

The Value of Support

By Alan Mead and Andrew Cooley

Have you taken the plunge into interim ministry? If you have, do you find that the established relationships with other clergy in your area still help, but you find yourself wanting more?

It is not uncommon to find established support networks helping to keep us connected and responsible. In my experience, however, as I move to a new congregation, or as an issue arises specific to congregational transition, I find myself yearning for connection with others who understand my circumstances from their own experience. Sometimes I desperately want and need the voice of experience from others who have traveled this route. And beyond the yearning for understanding and even the sharing from experience and reflection, I yearn to be a part of some group where I can know that what I share stands a chance of being heard and understood.

The Interim Ministry Network (IMN) offers fundamental education and ongoing support opportunities for everyone doing some form of interim ministry. When I began interim ministry I found a transition in my own support network. Partially because we moved to a new community and diocese with that first interim call, I found myself once again needing to find a meaningful and helpful support group. My initial support in that first year came from the IMN class in which I participated, the instructors who had taught us, and a colleague who had encouraged me to step into interim ministry and became my mentor throughout those early years of my interim work.

Years later, after completing several challenging (and learning) interim experiences, I accepted a call to a congregation as an “after pastor.” I once again found the resources and networking realities of IMN essential. As I moved into this new position as an “after pastor” I felt like I was moving into something beyond my ability. Whether that was true or not, I was certainly moving into a situation for which my experience was lacking.

Although it has at times been difficult, I have made it a priority in my ministry to attend every IMN Annual Conference. Wouldn't you know, at that IMN Annual Conference, one of the keynoters specialized in helping congregations that had experienced betrayal or misconduct come back to a place of better health. The keynoter was a clinical psychologist and lived and practiced on the other coast. Nevertheless, at the end for the conference I emailed her and, after some conversation and negotiation, contracted with her to guide me in leading this congregation to a place of health as they prepared to call their next senior minister. We used simple tools: the telephone and email. The guidance and encouragement I received transformed my ministry in that place and helped me avoid missteps that could have been costly, if not disastrous.

We all have our different experience of growth as pastors and as transition specialists. It is easy, sometimes, to think that what is happening to us is unique. Some of us may be isolated by geography and find it difficult to connect with other interims. Some of us may be in the midst of, or beginning, a difficult ministry situation. Whatever our changing needs as interims, it remains important to stay connected with others who are in ministry. That connection remains vital for interim specialists and also has been, for many of us, more difficult to accomplish and maintain.

With our reality of needing the support and the wisdom of others engaged in this important ministry, IMN continues to refine and develop ways for interims to connect, learn and engage. The Annual Conference is an important part of this; but cost and scheduling can make one's attendance impractical. While much thought and effort continues to be invested in the structure and content of the IMN Fundamentals Curriculum, we have also been listening to the needs of IMN members and are excited to be offering Virtual Support Groups. These groups have been a couple of years in development, including pilot efforts. It has been exciting over the recent Annual Conferences to be a part of the development of this new kind of connection - a virtual connection made possible by powerful technology available to almost all clergy.

Earlier this year, IMN announced the Virtual Support Group (VSG) pilot program. Here are a few comments from participants in those groups:

*“I have found ...
good listening ears and I was surprised about how much I had to share.”*

*“I have gained ...
so much from sharing my own
situation and listening to others share theirs.”*

*“It was helpful and worth the time spent.
I considered it an investment in my ministry.”*

*“I would recommend ...
joining a group, as I recommend all forms of
support and sharing groups.”*

The emergence of virtual support groups makes it possible for interims in isolated geographic areas to connect with other interims. Those in specialized or complex situations, i.e., conflict or misconduct, can connect with others who are also engaged in similar ministries. The exciting thing is that the support groups are open to all kinds of possibilities.

Andrew Cooley, first as a Team member and then as the Team Lead for the IMN Member Support Team, has been connected with others in visioning and putting into place this concept of virtual support groups. He is an early participant who shared with me his enthusiasm for his experience. I asked Andrew to reflect on his experience of participating in a virtual support group. Here is Andrew's reflection on his experience:

“Serving as a transition minister for over seven years now has been full of surprises and new challenges. I love this work, but I have missed the support networks, and access to the colleagues that came so easy when I served as a settled pastor. It was so easy to develop relationships of support when I'd rub shoulders with other clergy repeatedly in my community and through the various regional meetings and gatherings that engage us. But now, each new interim assignment throws new situations and complex dynamics at me but without the handy access to support networks. Who can appreciate the challenges or be trusted to offer helpful perspectives when I move every 18 months? I didn't realize just how lonely interim ministry can feel at times.

“So I am thrilled to be part of a great new resource for us. Virtual Support Groups (VSGs) kicked off last spring with two pilot groups and I was delighted to be asked to be one of the co-facilitators. They are a highlight of my month and I eagerly await each call.

“Kathy Keener, a long-time interim minister, was instrumental in designing the structure of the Virtual Support Groups. She led the efforts to identify co-facilitators and offered guidance from her experience of similar support group efforts.

“The VSGs are monthly 90 minute video-conference gatherings of transition ministers who share common experiences, situations, problems, or conditions. On these calls, members offer and receive practical and emotional support related to the practice of transitional/interim ministry.

“We typically open with a prayer, review our norms of confidentiality and respect, and then check in. Following the check-in, we identify some common situations or topics that we then unpack and offer active listening, sharing of observations and perspectives, and often pull in wisdom from IMN training, conference, workshops, readings, and our own experience. Often, though, there isn't a problem that gets 'solved'; but rather, a mutual echo of 'me too'. It is so encouraging to just have colleagues who have dealt with similar situations and challenges and who tell us that's a typical circumstance and they worked through it.

“Groups will be ecumenical, co-hosted by a pair of experienced IMN members, use Zoom video link via internet, limited to 8-12 members, closed once established, and free of charge. Participants are expected to participate each month unless extraordinary circumstances intervene; honor norms of confidentiality and respect, and trust that the most valuable resource to share is their own engagement and caring.

“Since the groups are online and one participates from anywhere, it is possible for international interims to participate. No matter where you are in the world, as long as you have access to an internet connection, this new opportunity for support and encouragement is now available.