

From Jonathan New – Executive Director

## Transitional Leadership Mistakes (and Temptations...)

“What is the most common and the most egregious mistake interims make?” These were good questions, posed by a participant in an interim group I had been asked to address. And I was happy to respond. After all, the question allowed me to speak to what transitional leadership is (and isn’t) and how it’s best practiced.

My answers to these questions have qualifications: First, leaders make mistakes. There isn’t a perfect way to lead and, even if there were, none of us could meet that standard all the time. Second, not all mistakes are created equal. Some have almost no negative impact. Others can even have an unintended positive influence. So, when I speak of mistakes, what I mean are those that are contrary to the principles of transitional leadership and – especially – those that can do harm.

So, **what is the most common mistake interims make?** To me, it’s acting as if the practice of transitional leadership is a cookie-cutter proposition. Granted, because we employ such concepts as *Focus Points* for the congregation and *Process Tasks* for the leader these elements of transitional work can be misinterpreted as sequential steps and/or goals as if were following a recipe. But transitional leadership is not that simple and it’s never plug-and-play.

Fundamentally, good transitional leadership is always responsive to the context. This is why reading the context is so crucial and why we do so many things to be contextually grounded. Analyze the congregation as a system. Assess power dynamics. Encourage appreciative inquiry. Seek to understand the congregation’s culture, norms, and folkways. Do our work on the dance floor but endeavor to get up into the balcony at times to have a wider view. And so on.

To my mind, being contextually responsive is one thing that elevates transitional leadership from a craft to an art. Transitional leaders are not technicians, employing knowledge or skills to “fix” or even “fine-tune” the congregation. No doubt, to be effective, we must be skilled and knowledgeable. But the heart of transitional leadership comes first in understanding what *is*, then finding ways that fit the circumstances to help the congregation tend to its own goals.

Which brings me to question number two: **What is the most egregious mistake transitional leaders can make?** I would say, placing my agenda – and, therefore, my *needs* – ahead of the congregation’s. To be clear, some of the needs we have as leaders are right, good, and proper – receiving fair compensation or having a safe workplace. And some agenda items we bring to the table should most definitely be there – organizational and financial assessment or activities to remember the congregation’s past and gain clarity about its identity. Yet – especially if we think of ourselves as an *expert* – we can tilt toward what we believe congregations must or should do because it suits us.

For example, in my work with low-capacity congregations, I know it's one thing to think they should consider closing yet quite another for me to tell them that they're dying and need to face that reality. I've had to pay close attention to my personal need to want to push such congregations to what I considered a graceful ending when I believed it might be their only option. Instead, I've tried to keep *my* need, *my* opinion, and *my* agenda to myself, opting instead for holding up the mirror, asking provocative questions, and inviting self-assessment and self-realization that might inform the congregation's own agenda-setting.

There is temptation bound up in both these mistakes – the commonest and the most egregious – which, perhaps, is different only in degree. In its simplest form, we want to come off as if we know how to handle all situations of transition. This may be especially relevant for the between-clergy-leaders interim period because we've spent the past 40 years developing what some of us might like to think of as an *expertise*. It can feel good to be perceived as the *expert*, especially among people who are desperate for certainty and fixes. Yet providing answers – or even just a rigidly defined pathway – removes the congregation's agency and responsibility for faithful discernment and decision-making. It's also not conducive to adaptive change that reflects and nurtures organizational health, resilience, and vitality. Moreover, if we combine a need to be an expert with even deeper ungoverned needs for being right, telling others what to do, or having the world the way we want it, then we're well on the way to doing real damage.

As transitional leaders, we're going to make mistakes – lots of them. My hope is that most of the time these will be honest mistakes, the ones we might consider errors. I'm convinced that we'll be at our best when we're confident in ourselves yet steer clear of playing the expert, running our own agendas, or seeking our own outcomes. And to do that, first and foremost, means having a high degree of self-awareness – a subject for another day.