

# The Finding of the Four Thousand

## A Primer on Executive Thinking at the Grassroots Level

By Barbara Saunders

*Columbia Theological Seminary board member John Aldridge provides a powerful example of long-range, solution-oriented thinking as he addresses both the recruitment needs of his institution and denominational pastoral shortages. Boards, at their best, strive for solutions that link their mission to that of the larger community they serve. Are you thinking beyond your walls?*

In early 2001, a big idea seized Atlanta lawyer John Aldridge, who's a trustee of Columbia Theological Seminary in suburban Decatur, Georgia. The idea was this: The tools and tactics of the modern business world might help the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) address its urgent shortage of professional pastors. Fortright discussion of the vocation of parish ministry might lead the most talented young church members to entertain images of themselves as future ministers the way they now envision themselves as doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Seminaries and churches might reach these young people using the same information management technology that may soon lead Aldridge's Atlanta law firm to replace its plush, book-filled library with a virtual one.

Aldridge sat down to lunch with the Reverend Clifton Kirkpatrick, stated clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), his denomination's chief executive officer, and introduced a concept he had not yet committed to paper. When adult church people see teen-age and young adult church members display initiative and service in their churches, they could submit the youths' names (with their consent) to a central database that would be accessible to seminaries, internship and scholarship programs, and other churches. Moderated electronic forums might connect the young people with peers who are also considering future careers as church leaders.

Aldridge moves fast. By the fall of 2002, not only the Presbyterians, but also the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the Episcopal Church had signed on for the Pastoral Leadership Search Effort ("PLSE," pronounced "pulse"), a program funded by a \$2.3 million grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. to the Fund for Theological Education. In November 2002, young Presbyterian seminarians and Presbyterian leaders from around the United States sat around a table in Atlanta talking

about how God works in people's lives and designing a program that the PCUSA will launch by September 2003.

John Aldridge is accustomed to leading, and to thinking in terms of long-term solutions to large-scale problems. A founding partner of McKenna Long & Aldridge, an international law firm whose clients include the State of Georgia and large multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola Enterprises, Boeing, General Motors, and AT&T, he has served as an elder at Peachtree Presbyterian Church, the largest Presbyterian congregation in the U.S. About working on PLSE, he said, "I've never felt more led by the Holy Spirit in doing something."

From the window of his fifty-third-floor office in downtown Atlanta, Aldridge gets an annual lesson in the efficiency of God's process. In the spring, when falcons nest in the building's ledges, Aldridge watches the raptor mothers swoop down on unfortunate small prey and sees the falcon chicks waddle, molt, and make their first attempts at flight.

As a seminary trustee, Aldridge began to make connections between seminary recruitment data, the shortage of pastors, and life in churches around the country. He attributes the speed of his response to a "business approach." He explained: "In business, you have to move fast before the facts change."

The current facts are clear. The median age of students in PCUSA seminaries is 40. The length of the average career in parish ministry is seventeen years, about half of the norm for comparable professions like law and medicine. Of serving Presbyterian pastors, only 7 percent are under 35 and 43 percent are over 50. Reflecting on these numbers, Aldridge concluded that the church "must do a better job in helping young people to discern a call to ministry." The young should be challenged to consider vocations in the church, he thought, as they begin to think about where they will go to college and what their life work will be.

*Barbara Saunders is a freelance writer based in Berkeley, California. Her last article for In Trust was "Theology for the Laity," which explored the more rigorous teaching now available to laypeople.*





the job because he was impressed by “the freedom he was offering me and the other students to come up with a program that would be effective.”

In Daniel’s view, effective communication has always been “the great task” of the church. He and Aldridge agree that the church must demonstrate its relevance to young people by showing willingness to use their media and rituals. The gatherings Daniel plans at his church include performances by rock bands as well as Bible studies. Many members of the generation born in the 1980s do not attend church socials at all. The most ambitious of them have full schedules of school, work, sports, and church activities. In their spare time, many visit chat rooms, send e-mail, and subscribe to online mailing lists. Online is the natural place to approach them.

Just a few years ago, Daniel was a Davidson College philosophy major, and describes his state of mind as “not a Christian or religiously affiliated.” In his senior year, he took a class with Dr. John Kuykendall, who recognized his student’s pastoral gifts and arranged a private meeting for him with the president of Columbia Theological Seminary. Daniel confesses, “I accepted the offer only because I needed a recommendation letter [from Kuykendall]... I showed up late and in my baseball cap.”

**B**eth Godfrey, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, is another member of PLSE’s program design committee. Although she is only 28 years old, pastoral ministry will be her second career. She says her job as a business-oriented designer was also a Christian vocation. It helped hone the skills that brought her to the attention of church members where she worked as a lay minister. Godfrey sharpened her intergenerational communication abilities on projects with architects and engineers much older than she is, and members of her church noticed her pastoral skills and told her so. “That is what opened me up to do the discernment and prayer,” she acknowledged. In time that led her to apply to seminary.

She is excited by the possibility that PLSE will result in other young people having the same experience she had: “Local church members...that 75-year-old woman or 28 year-old married couple...need to look at that young person and say the words to them.”

By September 2003, all 11,150 PCUSA churches will receive a PLSE kit that prepares pastors to educate their congregations about the how they can create opportunities for the younger members to serve, lead, and



Photograph by Judy Ondrey

explore their faith. In addition to a video, the kit contains instructions for nominating the first group of PLSE honorees, for getting their consent to be included in the database, and for sending the contact information to Atlanta.

A host church in each presbytery will serve as a communication hub between the churches and the PLSE office at the FTE.

Now Aldridge is inundated with e-mail and phone calls from pastors. The task force has dissolved as planned, and he is actively searching for a full-time executive director or project coordinator. He is confident that by the time churches refer the first of their young leaders to the program, the database will be functioning and the staff in place.

The cooperation he has witnessed—between laity and clergy, young and old people, funders, and administrators—inspires Thomas Daniel. “We’re modeling what I hope is the future of the church,” he said.

Will Aldridge consider PLSE’s work completed if and when the pastoral leadership crisis of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other participating denominations is resolved? “Absolutely not,” he said, adding: “Even if 4,000 PCUSA pulpits were not vacant—even if the PCUSA pastorate were not so heavily weighted to those over 50 years old—PCUSA churches should still be identifying and lifting up gifted young leaders with potential for pastoral ministry.”

“PLSE is not just a response to the current pastoral leadership challenge in the United States. It is the embodiment of a fundamental, core responsibility of every congregation, now and in the future, to be an active and vibrant part of the process of God’s call to pastoral ministry.” •IT•

*John Aldridge confers with Thomas Daniel, whom he selected to chair PLSE’s program design committee.*