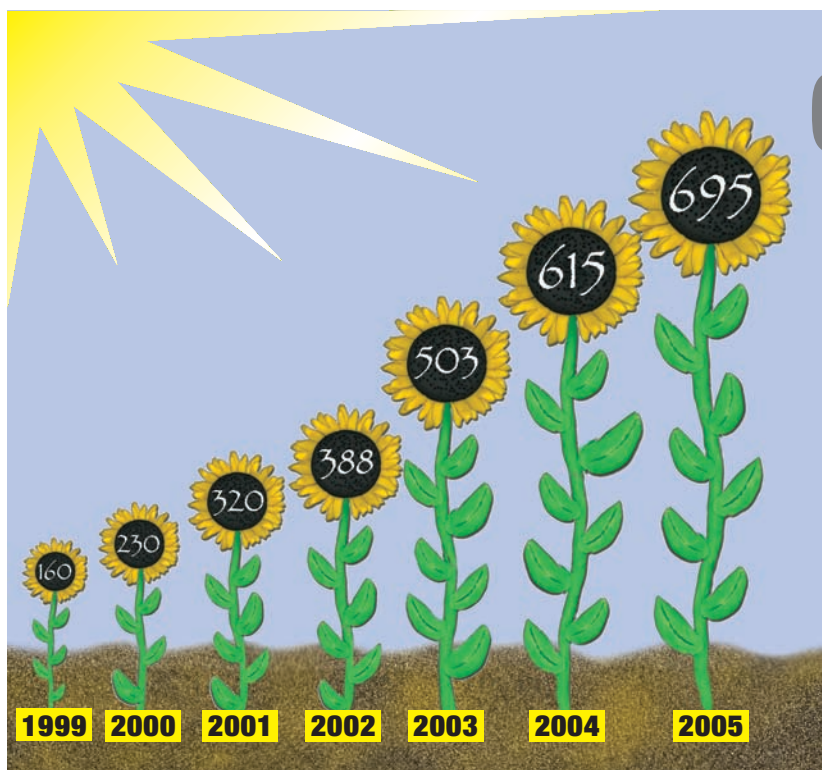


# GO FIGURE

JACK MARCUM



GRAPHIC BY KATE ANYAN

## Use of lay pastors steadily grows

Faced with a growing number of congregations unable to afford a full-time pastor, in the mid-1990s the PCUSA responded by expanding the role of commissioned lay pastors (CLPs)—elders who go through extensive training to enable them to preach, lead sacraments and perform other pastoral functions.

- **By the end of 2005, 695 individuals were serving as CLPs** in a total of 750 congregations. That number is 7 percent of all PCUSA congregations. Most CLPs are serving a single congregation (655, or 94 percent), although a few serve more than one, including four who each serve four congregations.
- **Most congregations served by CLPs are small.** The median size is 47 members, and the median Sunday worship attendance is 25. They have small budgets, too; total receipts for the median congregation served by a CLP are \$45,400, and total expenditures are \$41,200. A total of 11 percent of all congregations with 100 or fewer members are served by a CLP.
- **Most CLPs are men (72 percent).** Their median age is 57 years. Almost one in four CLPs are racial ethnic, including 8 percent who are African American, 6 percent who are Hispanic, 6 percent who are Native American, and 1 percent who are Asian. (Since fewer than half of CLPs provided their age or race ethnicity, these numbers should be treated cautiously.)
- **A steady, upward trend.** Precisely comparable data for years prior to 2005 are not available, although we do have enough information to calculate what I believe are close approximations for the number of CLPs for recent years. These estimates reveal a steady, upward trend over the last six years, as the illustration shows, rising more than four-fold since 1999 and doubling since 2001.

## What the research shows

Any realistic projection of denominational trends points toward a continuing increase in the number of smaller congregations, where most commissioned lay pastors serve. In 1990, 39 percent of PCUSA congregations had 100 or fewer members; by 2005, it was 47 percent. Carrying that trend forward, half of all PCUSA congregations will have 100 or fewer members by 2010, and 60 percent will be in that size range by 2025. Furthermore, smaller congregations are getting even smaller. In 1990, 48 percent of all congregations with 100 or fewer members had 50 or fewer members; in 2005, the 50-or-fewer share was 52 percent.

When an expanded role for commissioned lay pastors was being debated in the mid-1990s, some objected, arguing that the PCUSA was creating second-class ministers who lacked the extensive training and educational requirements long emphasized by Presbyterians. If such concerns remain, they have faded into the background, perhaps because of training programs developed by presbyteries, but more, I suspect, because of the practical results: Many hundreds of congregations have regular pastoral leadership that they would otherwise lack. Indeed, in less than 10 years, it's become hard to imagine a successful future for the PCUSA that does not involve a continuing and growing role for commissioned lay pastors. □