

From Jonathan New – Executive Director

Knowing Our *Why* As Transitional Leaders

A few months ago, I wrote about the most common and the most egregious mistakes transitional leaders can make. [LINK – [4/28/23](#)] My answers, respectively, were 1) acting like transitional leadership is a cookie cutter proposition and 2) placing my agenda (and, therefore, my needs) above the congregation's. Recently, I've been thinking that there's another mistake we can make that also has adverse effects for ourselves and the congregations we serve – not knowing our *why* as transitional leaders.

We've long been aware that congregations and their leaders are more faithful and successful when they have a clear sense of purpose. (Consider how Rick Warren's 1995 book *The Purpose Driven Church* jumped to the top of the bestseller list and remained there for years.) This idea got further legs in 2009 when Simon Sinek gave his first TED talk on "How Great Leaders Inspire Action". [LINK - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4ZojKF_VuA] In it he introduced his concept of the Golden Circle, the idea that successful organizations and their leaders start with *why* they do what they do rather than *what* they do or *how* they do it. Since then, "know your *why*" has been a catchphrase among those of us helping congregations be more healthy, vital, and resilient.

Congregations and their settled clergy surely benefit from knowing their *why* as organizations and as leaders. But what about us as transitional leaders, particularly those of us who will serve congregations for an interim period, or as consultants or coaches? I've previously argued that the dictum "know thyself" is important to faithful and effective transitional leaders. [LINK – [5/12/23](#)] Here I'd further claim that part of this is knowing why we're doing the work of transitional leadership in the first place.

Before I go on, I realize some of you will wonder about my *why*. That's only fair, so here it is: "Because I believe in the power of faith communities to bring the loving, healing, justice-seeking presence of God to a world desperately in need of it, I help congregations and those who lead them be their best selves." Not elegant, but it works for me.

Our *why*, as leaders, has to do with our sense of purpose in our leadership role(s). It's about personal fulfillment, having clarity of direction, and life-meaning. For me, as an ordained minister, it's about vocation and the particular call I believe God has laid upon me. Fundamentally, it concerns what motivates us, what creates urgency in us to act, and what keeps us engaged in the healthiest ways. To some extent, it has to do with our deepest awareness of the kind of work where we most show up, light up, and feel up; where we discover joy.

What's the *why* – the purpose and importance – of knowing our *why* as transitional leaders? Here are some key reasons why our transitional leadership *why* is critical:

- **It helps us bring our best selves to the work.** Congregations are experiencing a pace and magnitude of change – and the immense pressures that accompany them – at a level that is testing their very survival. These days, they need the best leaders to help them navigate an even wider set of transitions, any of which could derail or imperil them. They need us to bring the very best to the work.
- **It's demanding work.** At times, something more than a paycheck, mere occupation to keep us from boredom, or the congregation's appreciation is necessary to keep us going. An inner drive will be required to spur us on in the face of challenge.
- **We can go astray.** Having a *why* and – especially – having *clarity* about our *why* helps us recall what's our work and what's the congregation's, our agenda or theirs, our needs or those of our congregants. Misalignment between our *why* and transitional leadership best practice will be unhelpful and, possibly, destructive. Good alignment, however, brings together vocational drive and all the transitional knowledge, skills, and posture required to do the work well.

Which brings me back to knowing ourselves, a critical aspect of identifying and living into our *why*. In transitional leadership we talk much about the importance of congregational discernment. I believe that where managing transition is concerned, discernment begins at home – in us. Our discernment about what motivates us in the work is critical to being sure we're in right relationship with the work and those who will benefit from it.

How can you discover your *why* for transitional leadership? Begin exploring what drives or motivates you, and what you find most satisfying, then reflect on the nature and content of the work itself. I offer this three-step process:

Step One – Activities:

- Affirmations – What can you affirm in yourself and what do others affirm about you?
- Interests – What keeps your attention, piques your curiosity, and ignites your passion?
- Values – For whom and what do you stand?
- Personality Inventories/Assessments – What do these tell you about yourself?
- Life Map – What does a visual timeline about your life – highlighting key events or experiences that have shaped your values and identity – reveal to you?

Step Two – Alignment with Transitional Leadership:

- If you're doing the work, are you getting to fulfill your purpose through transitional leadership?

- Are you utilizing your gifts and talents?
- Reflecting on what you know about transitional leadership principles and best practice, how does this form of ministry and leadership align with your personal drive or motivations?

Step Three – Putting it Together:

- Write Your *Why* – How might you describe your *why* in a personal mission statement or elevator speech about you and transitional leadership?
- Share Your *Why* – Can you share your *why* with friends and colleagues? Why or why not? What does this experience indicate to you?

Whether you've been doing transitional ministry for a long time or just considering moving more fully into this form of ministerial leadership, it's equally important to wrestle with your *why*. Knowing that there is a good fit between who you are and the understanding, skills, posture, approaches, and best practices that make for excellent transitional ministry will stand you in good stead. Particularly as you find yourself in the mists of uncertainty, in the swirl of relentless change, and in heat of conflict, and everything else that comes with the good but often demanding work of being with congregations facing transition.

Just as I want our congregations to be more healthy, vital, and resilient, I want that for you too – as a transitional leader and as a person. The congregations we serve want, need, and expect that as well. While we will never do this work perfectly, it's part of our work as transitional leaders to do what we can to tend our craft. First and foremost, that means knowing ourselves and what most motivates us in the work, being clear about what this high calling demands, and being sure that these are well aligned.