

From Jonathan New – Executive Director

The *Leadership* in Transitional Leadership

“I don’t think of myself as a leader.” As a local church pastor, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard this response from volunteers on boards and committees when I referred to them as “lay leaders.” From their perspective, they weren’t “leaders” but simply the people getting the work and ministry of the church done. From my vantage point, however, I believed them to be leaders because of the positions they occupied, their influence in the organizational system, and the fact that I didn’t want to be the only “leader” of the church. Yet I understood their feelings. Because, while some of them were content to take on the mantle of “leader,” others wanted neither the responsibility nor the burden.

Yet it’s harder for me to be as understanding about clergy who say, “I don’t think of myself as a leader.” I’ve heard this often from seminary students I’ve taught and from ministry candidates when I’ve been involved in my denomination’s ministerial authorization processes. I can accept that we might think of ourselves in our clergy role in other ways first – teacher, priest, comforter, spiritual guide, etc. But it’s much more difficult for me to accept – and I really can’t believe – that we are not also “leader” by virtue of the fact that we occupy the positions that we do. And it’s my fundamental belief that, whether we like it or not, those among whom we serve will think of us as “leaders” even if we don’t.

I was thinking about this recently in a conversation with IMN faculty member, Pegi Ridout. We were talking about vocational discernment around transitional leadership and Pegi said she thinks there are three questions that those who want to do this work need to discern:

- Do you see yourself as a leader?
- Do you see yourself as leading during and for change?
- Are you willing to bear the cost of this leadership?

I feel confident in saying that, regardless of how some laity or clergy feel about their relation to leadership, most of us who work to manage change for healthy transitions and faithful transformations see ourselves as leaders. Transitional leaders know that their work can’t be done without an awareness that we are guiding and influencing an organization. We might debate what this leadership entails, and we would probably all agree that we lead *with* others who are also leading, but we accept that we are leading.

A key question, then, for those who are doing or contemplating transitional leadership, is whether we understand ourselves to be leading in times of change and attempting to

manage that change well. This is the essential move that positions us for doing the work. Among other things, it provides purpose, impetus, and focus. It also supports a posture we'll take in relation to the work and those among whom we'll serve.

All this said, that last question is critical: Are we willing to bear the cost associated with being a transitional leader? Don't misunderstand me. There are many blessings involved in transitional leadership: the satisfaction that comes with doing challenging work; seeing the organization's improved health or resilience; later, hearing how it has continued to thrive. This and more led me to the work in the first place, prompted me to serve six congregations as intentional interim, motivated me to apply transitional leadership approaches to regional ministry, and inspired me to become IMN's executive director.

Yet there are things about this work that make it particularly difficult: a kind of engagement that will often mean that what we help reveal is unwelcome; needing to remain in the midst of tension and distress and conflict that are always present at some level, even in the most stable organizations; knowing that we will often not see the fruits of our efforts and that when we're saying hellos the need to say our good-byes is right around the corner.

Transitional leadership is a special form of leadership for which not all of us are well-suited. Even when we are, there are times when we don't have the personal resources to do it well. Indeed, there will be many days when we don't feel up to it and when we won't do it well. This is to be expected. And this is also why self-care is so critical, why peer support and a network of practitioners to engage with is so important, and why regular discernment about whether the timing is right for us to be doing it is a must. At every stage, there is a need for vocational discernment – a topic to which I will return in the future.

For now, I offer my encouragement of you in the work of transitional leadership. The organizations and institutions we care about need our help to get through the changes and to the other side of transitions which are shaping them for their next chapters. Given the kind and magnitude of the changes they are facing this may involve radical reshaping. I hope you will know that, despite the costs, you will be an important – perhaps critical – part of that good and excellent work. And that, as you lead, IMN is here to help you have the training and support you need, especially as you keep asking and answering those three essential questions.