

Unrealistic expectations

By [Diane Roth](#)

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As part of my work, I have meetings and conversations with couples prior to their weddings. We don't just plan the ceremony. We also use an inventory which purports to measure the couple's "Strengths" and "Growth Areas." The inventory gives us many possibilities for conversations that we can have about their relationship.

Some of the possible strengths (or 'growth areas') named are: Communication, Conflict Resolution, Relationship Roles, Family and Friends, Spiritual Beliefs, Children and Parenting.

You get the idea.

Then there is this one: "Marriage Expectations." The idea is that if your expectations for marriage are "realistic," then this is a strength for you. If your expectations for marriage are "unrealistic," then this is a growth area.

I've been using this inventory for a long time, and I'll tell you what: I can't think of one couple who scored well on "Marriage Expectations." Not one. They all thought that their partner would never disappoint them, that nothing could make them doubt each other's love, that the romance would never fade.

I've taken to reporting these results with a preface: "Marriage Expectations is a growth area for you," I explain. "But as far as I can tell, it is for everyone. Maybe no one would get married if they had realistic expectations." We laugh about that a little, and go on to discuss their results, bursting their marriage pre-conception balloon, but as gently as possible.

I can't help thinking that the same dynamics could be applied to pastors and congregations.

I realize that there are a number of problems with this analogy. No, I am not married to my congregation. We aren't even dating. But it is a kind of relationship, and I

think that congregations have expectations of their pastors, some based in hope, and some based in tradition, and based in some sort of mythic golden age. They might have expectations of what their pastor will look like, or what kind of a personality she will have (or even whether their pastor will be a he or a she). They might have expectations of what kind of leader their pastor will be, or how he will pray or sing or preach. They might have expectations of what their pastor can or will do: bring back the '50s, attract young families, be great with youth or old people, evangelize the neighborhood.

Some of these expectations will (possibly) be unrealistic.

Pastors have expectations of congregations, too. They have expectations of what their congregations might look like, their piety, their worship life, their eagerness to come out to a Bible study or help with soup suppers or go on a mission trip. They have expectations (perhaps) about a congregation's faith or their doubts, their neediness or their strength.

Some of these expectations will be unrealistic.

Maybe that's natural. Maybe it's part of all of life, or at least, every relationship. We do our best to tell the truth, and to hear the truth about each other. But in the end, marriage, friendship, and entering into every kind of community is a leap of faith. We love each other and we hurt each other. We soar and we fall flat on our faces. We blame each other during the rough patches. The romance fades. We are bound to disappoint each other sometimes.

So we continue to harbor unrealistic expectations. That's just the way it is. Only one thing is needful: not to lower expectations, but to take another leap of faith, and practice forgiveness.

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