

2010

Curriculum Modules for Integrating Faith and Spirituality in Social Work Education

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Recommended Citation

Sherr, Michael E.; Harr, Cynthia; and Stoltzfus, Ken, "Curriculum Modules for Integrating Faith and Spirituality in Social Work Education" (2010). *Social Work Faculty Publications*. 27.

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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

**CURRICULUM MODULE OR INTEGRATING FAITH AND
SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

Si Kahn and Nehemiah

**By: Michael E. Sherr, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., Cynthia Harr, Ph.D., and Ken
Stoltzfus, Ph.D.**

Primary course: Practice with Communities and Organizations or Macro Practice

Secondary course(s): Human Behavior in the Social Environment; Social Work
Leadership; Social Policy

CURRICULUM MODULE ON SI KAHN AND NEHEMIAH

I. Core Competency Addressed:

Education Policy 2.1.10 (a) – (d) —Engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.

Professional practice involves the dynamic and interactive processes of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation at multiple levels. Social workers have the knowledge and skills to practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Practice knowledge includes identifying, analyzing, and implementing evidence-based interventions designed to achieve client goals; using research and technological advances; evaluating program outcomes and practice effectiveness; developing, analyzing, advocating, and providing leadership for policies and services; and promoting social and economic justice.

Educational Policy 2.1.10(a)—Engagement

Social workers substantively and affectively prepare for action with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities;

- use empathy and other interpersonal skills; and
- develop a mutually agreed-on focus of work and desired outcomes.

Educational Policy 2.1.10(b)—Assessment

Social workers

- collect, organize, and interpret client data;
- assess client strengths and limitations;
- develop mutually agreed-on intervention goals and objectives; and
- select appropriate intervention strategies.

Educational Policy 2.1.10(c)—Intervention

Social workers

- initiate actions to achieve organizational goals;
- implement prevention interventions that enhance client capacities;
- help clients resolve problems;
- negotiate, mediate, and advocate for clients; and
- facilitate transitions and endings.

Educational Policy 2.1.10(d)—Evaluation

Social workers critically analyze, monitor, and evaluate interventions.

II. Specific Practice Behaviors Related to the Module:

1. Students will have knowledge of the micro, mezzo, and macro skills used in community practice. Skills include:
 - Micro—Use of verbal and nonverbal behavior, warmth, empathy, genuineness skills, assertiveness and empowerment skills, understanding and working with supervisors, and the use of conflict
 - Mezzo—Networking skills, leading and working with committees, and facilitating meetings
 - Macro—program development, community organizing, fundraising, budgeting, developing policies and procedures, assessment, evaluation, and leadership

2. Students will contemplate the role of faith in Nehemiah's approach to community organizing. Students will also contemplate how their religious beliefs influence their approach to community organizing.
3. Students will critically assess and articulate Si Kahn's and Nehemiah's approach to community organizing;
4. Students will understand the role of power as well as the potentially "violent nature" of community practice when advocating for social and economic justice.

III. Materials Needed and/or Assigned Readings:

Kahn, S. (1994). *How people get power*. (rev. ed.). Washington, DC: NASW Press.

Kirst-Ashman, K. K., & Hull, G. H. (2006). *Generalist Practice with Organizations and Communities* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.

O'Connor, M. K. & Netting, F. E. (2007). Emergent program planning as competent practice: The importance of considering context. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 18 (2), 57-75

Sherr, M. E. (2008). *Social work with volunteers: Developing context-specific optimal partnerships*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Press.

Singletary, J.E. (2009). The emergent journey of church-based program planning. *Social Work and Christianity*, 36(2), 192-216.

The book of Nehemiah from the Old Testament.

IV. Description of the Module:

The module includes three elements—assigned reading, a brief paper, and class discussion.

Assigned Reading

I assign the readings about four weeks into the course. At that point, students have a basic overview and understanding of a few community/program planning models for community organizing. Students then have a month to read both assigned readings. I also remind students to spend time each week reading. When I assign the readings, I encourage them to think of social work as one of many lenses through which the book of Nehemiah and the rest of the Bible may be read. I also ask them to keep one question at the forefront of their minds, "How are Kahn's and Nehemiah's approaches to community organizing similar and/or different?"

Paper

Eight weeks into the course, students turn in a 6-8 page Si Kahn/Nehemiah paper. Students write the paper using four sub-headings: 1) What I learned about community practice from Kahn; 2) What I learned about community practice from Nehemiah; 3) Similarities and/or differences in their approaches to community practice; and 4) Thoughts and/or questions I have about synthesizing what I learned from the assignment

into how I will approach social work practice with communities. I use the following rubric to evaluate the papers:

- 20% for the depth and application of course material in sections 1 and 2;
- 70% for evaluation of similarities and/or differences in section 3 and thoughts and questions raised in section 4; and
- 10% for writing mechanics.

I post the due date for the papers a week before discussing the readings in class. I also ask students to bring copies of their papers to class the following week for our discussion. I read and grade the papers so I have them ready to return to students after the discussion.

Class Discussion

I schedule the “Si Kahn meets Nehemiah” discussion the ninth week of the semester. At that point in the semester, students have learned the components of three approaches to community organizing—IMAGINE from Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2006); CSOP from Sherr (2008); and emergent planning (O’Connor & Netting, 2007; Singletary 2009). Students have also applied one of the three approaches in a large group project they have been working on since the beginning of the semester.

The subheadings from the paper serve as the guide to class discussion. Most of my experience teaching practice with communities and organizations is teaching the course as a three-hour course that meets once per week. I participate in the discussion as the facilitator, offering minimal personal thoughts and/or reflections until later in the class session. I usually begin the discussion by asking students to share, in their own words, what they learned from each reading. As students share, I look for opportunities to highlight things mentioned that are relevant to other material learned throughout the semester. Students often highlight relevant themes from the assignment with other materials in class as well. Next, I guide the discussion to focus on the similarities and differences. This segment of the discussion often divides students into natural sub-groups—some students see mostly similarities, some see mostly differences, and still others see a mix of both. Toward the end of class, I provide my own brief commentary/review (see appendix) of Nehemiah’s relevance to social work practice with communities. I use the last few minutes of the class to give students an opportunity to share what they learned from the assignment. I also give students the opportunity to take another week and revise their papers to incorporate any new insights they learned from the discussion. The class discussion usually takes the entire three hours divided into the following segments:

1. 50 minutes discussing what students learned from each reading;
2. 55 minutes discussing/debating similarities and differences;
3. 15 minutes for a break;
4. 30 minutes discussing and reviewing my own brief commentary/review; and
5. 30 minutes for students to share what they learned from the assignment and offer them the opportunity to revise and resubmit their papers the following week.

V. Additional Class Activities and Assignments:

Dr. Cynthia Harr, a colleague that adapted the module for her sections of social work practice with communities and organizations, provides a different outline for the paper and class discussion. Her outline for the paper and class discussion is as follows:

Theological Reflection and Application Outline

Based on the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament and text, *How People Get Power* by Si Kahn:

I. Discuss Nehemiah's motivation to act on behalf of an oppressed population and his preparation for the leadership role of community organizer and governor (Nehemiah Chapter 1-2:9). Relate to *How People Get Power*, Chapter 1.

II. Beginning the Task: Describe Nehemiah's initial steps in bringing about community restoration (Nehemiah Chapter 2:10-18 and Chapter 3). Relate to *How People Get Power*, Chapters 1-7.

III. Describe the challenges and opposition encountered by Nehemiah from local and neighboring authorities. How did he progress amid the threats and what were the defense measures he employed (Nehemiah, Chapter 2:10, 19-20 and Chapters 4,6)? Relate to *How People Get Power*, Chapters 8-10.

IV. Discuss the challenges of discord Nehemiah faced from within the Jewish community. How did Nehemiah address these issues (Nehemiah, Chapter 5)?

VI. Restoration of Jerusalem: After the completion of the wall, what measures did Nehemiah take to organize the ongoing city government and surrounding areas (Nehemiah, Chapters 7-13) ? Relate to *How People Get Power*, Chapters 9-11.

VII. Describe the leadership characteristics of Nehemiah and relate to leadership Skills presented in *How People Get Power*.

Appendix A.

My Own Brief Commentary/Review of Nehemiah that I Share with Students.

(Note: this material is not intended to be an exhaustive list of relevant lessons)

Relevant lessons from Nehemiah for Community/organizational social work practice

Chapter 1

- a. The issue that caused him to risk was personal. The well-being of the Jewish remnant and the wall were personal. He did not jump to advocacy and action for every single issue.
- b. He always turns to God in prayer BEFORE he acted. The prayer was also not about his despair, but of a servant wanting to revere His name.
- c. He developed credibility with the King serving faithfully day-after-day.
- d. He took a deliberate risk and used his body language to tell the king something was wrong. He was genuine, He was purposeful. Although it was a risk, he developed enough trust with the king over the years to take the risk. He developed a one-on-one personal relationship with the king as his master and then used that network relationship. In fact, Nehemiah risked his life by using his nonverbal body language to communicate distress and sorrow in front of the king.
- e. Once the king was open to him, he was ready to deliver his request in a concise manner. He told the king exactly what he needed, and as the king offered help, he asked for more. There was obviously some pre-preparation.
- f. There was opposition from the beginning. Opposition against someone coming to promote the welfare of the Israelites. Also, just general disbelief in the ability to complete the task.

Chapter 2

- g. He first did an assessment of the community. He arrived in Jerusalem very quietly. Then he looked at the entire wall and community before acting.
- h. He has a meeting and explains the issue to the people. Provided an informed account—communicated power via his passion, self-sacrifice, information, and authority. This meeting was the time for him to be persuasive.
- i. Opposition became more explicit and Nehemiah was ready to neutralize it with his response at the end of the chapter.
- j. But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?"

they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it" (Nehemiah 2:19-20).

Chapter 3

- k. He uses the entire community and delegates the work—indirect social work practice (macro practice). He didn't do the work himself. Changing community requires a large group of people.

Chapter 4

- l. The mounting opposition, the ridicule, pointing out the irrationality of what they were trying to do.
- m. Nehemiah deals with opposition—prayer, strong and wise defensive/contingent preparation.
- n. The long haul of macro practice.

Chapter 5

- o. He turns his attention to the poor—in connection to the Wall. After building a coalition of a community working together, he uses that relationship to make a connection to how they treat each other as it is connected to the work and the community. See Nehemiah 5.
- p. He did not use his positions and achievements for his own gain. As governor he did not burden the people. In fact, he was most generous as a leader eating with 150 Jews and officials—probably more because of their families. He only sought God's favor as evident in verse 19. "Remember me with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people.

Chapter 6

- q. He deals with opposition and fear. As they build the wall, they do so with their lives in danger at every turn. Community practice, making changes, advocating for justice, for the poor, is a violent business. People don't willingly accept change, there is always opposition. Nehemiah dealt with it in prayer, but was also ready for action. He had people carry weapons as they worked. He had to be wise and discerning in neutralizing opponents the even seemed, at the surface, to want to help him. Nehemiah 6: 1-14.
- r. He had a handle on the limits of his authority and relationship with God. He knew that he was not allowed to enter the temple.

Chapter 7

- s. People get settled.
- t. He adjusts his goals and objectives from the building of the wall to reforming the people—On-going assessment important to social work practice. Also easier to build structures than it is to change/empower people. Having a concrete task in community social work practice is helpful in uniting a group of people together. But after the task, how people live also needs to be addressed. Often more difficult.

Chapter 8

- u. Ezra reads the law and they celebrate—a ritual to reinforce beliefs and sense of cohesion.

Chapter 9 & 10

- v. Israelites Confess their Sins—Empathy with accountability
- w. They enter into a contract a “binding agreement”

Chapter 11 & 12

- x. Residents, Priests, and Levites move back to Jerusalem.
- y. Dedicate the wall

Chapter 13

Nehemiah does not remain, but turns over leadership to the community. From day one, he never planned to stay. He never sought personal credit or gain; he did not want the community, the “clients” dependent on him. He also upheld his contract with his King, his master. Important lessons for social work termination, motivation for advocacy, etc... Who will take the glory? What is our motivation as advocates?

- z. He asks permission from king Artaxerxes and follows-up, was again upset at what he saw and tried to make final reforms all the while praying to God. Follow-up is important for social work practice.
- aa. Key verse chapter 13: verse 14 “Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.”

As social workers advocating for social justice and well-being of people/communities, we often find the results do not turn out as planned. There are often too many unknown variables. BUT does this mean that our work was useless, or not effective? How do we measure our effectiveness as social workers? In the end, this verse reminds us that the process of following and being faithful to our vocations (in this case as social workers) is the grounds for our usefulness. However, we often have little control over the results.

Appendix B

Grounding Community Practice in the Biblical Narrative of God's Work In and Through Communities

The information contained in this section may be useful as part of an introduction to the Si Kahn and Nehemiah unit or as an in-class devotional. In either case, this material may assist instructors to present modern community practice as an opportunity for social workers to participate in the ongoing story of God's work in and through communities.

A. Importance of Community to the Biblical Faith Story

1. The revelation of God as 3-in-1 (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) whose very existence embodies relationship
2. Israel as a community
 - a. Israel similar in some respects to other near-eastern people groups-served to protect its own geo-political interests
 - b. Israel also different from other ancient near-eastern religions/cultures in that it was to be a "light to the nations" (see Isaiah 42:6)
3. Although Israel's unfaithfulness led to its subjugation, Nehemiah serves as a reminder of God's commitment to Israel as both a community which exists for its own sake and a community which exists for the sake of the rest of the world
4. The story of Nehemiah also points out the importance of the physical spaces which communities occupy. Such spaces offer communities protection and places in which to enact community rituals (such as worship). This point regarding the importance of physical space can be linked to the Ecological Perspective, which emphasizes the importance of connections between people and their environments (Gitterman, 1996).
5. The importance of community is affirmed by the rest of the biblical narrative. For example, the New Testament church may be understood as a new polis (community) which follows Christ together (Yoder, 1972).
5. Christian eschatology gives us a picture of Christ's kingdom as a city/community: the new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2)
6. Christians in social work have an opportunity to participate in the story of God's work in and through communities by:
 - a. Working in and through communities themselves
 - b. Assisting the communities they work with to look a bit like the coming kingdom by promoting justice, equitable distribution of resources, etc.

References

- Gitterman, A. (1996). Advances in the life model of social work practice. In F.J. Turner (ed.), *Social work treatment: interlocking theoretical approaches*. (pp.389-408). New York: The Free Press.
- Yoder, J.H. (1972). *The politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Co.