

Faith-Rooted Organizing for Social Change

RSFT-8405

3 Units

Starr King School for the Ministry / Graduate Theological Union
Spring 2021

Instructor: Betty Jeanne Rueters-Ward, MASC

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Availability: My office hours vary, as I aim to accommodate students' diverse schedules. Please don't hesitate to reach out to request a meeting, and indicate available days/times including time zone.

Course Description

This foundational course – applicable to all vocational paths, from community organizing to parish ministry to non-profit leadership to theological scholarship – explores tools, best practices, and multi-religious theologies for faith-rooted organizing for change. Paying close attention to the intersections of social issues, identities, and religious traditions, participants will draw lessons from a diversity of historical and contemporary movements, ranging from Black Lives Matter to climate justice. Merging the pastoral with the practical, students will learn to articulate their unique faith-rooted organizing style and strategize on how to take concrete, spiritually grounded action in their own congregations and communities.

Inspired by the pedagogy of Starr King School for the Ministry, this course will:

- Invite students to bring their full, authentic selves to the learning community.
- Draw knowledge from both academic sources and lived personal experience.
- Embody an ongoing practice combining inquiry, study, action and reflection.
- Permeate the walls of the academy and build a global learning community.
- Center the unique learning goals and needs of each student.
- Further Starr King's commitment to countering oppressions, creating just and sustainable communities, and fostering multi-religious life and learning.

Learning Objectives

During this course, students will:

- Identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities re: faith-rooted organizing
- Draw on diverse perspectives and case studies for insight and inspiration
- Reflect on emotional and spiritual aspects of working for social change
- Provide and receive peer/collegial support for mutual leadership development

Learning Outcomes

In completing of this course, students will:

- Understand core concepts of community organizing and movement building
- Gain practical strategies and tools to address common organizing challenges
- Articulate their personal theology for and approach to faith-rooted organizing
- Research, create, and present learning resources on topics of personal interest
- Engage in ongoing, immersion learning via a praxis (action/reflection) project

Course Policies

This course relies on the thoughtful and consistent engagement of each participant. All are expected to participate actively and promptly in discussions, activities, reading and written assignments. Students are leaders and co-creators of this graduate-level learning experience, generating conversation and learning materials for each other, and proactively building a culture of peer support. In the case of missing or late assignments or inconsistent participation, students must notify the instructors as soon as possible, and work out a plan for completion.

Course Assignments

Each week,

- Review announcements and instructions for the week.
- Complete reading, interactive activities, and other assignments.
- Post (written, or via video) in an asynchronous online discussion.
- Respond substantively to at least two peers in the discussion.
- Engage in praxis (action/reflection component).

During the first weeks,

- One-on-one consultation with instructor re: learning goals and interests.

At the mid-semester point,

- Submit an update on your praxis project.
- Complete a self-evaluation of your participation, and an evaluation of the course.

During the final weeks,

- Summarize key lessons from your praxis experience.
- Lead presentation for classmates.
- Engage classmates' presentations through discussion and/or other activities.
- Submit a personal statement paper on faith-rooted organizing.
- Complete self-evaluation of your participation, and an evaluation of the course.

Once or twice during the course,

- Facilitate an engaging discussion in the week's forum.

Detailed instructions will be available in supplementary documents for the following:

Praxis Project: Execute a praxis (action/reflection) project engaging directly in faith-rooted organizing and drawing insights from experiences.

Presentation: Develop a multimedia presentation that brings course topics of interest to them to life for peers/colleagues.

Paper: Craft a personal philosophy/theology for your long-term spiritual leadership committed to faith-rooted organizing for social change.

Grading and Evaluation

Regular, active class participation constitutes most of the grading rubric. Also required are three additional items of equal weight: the praxis project, presentation, and personal statement paper. Components are designed to enrich the online experience, and equip students with hands-on experiences, theological reflection, and collaborative ethos to build and sustain social change.

Your final grade +/- or evaluation will be determined by the following components:

Class Participation - 40%

Praxis Project - 20%

Presentation - 20%

Paper - 20%

Required Texts

“Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World”

by Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, Peter Heltzel

ISBN-10: 0 0830836616, ISBN-13: 978-0830836611, current cost on Amazon: \$14.20

With so many injustices, small and great, across the world and right at our doorstep, what are people of faith to do? Since the 1930s, organizing movements for social justice in the U.S. have largely been built on assumptions that are secular origin—such as reliance on self-interest and having a common enemy as a motivator for change. Alexia Salvatierra has developed a model of social action that is rooted in the values and convictions born of faith. Together with theologian Peter Heltzel, this model of “faith-rooted organizing” offers a path to meaningful social change that takes seriously the command to love God and to love our neighbor as ourself.

“American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country” by Jack Jenkins

ISBN: 9780062935984, current cost on Amazon: \$17.99

Since the ascendancy of the Religious Right in the 1970s, common wisdom holds that it is a coalition of fundamentalist powerbrokers who are the “moral majority,” setting the standard for conservative Christian values and working to preserve the status quo.

But, as national religion reporter Jack Jenkins contends, the country is also driven by a vibrant, long-standing moral force from the left. Constituting an amorphous group of interfaith activists that goes by many names and takes many forms, this coalition has operated since America's founding — praying, protesting, and marching for common goals that have moved society forward. Throughout our history, the Religious Left has embodied and championed the progressive values at the heart of American democracy—abolition, labor reform, civil rights, environmental preservation.

Drawing on his years of reporting, Jenkins examines the re-emergence of progressive faith-based activism, detailing its origins and contrasting its goals with those of the Religious Right. Today's rapidly expanding interfaith coalition—which includes Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and other faiths—has become a force within the larger “resistance” movement. Jenkins profiles Washington political insiders—including former White House staffers and faith outreach directors for the campaigns of Barack Obama, John Kerry, and Hillary Clinton—as well as a new generation of progressive faith leaders at the forefront today.

In addition to these texts, the course will incorporate other materials (readings, videos, online resources, etc.) including those generated or suggested by students.

Suggested (Optional) Texts

“The Impossible Will Take a Little While: Perseverance and Hope in Troubled Times”
edited by Paul Loeb

What keeps us going when times get tough? How have the leaders and unsung heroes of world-changing political movements persevered in the face of cynicism, fear, and seemingly overwhelming odds? In *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, they answer these questions in their own words, creating a conversation among some of the most visionary and eloquent voices of our times. Paul Rogat Loeb has comprehensively updated this classic work on what it's like to go up against Goliath—whether South African apartheid, Mississippi segregation, Middle East dictatorships, or the corporations driving global climate change. Without sugarcoating the obstacles, these stories inspire the hope to keep moving forward.

“Revive Us Again: Vision and Action in Moral Organizing”
by Rev. William J. Barber II

The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II has been called “the closest person we have to Martin Luther King Jr. in our midst” (Cornel West) and “one of the most gifted organizers and orators in the country today” (Ari Berman). In this age of political division and civic unrest, Rev. Barber's message is more necessary than ever. This volume features Rev. Barber's most stirring sermons and speeches, with response essays by prominent public intellectuals, activists, and faith leaders. Drawing from the history of social movements in the US, especially the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King

Jr.'s Poor People's Campaign, Rev. Barber and the contributors to this volume speak to the most pressing issues of our time, including Black Lives Matter, the fight for a \$15 minimum wage, the struggle to protect voting rights, the march for women's rights, and the movement to overcome poverty and unite the dispossessed across all dividing lines. Grounded in the fundamental biblical theme of poor and oppressed people taking action together, the book suggests ways to effectively build a fusion movement to make America fair and just for everyone.

"Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing, 2nd Edition"
by Dennis A. Jacobsen

Illustrated with examples from the experience of community organizers, *Doing Justice* weaves theological and biblical warrants for community organizing into concrete strategies for achieving justice in the public arena. It offers sound treatment of fundamental organizing principles like power, self-interest, and agitation and suggests ways to build and sustain an organization, relate to media and corporations, and strengthen ministries and empower lay leaders.

The second edition includes forewords by veteran pastor-activists Bill Wylie Kellermann and Grant Stevensen and a new preface that notes recent changes in organizing, describes needed new directions and connections, and discusses the significance of new movements such as Black Lives Matter. Also new is Stevensen's running "conversation" with Jacobsen, drawing readers into deeper engagement with organizing practices.

Designed for use by congregations and church leaders as well as by ministerial students, *Doing Justice* will open new vistas for community action in support of the poor, the disadvantaged, and the disenfranchised of our society.

"Prophetic Activism: Progressive Religious Justice Movements in Contemporary America (Religion and Social Transformation)" by Helene Slessarev-Jamir

While the links between conservative Christians and politics have been drawn strongly in recent years, coming to embody what many think of as religious activism, the profoundly religious nature of community organizing and other more left-leaning justice work has been largely overlooked. Prophetic Activism is the first broad comparative examination of progressive religious activism in the United States. Set up as a counter-narrative to religious conservatism, the book offers readers a deeper understanding of the richness and diversity of contemporary religious activism. Helene Slessarev-Jamir offers five case studies of major progressive religious justice movements that have their roots in liberative interpretations of Scripture: congregational community organizing; worker justice; immigrant rights work; peace-making and reconciliation; and global anti-poverty and debt relief. Drawing on intensive interviews with activists at all levels of this work from pastors and congregational leaders to local organizers and the executive directors of the national networks she uncovers the ways in which they construct an ethical framework for their work. In addition to looking at predominantly Christian

organizations, the book also highlights the growth of progressive activism among Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists who are engaged in reinterpreting their religious texts to support new forms of activism.

Course Schedule

Weeks One and Two:

- Welcome, Introductions, and Orientation
- Exploring Key Concepts

Week Three:

Readings from “Faith-Rooted Organizing”:

- Introduction
- The Roots of Faith-Rooted Organizing
- Dreaming God’s Dreams Together: Goals of Faith-Rooted Organizing

Week Four:

Readings from “Faith-Rooted Organizing”:

- Our Starting Place, the Call of the Poor
- Discerning the Kairos
- Questions of Power and Hope

Week Five:

Readings from “Faith-Rooted Organizing”:

- The Gift of Christ-Centered Community
- Individual Gifts: Chaplaincy to the Poor and the Powerful
- Prophetic Advocacy and Public Witness

Week Six:

Readings from “Faith-Rooted Organizing”:

- Recruitment: God’s Pitchfork
- Developing the Body of Christ
- Prophetic Spirituality: Sustaining the Struggle

Week Seven:

Readings from “American Prophets”:

- Introduction
- Faith in Public Life
- The Personal is Political – and Spiritual
- When God Chooses a Leader

Week Eight:

Readings from “American Prophets”:

- Revolutionary Love
- Keepers of the Story
- Welcoming the Stranger

Week Nine:

Readings from "American Prophets":

- Creation Care
- Prophets over Profits
- The Hard Work of Transformation

Week Ten:

Readings from "American Prophets":

- Troubled Waters
- The New God Gap
- The Future of Faith
- Epilogue

Weeks Eleven to Thirteen:

- Student Presentations

Week Fourteen:

- Closing & Celebration

Each week will include supplementary content, including selections from of:

Onleilove Alston
Lisa Anderson
Pancho Argüelles
Auburn Seminary
Rabbi Justus Baird
Rev. Darcy Baxter
Dave Beckwith
adrienne maree brown
Chris Crass
Gabriel Foster
Lena Gardner
Malachi Garza
Reina Gossett
Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt
Building Movement Project
Center for Community Change

Miss Major Griffin-Gracy
Valarie Kaur
Dove Kent
Jin S. Kim
Cristina Lopez
Rodney McKenzie
Movement Strategy Center
Rev. Jennifer Nordstrom
Isa Noyola
Barack Obama
Francisca Porchas Coronado
Jihad Safir
Rev. Osagyefo Sekou
The Shalom Center
Julian Sharp
Rev. Amanda Weatherspoo

About the Instructor

Betty Jeanne Rütters-Ward serves as Assistant Professor for Transformative Leadership at Starr King School for the Ministry, where she has taught and mentored Graduate Theological Union students and spiritual leaders around the world since 2007. Her courses examine leadership, community organizing, education, social change theory and practice, ministry, and more. Betty Jeanne's teaching approach is distinguished by:

- Linking theory, reflection and action – within and beyond the classroom
- Curricula that respond to students' unique passions, interests and goals
- Multi-faceted, interactive online courses that bring virtual learning to life
- Holistic academic advising, vocational counseling, and personal coaching

Betty Jeanne is a social change practitioner whose work has included ministry, community organizing, writing, public speaking, teaching and training, coaching, organizational and campaign management. She holds a Master of Arts in Social Change, combined with over ten years of leadership in the non-profit, educational, religious, philanthropic, and socially responsible business sectors. Betty Jeanne drives social change through capacity building and by developing effective, sustainable leaders of all ages, with the goal of activating people, organizations and communities in pursuit of the common good.

Betty Jeanne's passion for social change is fueled by her experiences in spiritual communities. She supports people – of any or no religious affiliations – to develop as leaders, make meaning of their lives, build community, reflect on and enact their values. Betty Jeanne has supported thousands of leaders in achieving success, maintaining balance and developing emotional resiliency amid the often fast-paced, high-stakes, stressful environments in which social change efforts happen. On a larger scale, Betty Jeanne has built religious-secular coalitions for civil and human rights, universal healthcare, youth empowerment, and racial justice.

Betty Jeanne has shared reflections in venues ranging from the United States Social Forum to the United Nations. She has published on "Rethinking Work Culture and Self Care in the Nonprofit Sector", "Personal Sustainability in Social Movements", and "Constructive Theologies for Mental and Spiritual Health", exploring the successes and struggles of social change leaders and strategies for long-term success.

More about Betty Jeanne can be found at www.linkedin.com/in/bruetersward or www.sksm.edu/2015/04/17/i-am-starr-king-interview-with-betty-jeanne-rueters-ward.