

Failing as pastor hurts, talking about it is hard

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue

Sometimes being a pastor is a real pain. But few pastors want to admit it. J. R. Briggs is trying to change that.

That's

why Briggs, a blogger and pastor of the Renew Community in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, is organizing the Epic Fail Pastors Conference, which is set for April 14-16 at a church-turned-bar 25 minutes outside of Philadelphia. Briggs hopes to make space for pastors to speak their minds without fear.

The conference grew out of a blog post that Briggs wrote last summer. Many ministers' conferences are flashy events with rock bands and presentations from big church pastors, who take the stage and talk about their great successes.

But those

presentations don't match the daily realities for pastors, especially at small churches, Briggs said. "Most of the time, you feel like I'm never going to be that guy on stage—I am preaching to 42 people, including the noisy kids," he said. Briggs hopes the Epic Fail conference will remind pastors that it's OK to be human and that failure is normal.

After

all, he said, most of the leaders in the Bible were failures. David was an adulterer who betrayed a close friend. Moses was a murderer. Paul persecuted Christians before his conversion. And the disciples spent a lot of time bumbling around after Jesus.

"The entrance exam for

Christianity is admitting you are a failure," Briggs said. But pastors,

he said, are often expected to be perfect. That means they can't admit their doubts or failings. If they do, they can be shamed by their peers and parishioners.

"I am not afraid of failure," said Briggs. "I am afraid of the shame that comes from the rejection that comes from failure."

So

Briggs suggested a conference at which leaders could put their worst foot forward. The response was overwhelming. Hundreds of comments, e-mails and phone calls flooded in, with tales of ministers' failings, both personal and professional. That led to the blog post becoming reality.

Fittingly the conference will be held at a church that failed and became a bar. "The stained glass has been replaced by neon Sam Adams signs and the pews have been replaced by pool tables," Briggs said.

The conference is relatively cheap at \$79, not including lodging, and will be low key. Several pastors will talk about their failures and lessons they've learned from them, and there will be time for discussion. Briggs said he's not revealing the names of speakers ahead of time. But he is insisting that those speakers hang around for the whole event, rather than popping in and then leaving. On the last day, participants will share communion. Already ministers from as far away as Australia have signed up.

Adam McHugh isn't surprised. A former pastor who is now an author, McHugh said he tried being honest about his struggles as pastor when he was in ministry.

His

parishioners were not thrilled. Some said he was not fit to be a pastor after admitting he'd been to see counselors. Others tried to undermine his leadership role.

"I think we all feel a real tension as pastors—we want to be spiritual role models, but we also want to be

ourselves and acknowledge that we fail," he said. "This is why pastoral ministry can be hazardous to our spiritual lives."

The recession

has made things worse. In some denominations there are more ministers looking for work than there are jobs. Church budgets are tight, meaning that many small churches have trouble keeping a full-time pastor. Admitting failure isn't good for job security. "The job can be brutal enough already, and the pay is already low, so the financial, emotional and relational costs, on top of those other costs, for sharing honestly are often not worth it," said McHugh.

Scot McKnight, blogger and

professor of New Testament at North Park University in Chicago, isn't surprised that the issue of failure has struck a nerve with ministers. He said that ministry can be especially difficult for pastors of nondenominational churches who don't have the support structure or a network of peers that a denomination can provide.

McKnight sees

signs for hope, though. He said that older church members expected their pastors to be perfect. That's not always the case with younger churchgoers.

"In the previous generation, there was a lot of emphasis that the pastor had to be distant, apart from the congregation, and holy," he said. "Failure was seen as a sign of betrayal. For this generation, admitting failure is part of the pastoral task." —RNS