



ELCA Natural Systems Academy

When Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton was elected in 2013, the ELCA faced challenges of budget, staff, and ministry constraints. Changes in society and the church were occurring at a rapid pace and impacting congregations and synods across the ELCA. As part of her effort to address these challenges, the presiding bishop inaugurated a natural systems orientation that she had found especially helpful during her years as synod bishop.

Early in 2014, a design for the ELCA Systems Academy emerged using a process that presents natural systems concepts along with family of origin work, case studies, and noteworthy presenters. Synod bishops are invited to select a synod representative who meets relevant criteria to be part of a four-year commitment to the academy's goals. Since the first academy session in the fall of 2015, 30 synod appointees and seven churchwide staff members have joined the seminars. These individuals work on applying the theory in their respective positions. The first 15 class members will graduate in June 2019, after four years of study. A continuing education plan for post-graduate years is in place. A new academy class has enrolled each fall since 2015 and another will begin in the fall of 2019. Nearly 50% of the ELCA's synods are represented in the academy and work in synods is underway.

This year will bring transitions across the ELCA, from the churchwide organization to synods to congregations. The academy's curriculum principles address change and challenge which appear to be givens in church and society in our time.

What will attendees know and be able to do in their synods, in congregations, and in their life situations as a result of studying systems? The curriculum promotes the development of leadership capacities that relate to this question. A synod resource team project is a major application and initiative being developed and established in several synods. Other projects are also developing that use systems thinking and address the needs of synods and congregations.

ELCA Systems Academy curriculum develops understandings and capacities:

1. The ability to observe how things work in a relationship system
2. An understanding of how anxiety affects relationships and how people think
3. The impact of "mature" behavior on institutions and ministry
4. The challenge to think differently
5. An understanding of the challenge and the importance of how people treat one another
6. The practice of taking time to think
7. The way theory makes theology concrete

To the extent that these aims are integrated into personal and relational functioning, they promote "systems thinkers" in church settings. Pursuing these aims in a Bowen theory framework coupled with the application savvy of Rabbi Edwin Friedman prompts leadership principles that are different from conventional cause and effect thinking. The gain being developed is a broader repertoire of responding to challenges in ministry and organizational settings. Principles and capacities that come into play include: be an observer, learn from experience, define and regulate self, stay connected, work toward neutrality in appropriate settings, and take responsibility for one's self and being. The ELCA Natural Systems Academy is a pathway initiative for leadership in synods, congregations, and the churchwide organization.

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