

Systems Thinking for Religious Leaders

Instructor: Helen Bishop, Ed.D.

This course is designed to promote understanding among religious leaders of how organizations operate on the systems level. "Systems thinking" is a methodology linking understandings of how individuals, small and large groups of people interact with the structure, policies, practices, and culture of an organization. Participants will read materials on various aspects of organizational life, examine the ways in which components interact, discuss emotional and family systems theories and their implications for congregational systems, use systems analysis and thinking to investigate congregational leadership, analyze case studies for evidence of organizational frames, and prepare a case study demonstrating systems thinking. References and examples of working to counter oppressions systemically are foundational to this course.

Student expectations

The course will be offered on-line. With the goal of creating a learning community, students will share biographical information and learning goals they create for themselves. They are required to log in periodically throughout the week to post assignments, review materials posted by other students, and participate actively in an ongoing discussion of course materials. If they wish to do so, students can contact the instructor to get approval for questions they design, rather than using questions posted by the instructor. Students are required to engage with the course materials, the instructor and each other. Course materials will include opportunities for engagement with issues of fairness, equity and justice in areas where people experience oppression in this culture, to prepare students for work to create just communities to counter oppression.

Students have options for their final projects. They can write and post final papers consisting of case studies of congregations or nonprofit organizations in which they use systems thinking to analyze an issue facing the organization/congregation, or use artistic media such as photography, calligraphy, collage, music, lyrics, or any other medium that lends itself to digital posting, to illustrate systems thinking.

Book list

Please note that all titles with the exception of Helen Bishop's monograph are available through the Unitarian Universalist Association bookstore, www.amazon.com, or other on-line booksellers such as Powells, Borders, and Barnes & Noble. The monograph can be ordered from Shannon Hawkins, the Liberal Religious Educators Association administrator, for a cost of \$10 plus postage. Contact Shannon using her email address, ShannonLREDA@satx.rr.com, or at PO Box 691254, San Antonio TX 78269.

Bishop, Helen (2001). "Professional Matters." A monograph available from the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA).

Blackwell, Angela Glover, Stewart Kwoh, and Manuel Pastor (2002).

Searching for the Uncommon Ground: New Dimensions on Race in America. New York: W.W. Norton. ISBN 0-393-32351-X,

Heifetz, Ronald (1994). Leadership Without Easy Answers. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. ISBN 0-674-51858-6.

Lareau, Annette (2003). Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. ISBN 0-520-23763-3.

Oshry, Barry (1999). Leading Systems. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. ISBN 1-57675-072-8.

Oshry, Barry (1996). Seeing Systems. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. ISBN 1-881052-99-0.

Senge, Peter (1990). The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. New York: Doubleday. ISBN 0-385-26095-4.

Steinke, Peter (2006). Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. ISBN 1-56699-328-8.

Steinke, Peter (1996). Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach. Washington, DC: Alban Institute.

Weekly topics and assignments

Week 1 - Introduction to systems thinking

Bishop, Helen (2001). *Professional Matters.* " A monograph available through The Liberal Religious Educators Association (Shannon Hawkins, LREDA Administrator, ShannonLREDA@satx.rr.com, \$10 plus

postage)

Oshry, Barry (1996). *Seeing Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
1 - 52.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*.
Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 1 - 22.

Students will begin to acquire systems thinking through two avenues: emotional/family systems theory and organizational systems theory. They will also post short bios and digital photos of themselves, and share their learning goals for this course.

Week 2- Systems thinking and healthy congregations

Oshry, Barry (1996). *Seeing Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
53 - 130.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 1 - 56.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*.
Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 23 - 37.

Students this week will examine the attributes of what Peter Steinke calls a "healthy congregation," and will construct and share genograms of the congregations or organizations on which they've decided to focus.

Week 3 - Systems diagrams

Oshry, Barry (1996). *Seeing Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
131 - 174.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 57 - 92.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*.
Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 38 - 53.

Students will learn how to read a systems diagram, and assess the focus of congregations or organizations. They will assess key points of organizational access, as well as areas of support and resistance for change.

Week 4 - The role of power in moving toward differentiation in relationship

Oshry, Barry (1996). *Seeing Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 175 - 204.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 139 - 173.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 54 - 77.

Students will learn how anxiety can move people back into their reptilian brains, make decisions about personal mastery, and assess the role power can play in moving individuals and organizations toward differentiation in relationship.

Week 5 - Systems thinking and mental models

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems: Lessons from the Power Lab*. San Diego: Berrett-Koehler. 1 - 53.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 174 - 204.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 78 - 100.

Students will analyze the mental models they use to make assessments and decisions about common organizational situations. They will analyze a case study to explore ways in which people who focus on differentiation can influence an organization in the direction of health.

Week 6 - Shared vision and organizational health

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems: Lessons from the Power Lab*. San Diego: Berrett-Koehler. 56 - 108.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 205 - 232.

Steinke, Peter (1996). *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 101 - 109.

Students will analyze the genograms they prepared earlier in the course to find examples of systemic forces that influence a congregation or

organization in the direction of health and strength. They will find examples from their own congregations or organizations of shared vision, and describe ways of using systems thinking from inside and outside an organization.

Week 7 - Using NAPS and LAPS to create robust human systems

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 109 - 142.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 233 - 269.

Steinke, Peter (2006). *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 1 - 46.

Students will analyze a case study for examples of "non-anxious presence" or "less-anxious presence," taking a NAP or a LAP. They will describe how teams in their own congregations or organizations demonstrate team learning, and create a description of a robust human system.

Reading week

Students may wish to catch up on reading and assignments, or work on their final papers.

Week 8 - Influencing robust human systems

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 143 - 158.

Senge, Peter (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday. 339 - 360.

Steinke, Peter (2006). *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 47 - 96.

Students will describe examples of leaders in their congregations or organizations who use systems thinking to influence people inside and outside the organization.

Week 9 - "I" and "Us"

Oshry, Barry (1999). *Leading Systems*. San Diego, CA: Berrett-Koehler. 159 - 189.

Steinke, Peter (2006). *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 97 - 118.

Students will examine the role of the "Other" in systems work, and describe changes in behavior patterns that facilitate systemic change with regard to "differences." They will select and analyze an identity in terms of personal and cultural history and change.

Week 10 - Rocking the boat

Steinke, Peter (2006). *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What*. Washington, DC: Alban Institute. 119 - 175.

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated

Students will analyze a case study for examples of how leaders use systems thinking to challenge an existing system that needs to change adaptively. They will begin to explore the system of an associational network.

Week 11 - Values and systems thinking

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated

Heifetz, Ronald A. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1 - 66.

Lareau, Annette (2003). (2003). *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1-160.

Students will describe the values they prioritize highly in relation to the systems within which they function, and will analyze how those values are made manifest in those systems. They will analyze ways in which issues such

as class are transmitted to children and youth, and discuss implications for work to counter oppression around the issue of class.

Week 12 - Systems thinking and adaptive work

Blackwell, Angela Glover, Stewart Kwoh, and Manuel Pastor (2002).

Searching for the Uncommon Ground: New Dimensions on Race in America. New York: W.W. Norton. 1-142.

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated

Heifetz, Ronald A. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 67 - 180.

Students will use the concept of "adaptive work" to describe ways in which leaders can influence systems to change in response to changes in their environments. Students will also analyze the complexities of the issue of race in the United States at the beginning of the 21st century, from the perspective of religious leaders who believe their faith communities must work effectively in their communities to counter systemic racism.

Week 13 - Systems thinking and the role of authority

Blackwell, Angela Glover, Stewart Kwoh, and Manuel Pastor (2002).

Searching for the Uncommon Ground: New Dimensions on Race in America. New York: W.W. Norton. 143 - 217.

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated

Heifetz, Ronald A. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 181 - 232.

Students will describe ways in which they can use systems thinking to influence a system to change, whether or not they are in a position of authority. They will demonstrate systems thinking skills in relation to the development of leadership strategies for faith communities to engage effectively to counter racism in their own cultures.

Week 14 - Systems thinking and personal challenges

Current directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, or of a nonprofit organization with which you are associated
Heifetz, Ronald A. (1994). *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 233 - 276.

Students will use systems thinking to describe situations in which personal challenges must be met for the system to thrive.