



Episode 5: What Do People Want and Need from Their Senior Pastor?

In this episode, we addressed the very important role of the senior pastor in helping congregants grow spiritually.

Congregant Satisfaction with Their Senior Pastor Is Disproportionately High

For the 2000 churches that have taken the REVEAL survey, average satisfaction with the church's role in spiritual growth is around 50%. However, average satisfaction with the senior pastor's effectiveness is 70%—20 points higher—and that's true for almost every church that's taken the REVEAL survey, even when people aren't happy with the church. We believe this discrepancy indicates several things:

- Congregants don't view their church and senior pastor as one and the same. They are able to separate the leader from the church as a whole.
- People attach importance to the senior pastor role—not only as the primary teacher, but also the leader and visionary for church's direction and ministry.
- It reveals how much goodwill and permission exists for the senior pastor that he or she can use to lead the congregation.

Expectations of the Senior Pastor

Based on our analysis of dozens of statements in our survey about the senior pastor, we found that people expect six things from senior pastors:

- 1) Pastoral Care—people expect the senior pastor to be the spiritual shepherd for people who are hurting from illness, grieving a loss or struggling with a big decision. This expectation shifts as a church grows, but the senior pastor is always the lead shepherd.
- 2) Spiritual Challenge—the senior pastor is expected to challenge congregants in their journey based on sound biblical doctrine and to model what a Christ-centered life looks like in the real world.
- 3) Serving Advocacy—whether the church needs volunteers to serve in the children's ministry or the local food pantry, people expect the senior pastor to be a vocal and visible advocate for serving those in need and the church.

- 4) Preaching and Vision Casting—as the primary teacher at weekend services, the senior pastor is the church’s main source of spiritual education, inspiration and encouragement. The senior pastor is also responsible for casting a vision for the future that will capture people’s hearts.
- 5) Unity and Stability—people expect the senior pastor to make decisions that ensure the church remains financially strong and secure. The senior pastor is responsible for maintaining unity and holding church leaders accountable.
- 6) External Focus—the senior pastor is expected to be a cheerleader for the church’s engagement with community concerns like homelessness, social justice issues, and race relations.

What People Want from Their Senior Pastor

The jobs listed above are not equally important. Preaching and Vision Casting accounts for more than half of people’s satisfaction with their senior pastor’s effectiveness. Pastoral Care, Serving Advocacy and Unity/Stability *combined* account for less satisfaction than Preaching and Vision Casting alone. Having an External Focus has no impact on satisfaction. When we look at our data to determine what drives satisfaction with Preaching and Vision Casting, three statements surfaced to the top—and they were essentially the same for every segment along the Spiritual Continuum. This means people just getting started on their spiritual journey want the same three things from Preaching and Vision Casting as those in the most mature Christ-Centered group. They want a senior pastor to:

- Provide sound doctrine rooted in biblical accuracy
- Challenge them and provide next steps
- Model and reinforce how to grow spiritually

These are also the key characteristics for the senior pastor’s role of Spiritual Challenge. As a result, two of the senior pastor’s many “hats” (Spiritual Challenge and Preaching and Vision Casting) merge to form the biggest driver of satisfaction: *Sound doctrine, challenge and modeling what spiritual growth looks like.*

What People Need from Their Senior Pastor

We determined what people need by looking at which expectations drive growth from one segment on the spiritual continuum to the next. When we did this to assess the impact of the six senior pastor roles, we found that Spiritual Challenge has the most influence on spiritual growth. No other category comes close, even Preaching and Vision Casting. External Focus and Serving Advocacy ground in the more mature stages of growth, but Spiritual Challenge is still twice as influential.

These results might be taken to mean that senior pastors ought to focus most of their time and energy on creating blockbuster messages for weekend services. However, based on further analysis, that’s not true. There are two ways a senior pastor’s delivery of Spiritual Challenge impacts people’s satisfaction with the church: through teaching at weekend services and through leading—by creating a church culture where spiritual challenge flourishes. Spiritual

Challenge through leading the church has *four times* as much impact on satisfaction with the church's role in spiritual growth compared to teaching. Even the best sermon isn't as important as do the day-to-day decisions a senior pastor makes in leading the church's discipleship agenda. Therefore, based on our research, if a senior pastor has to choose between being a great teacher or a great leader, the choice is clear. Senior pastors should prioritize spending their time leading the church.