

What is a Rector-Centric Church?

In the interpretation of your *Vital Signs*® report, it may have been suggested that your church is rector-centric. It is important to understand what this means.

From a technical standpoint, a church is considered to be rector-centric if three of the five drivers of satisfaction are focused on some aspect of the work of the rector. This suggests that how people feel about the church *overall* is strongly dependent upon their evaluation of the work of the rector. Those who evaluate the work of the rector more positively are much more likely to be satisfied with the church overall. Those who are less positive about the work of the rector are much more likely to be less satisfied with the church *overall*.

While it may seem inevitable that a church will view itself primarily through the performance of its rector, this is not the case for all churches. In some churches, how people feel about the church overall is more strongly impacted by their evaluations of the decision-making process, the quality of the music ministry, or the comprehensiveness of the education program. In a rector-centric church, the conversations about how the church is doing will often focus on some aspect of the rector's work.

It is important to be clear on this point: the suggestion that a church is rector-centric tells us nothing about whether the respondents feel positive or negative about the work of the rector. To use an analogy, the statement "there is a strong relationship between how cold it is outside and how many clothes people tend to wear," while true, tells us nothing about the current temperature. It could be thirty degrees below zero with people wearing five layers of clothing. Or it could be a hundred degrees with people donning their swimsuits. In a rector-centric church, members may feel very appreciative about the work of the rector, or, conversely, very disappointed.

It is equally important to understand that the suggestion that a church is rector-centric does not necessarily mean that the rector is expected to do everything. However, it is possible that the emotional reward system in the church will tend to ignore what the church as a Body is doing well or not so well in favor of a focus on what the rector is doing well...or not so well. The result is that the rector often ends up doing everything because the system is so focused on the rector that there is little incentive for lay people to do anything. The system ends up praising or complaining about the rector no matter what else is done. Sometimes people are inadvertently crippled by the competence of their leader in a rector-centric church because no one can do it as well as him or her.

Whether people feel the church is doing well or struggling, there is usually a significant amount of anxiety in a rector-centric church. If things are going well, people worry about the rector leaving and the rector feels the burden of the church's success. If things are not going well, people tend to focus their frustration on the rector and the rector feels this burden as well.

This is not to say that a rector-centric culture is always negative. In large churches where the leader has a strong public presence expressed through the media in a television, radio, or internet ministry, it is nearly inevitable that people will focus on the church as an expression of the leader's personality. These *icon cultures* can have significant, behind-the-scene ministries that are fueled by the leader's persona. Every church must discern its own calling through a clear recognition of the potential benefits and risks of a rector-centric culture.