

1. Pressure to succeed

Slide 1. Quote by Archbishop Desmond Tutu

An online UK stress survey has found that six out of ten young people aged 18–24 have felt so stressed by the pressure to succeed they have felt unable to cope.

The survey – commissioned by the Mental Health Foundation in 2001 – also found that almost half of young people (47%) had experienced significant stress in relation to body image and worries about their appearance.

Almost six out of ten young (57%) people said they have become stressed because of a fear of making mistakes (failure).

Young people are under pressure to succeed not just academically, but in the way they look. They are afraid they will not live up to their peer’s expectations of them and will be a failure.

We all remember at the start of Covid when every Church was experimenting with putting Services online. We were all learning and the beginning, so we had iPads and iPhones looking up people’s noses or with backgrounds of our untidy offices or living room - the TV ads call it (Slide 4) “housebarrassment”!. In the early days of Covid I realised that a (slightly overweight) male friend of mine was doing Morning Prayer online, so I started to watch it until one morning he put his laptop on a coffee table with him seated in front with his leg spread - it wasn’t a happy view so I turned it off and didn’t watch it again! It was a bit embarrassing, but it was the sort of mistake we all made online in the early days of Covid. We laughed at the mistakes we made which shows that we aren’t perfect.

That’s why those TV blooper programmes are so popular. People who normally give a polished professional performance on screen suddenly become human when they make mistakes, if they trip up or crack up in their performance, and it makes us laugh. Failure can be hilarious and we love it.

But we also hate failure. The minute someone becomes famous or is cast into the public eye, someone somewhere will start digging up mistakes and misdemeanours from their past and start airing them in public. What’s the difference, and where is the dividing line to be drawn between what is acceptable and funny and what is abhorrent, offensive and maybe even dangerous about publicising such failures?

2. Let’s look at this word “failure”

In English, the word “failure” was first applied to **people** in 1837. Before that it was only ever used as a verb “to fail”. No-one knows where the word “failure” came from, but in 1837 Queen Victoria came to the throne, and there was massive unemployment and higher food prices - all leading to a depression. Maybe someone in government was called ‘a failure’ because of this and the word came into use.

The word “failure” is a pretty negative word. The author of the book related to this course (Emma Ineson) says her publishers told her they didn’t think anyone would buy a book with the title “Failure”. They wanted something more cheerful and suggested the word “Failing”. But Emma wouldn’t have it. She could see their point - no-one likes to be thought of as a failure, but the fact

is that failure is part of all our lives and there's no getting away from it. The word “failing” is a negative adjective attached to a noun so we get to OFSTED categorisation of a “failing school”. The word ‘failure’ seems so final in our language now. It has become an identity or a title.

A psychotherapist and author, Colin Feltham, says (Slide 5) *“it seems unlikely, if not impossible, for any to be a total failure. Any of us may fail at certain things but none of us can be a perfect failure”*. Perhaps when we speak about failure or failing, we should be careful with our language because none of us is beyond redemption - none of us are interminably “a failure”.

Mistakes should then be seen as a kind of failure in which learning can happen, and therefore should not be shied away from, so long as they are the kinds of mistakes that do not lead to catastrophic failure. One study suggests that mistakes are in fact necessary to rewire our brains enabling us to increase our learning. How positive is that? Failures and mistakes can occur in every area of work and in every walk of life. The UK Health & Safety Executive names two types of failure: “human error (an unintentional action or decision) and violations (deliberately doing the wrong thing) either through lack of choice or lack of concern about the consequences.

Failure is often defined as “when something doesn't go according to plan”, but this leads to the question “Whose plan is it anyway?”. More often than not we are considered to have failed due to **other peoples'** expectations not being met. Jesus looked like a failure if you class success as having lots of followers, building an empire, and not being crucified by the age of 33. But according to God's plan for the redemption of humanity and eternal salvation, Jesus' death was a resounding success.

Is it a myth that everything should always operate without some malfunction or underperformance? Is it even possible?

Joe Moran in his book “If you Should Fail” speaks of failure in these terms (Slide 6). Quote. We are all permanent citizens of the Republic of Failure. Failure, is home. Perhaps this is the start of understanding what failure is and what role it plays in the lives of people, and of Christians in particular. Perhaps we should stop shying away from failure in embarrassment and shame, and learn to embrace it instead. Even if we're not happy with having failure in our lives, perhaps we can come to accept that it's always likely to be there, so we need to learn to live with it.

3. Negligence, weakness and our own deliberate fault (from the BCP Confession)

All failures are not equal - we tend to lump them all together - we say failure is failure. Is a genuine mistake the same as a devious moral error though? We need a way to categorise failures to help us understand what failures we might embrace, even encourage and learn from, and what failures we might wish to avoid. Some failures, believe it or not, warrant praise and can be the gateway to new breakthrough. Other failures do warrant blame and demand admission, an apology and reparation. The trouble is that we're not very good at telling the difference between these different types of failures.

1. First there are simple preventable failures - the person knows how to do something right but for some reason gets it wrong. These failures are often made when doing high-volume or routine tasks such as a production line. You knew what to do but forgot or neglected to do it properly.

2. Complex failures or accidents, which is when a set of factors TOGETHER lead to failure despite there being a recognised process. (Slide 7) The fatal train crash at Stonehaven in 2020 in which 3 died was caused by a series of failures. The train struck debris that had washed out of a badly constructed drainage trench during heavy rain. This in turn led to untrained controllers being unable to manage the severe workload due to the volume of weather-related events. Additionally, the train was an older model that didn't include design features to minimise damage in a collision. The crash was the result of a complex failure.
3. Intelligent failures - discoveries which are the undesired result of exploring new territory. When Edison was asked about his many failures on the way to inventing the electric lightbulb, he purportedly said *'I have not failed 10,000 times - I've successfully found 10,000 ways that will not work'*. Intelligent failures should be looked for and embraced. Intelligent failing looks at what success might be next time.

As I mentioned earlier, very few failures are someone's deliberate fault, but in many organisations and contexts blame is apportioned more frequently than it should be. (Slide 8) It's been shown that we tend to overplay external factors that led to our **own** mistakes, but we underplay them when it comes to the mistakes of others. We let ourselves off the hook too easily and fail to afford the same courtesy to others. Interesting. This over-apportionment of blame leads to “The Fear Factor”.

4. The Fear Factor

The result of being blamed excessively leads to fear of taking even the most sensible risks for fear of getting it wrong and being blamed. This fear gets in the way of opportunity for learning from our mistakes. Rather than the fear analysis of “Who did what wrong?” We should move on to looking at what led to the mistake?’ There is power and potential in failure - but it's not easy. When we're confronted with things that have gone wrong, we can feel embarrassment and shame and try to hide it, or we can look it full in the face and learn from it. But what stops us from learning from our mistakes?

Well the answer is fear that we will be found inadequate. Shame attaches to failure - it makes those who fail, withdraw, become silent, keep secrets, or try to appease or please others. How can we become wholehearted people towards our own failures and towards the failures of others? How can we love our neighbours as ourselves?

We humans go to great lengths to avoid the pain and shame that goes with failure and will employ all kinds of tactics, by denying or minimising it. That's why people tell fabricated stories about what went wrong in order to protect themselves from shame. The first step towards learning from failure is to get things out in the open. Failure analysis needs to be carried out with courage in order for learning to occur.

There's a school that has embraced learning from failure, and it has initiated a “failure week”.
Quote from Headteacher (Slide 9):

Embrace failure then as an opportunity - we need to fail in order to risk and innovate. We are all looking for someone to blame - in the economy problems at the moment, wars, even the Turkey/Syria earthquake blame is being apportioned on the construction companies and the government for not having enough building controls. Will they admit their failures, will they learn from it and do better next time? Hopefully. Resignations may make the mob feel better, but do they get to the

heart of the problem? When things go wrong though we don't normally find an understanding public willing to receive an apology from say a politician, and allow him or her to again. There's rarely grace evident in the world, and often not even in the Church.

5. Christians and Failure

Christians ought to be good at failure. The story of our faith equips us so well for it. We ought to be the ones most familiar with, and accepting of, failure. We should also be the most forgiving when it comes to those who fail. Is there room for it in our theology? Jesus set out very clearly that the disciples were not signing up to instant success. Following Him would likely lead to their deaths *“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”* (Matthew 16.24). Jesus prepared his followers for failure.

As I said earlier the reason people don't admit to mistakes is that we think if we admit to getting something wrong, we'll be seen as incompetent. One day people will realise that I am the fraud I know myself to be - that's what we say to ourselves. We all want to maintain the veneer of competence. There is always a nagging fear that we'll be found out as a failure or as incompetent. We fear shame, yet at the heart of the story of the sinless person of Christ is the truth that he himself was the subject of shame, mockery and derision - the Cross, a symbol of foolishness and utter incompetence. Jesus couldn't even carry his own Cross. He was mocked even as he died to save us. Failure is right at the heart of the Christian faith. Yet it is through the cross that God chose to shame the apparent wisdom of this world.

Another word for the shame of failure is foolishness. When we fail we feel foolish and the Bible has plenty to say about that too *“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong”* (1 Corinthians 1.27). (Slide 10). That ought to comfort all of us who feel like we have failed. Failure is never final and redemption is always possible.

So what's the problem? Why are we as Christians, so reluctant to allow ourselves and others to fail? Part of the problem is that we don't allow ourselves to have very good role models.

6. Imperfect Saints

Who are your role models? (Slide 11) One of mine is Elaine Storkey, a Christian writer, speaker and broadcaster who has great insight into the challenges of women across the globe, and Vincent Donovan, a Spiritan Priest who spent seventeen years working among the Masai in Tanzania teaching the Gospel message. I can't hope to ever do what they have done, but they are two of my modern day role models and great people of faith. You may have your role models. But what happens if you put someone on a pedestal and they fall off? The Archbishop of Canterbury tells a story about preaching at a church on the subject of sin. During his sermon he made the point that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. After the service he was approached by an outraged woman who exclaimed in disgust, *“Archbishop! I did not know that you were a sinner! If I'd known I wouldn't have come today.”* She left with her illusions about Justin Welby in tatters. He is an imperfect saint just like we all are.

7. Simply Unfinished

At the beginning we started with a definition of failure as simply what happens *“when something doesn't go to plan”*. We return to the question *“Whose plan?”* If the plan is of the world, the flesh

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and the devil, then Jesus failed, we fail and the Church is a failure. But if God’s plan is our blueprint for a new way of living and being - a different and alternative vision of what constitutes success - then the landscape looks very different.

The only plan that matters is the vision for kingdom-living inaugurated by Jesus, entrusted to his disciples and which continues through us today. That plan redraws the map of what constitutes success and failure. According to the ways of the Kingdom of God you are successful not when you are rich and famous, you succeed when you look like you’re failing, when you give yourself for others, when you pay most attention to the least, the lost, the last, when you seek first the kingdom. We ought not to seek success this side of heaven because we’ll be continually disappointed.

We need not fear failure because God has the perfect plan for our lives and He knows we are a work in progress - we are quite simply “unfinished” (Slide 12). God knows what will happen in our lives, so we are spared all the anxiety. That frees us to live with failure. We’re all part of His wonderful plan, He loves us warts and all - we are God’s work in progress - we will continue to fall and fail, but if we let Him, he will put us back on the road again. Someone once said to me *“When we get to Heaven, God won’t be looking us over for perfection, he will be looking at our healed scars to see how we overcame our failures”*.