

Why I Left “The Ministry”
The Most Overlooked Area of Church Potential: An Executive Briefing
By Alan E. Nelson, Ed.D.

I know what it’s like when someone “leaves” the ministry. Internal eyebrows rise. We wonder what caused someone who professed a call from God to preach the Gospel and lead a congregation, to then jump ship and do something else. Our minds race to the seamier side. Was the pressure too much? Did he ever have a call at all? We don’t often say it, but we wonder, don’t we?

After more than 20 years of being a pastor, I left the ministry, technically speaking. But after authoring a dozen books and nearly 200 articles on ministry and spiritual life, plus serving as the executive editor of Rev! magazine, I left the pastorate.

The reason was simple. Time was running out and I wanted to change the church—and if possible, the world.

No matter how egalitarian or democratic we like to think we are, history is not made by the masses. Three dominant factors change society: discoveries, disasters, and leaders, but the most significant by far is leaders—whether they’re good or bad. If you want to change history, you must focus on leaders. So how do you change them? For more than a decade, thanks to books such as “How to Change Your Church,” “The Five Star Church,” “Me to We,” and “Embracing Brokenness,” I was able to travel as a pastor, teaching workshops and seminary courses. But after a decade of that, I came to the conclusion that investing in adult leaders yields a low return on investment.

My dad used to say, “Life is like a roll of toilet paper. The less you have left, the faster it goes.” By age 45, I was convinced that we needed to lower the age of leadership development, identifying and developing influencers while they’re still moldable. Barna’s research coincides with that of Kohlberg and other moral psychologists: character is pretty much established by age 14.

Thus I began prototyping an executive-caliber leadership training program, with the upper age set at 14. The goal was to learn the earliest age to which you could teach serious leadership. During our research phase, we discovered that if a child displays leadership aptitude, and we developed a way of measuring that, by age 10 s/he is cognitively mature enough to learn sophisticated social skills required in leading. So at the ripe old age of 49, with two sons in private college, I gave up my

paycheck and benefits to launch a non-profit organization called KidLead.

Pastors don’t need to give up on adults, but if we’re to be good stewards, we’d better be putting a lot of eggs in the kid basket. But even better, we need to target our very young leaders. Take advantage of the 4-year opportunity we call the 10-13 Window. This is our best single shot at developing effective and ethical leaders. Unfortunately, very few church staff are leadership savvy. They confuse it with discipleship and service. And preteen/middle school ministries always tend to be low on the church totem pole.

Even if you don’t have a personal call to this area of ministry, you can still champion it. We have developed the first of its kind, executive-caliber leadership training curriculum called **LeadNow**. The faith-based version is beginning to be used in premier Christian schools and some larger churches. It is sophisticated enough to require certification to use it. You can go to the KidLead website to watch a brief video and take a free leadership aptitude assessment on a child. By pushing the “parent” button you’ll get an automated response to help you understand the type of child you should be reaching for leadership mentoring. Plus there’s a book that summarizes our findings.

Waiting until college, seminary, and first employment is far too late to develop effective, ethical leaders. We must start younger, much younger. The church and Christian school may be the best places to accomplish this task, because they are social communities where young leaders can develop their skills in a context of faith.

My challenge to pastors is to take the call of identifying and developing young leaders very seriously. Make sure that if there’s one thing your church does well, it’s young leader preparation. *If you want to change the world, focus on leaders. But if you want to change leaders, focus on them when they’re young.* I “left the ministry” to make a bigger impact on the church. You don’t have to quit being a pastor, but I pray you’ll join me in this endeavor.

Alan E. Nelson, Ed.D. (www.alanenelson.com) is the author of *KidLead: Growing Great leaders* and the founder of KidLead Inc.. The Nelsons live near Monterey, CA. For more info on KidLead, contact them through the website: www.kidlead.com.