

## What Does IMN Mean By *Transitional Leadership*?

When IMN speaks of *transitional leadership* we mean the kind of leadership that helps an organization face change and manage transitions for the best possible outcomes. But there's more to this understanding, how it was shaped, and what it involves.

IMN was founded over 40 years ago to equip and support leaders of congregations who serve on a temporary basis during a pastoral vacancy – interim ministers. No mere placeholders, interim ministers were trained to apply organizational development principles and bring targeted leadership to the time of pastoral turnover.

The reason for this was simple: Research showed that congregations were particularly vulnerable at the time of a change of pastors, often losing vitality and direction, creating greater disruption and setting them back years. However, this significant change – when managed well – could have a very different outcome. Congregations might actually thrive as they entered a new chapter with new clergy leadership when interims helped to guide the transition process. This wasn't magic but the intentional engagement of the congregation in processes of self-discovery, visioning, and corporate discernment as they came to the task of selecting and preparing for new clergy leadership.

IMN still trains and supports intentional interim ministers. However, over the years we've recognized that there are many significant moments of change in a congregation's life that benefit from excellent management beyond a change of clergy leadership, including: organizational sustainability, staff and mission right-sizing, assessing and dealing with facilities issues, shared ministry and amalgamations (e.g., mergers, unions, federations, yoking), closure and legacy consideration, and more. There are also other faith-based organizations where this leadership may be applied. And leaders now serve in a variety of ways to guide transitions – as interims, consultants, coaches; as settled clergy; as lay leaders volunteering or employed; full-time or part-time, in person or virtually. In fact, because of the unprecedented magnitude and pace of change that's being experienced, this kind of leadership is even more important today.

For these reasons and more, these days, we speak of *transitional leadership* – using change-management knowledge, skills, and approaches to provide leadership for healthy transitions and faithful transformations.

No matter the setting or circumstance, transitional leadership begins with some significant change to be managed, for example: pastoral vacancy, membership and attendance decline or increase, re-examining staffing structures or right-sizing, addressing building or sustainability issues, or – often – a combination of these changes. We address the change but – equally important – we seize the opportunity the change provides to do a kind of work that's sometimes impossible to do otherwise. Change will naturally bring disruption, discomfort, anxiety, sometimes amping up to chaos, pain, and fear. But the vulnerability out of which these feelings arise is also an entry point – a kind of organizational “cracking open” – for doing deeper work together. Change can be drawn upon as an opportune moment to confront deep-rooted

issues or address un-dealt-with problems, or simply to help the organization fully recognize its gifts and potential for the road ahead. So, capitalizing on the feelings of anxiety and vulnerability that naturally emerge out of the experience of change can help the organization take its next faithful steps and become more resilient.

But it's not just change that transitional leaders draw on to do their work. We ground it in an understanding of the organization as a system – a unique, dynamic network of connections in which individuals relate to others as friends and companions, but also as stakeholders and influencers. We apply to this what we know about how change impacts an organization and how transitions within it can best be achieved, and about how power is exercised and how it can be taken into consideration in the transition.

Along the way, transitional leaders engage the organization by helping it explore its:

- **heritage** – how the organization has been shaped
- **leadership** – its ways of organizing and effective leadership for a new time
- **mission** – defining or redefining its sense of purpose and direction
- **connections** – all the relationships that it has built beyond itself
- **future** – preparing to thrive in a changing world, consistent with the organization's purpose, strengths and areas for development

Transitional leaders aren't fixers, arriving with expertise to solve the organization's problems. There is no recipe, blueprint, or 10-point plan for this work. Using road-tested tools, skills, and approaches, they lean into their curiosity about an organization and bring to light what's hidden in order that it might be helpfully considered or re-examined. They're companion-leaders, focused on assessing what is and asking what might be, tending the organization's transition process. And they're adaptive leaders, trained to distinguish between technical problems that can be solved with well-established solutions and the thorny challenges that require an organization to adapt to new conditions to find health, wholeness, and a viable future.

Congregations and other faith-based organizations are reeling from the disruptions caused by pandemic pressures and shifting patterns of participation and religious affiliation that have been going on for years but are now having a more significant impact. So much is changing so fast, and even the most stable organizations may feel they are losing their way, wondering about what's coming next and even whether they have a future.

Transitional leaders can't and won't fix these problems. What they will do is stand with the organization to help it face these changes, understand them and themselves, recognize their gifts and assets, and help them chart new directions toward which they can faithfully direct their energies.