr King School for the Ministry student handbook, two absences are allowed in the 12 week semester. If there are urgent family or other needs that will keep you from participating in any given week, you must email me immediately so we can arrange for make-up work. I am flexible, but I insist on being contacted so that we can negotiate.

### Course assignments:

Generally there is a weekly assigned personal reflection of 300 words (or less) plus responses to two other students' reflections. There is also a brief 300 word academic essay (written in an accepted style). This uses course material plus other resources found online or in other books.

### Grading:

I strongly prefer that you take this course Pass/Fail. If you take the course for a letter grade we will discuss an additional paper for you to write during the semester.

### Required Texts:

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. There will be book chapters (but not entire books) assigned from several of the MFC required books.

Required textbooks from MFC required reading list:

- Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook, *Injustice and the Care of Souls: Taking Oppression Seriously in Pastoral Care*. Fortress Press (2009). \$29.00 on Amazon.
- Peter Steinke. *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* Alban Institute (1996). \$19. Paperback, 9.99 Kindle on Amazon.
- UUA, *Safe Congregations Handbook* (2005). Available online.

Other required text books:

- Roberta Gilbert. *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory: A New Way of Thinking about the Individual and the Group*. Center for the Study of Human Systems. 2006. \$11.88 on Amazon
- Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. First written in the 1970s, there are many editions and many used copies available for a few dollars.
- Saul Alinsky. *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*. First written in the 1970s, there are many editions and many used copies available for a few dollars.

### **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:

Paulo Freire, chapters from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Saul Alinsky, introductory chapter

Sister Gertrude Foley

Peggy McIntosh

Allan Johnson (chapter and 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:

S. Kujawa, chapters from “Injustice and the Care of Souls”

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

P. Steinke chapters from his book.

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 and chapters from his book

E. Friedman, “Leadership and Self in a Congregational Family” (pages 220-249)

Kujawa, chapter from Injustice and the Care of Souls

## **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).

P. Steinke, continuing to watch videos and read selections from his book

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)

Case studies and recent information about clergy sexual abuse

Case studies

### **Unit 6. Weeks 11 and 12 Beyond congregations**

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.

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, social media, resistance and protest movements.

Optional reading offerings, depending on your area of interest.

Confessions of a Nonprofit Founder who had Founder’s Syndrome

Online nonprofit websites and resources

Saul Alinsky, readings from his work

Paulo Freire—applying his theories

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”