



## Creating Safe Space in our Churches

As people of God, we hold on to a faith that draws on the aspects of love, comfort, strength, and honesty. We strive to follow the call of Jesus to love one another, be they neighbor or stranger, friend or enemy. Then why do so many of our congregations feel unsafe to many sitting in the pews? Why do persons feels like it is a risk to be fully honest and open about what is happening in their lives?

Creating safe space in the church allows for wholeness in the midst of brokenness, healing in the midst of illness, grace in the midst of fear, and courage in the midst of silence.



*Jill Kline and Jan Eller share safe space at a Caucus Steering Committee meeting.*

### **What is "Safe Space"?** **a discussion starter for groups and churches**

Creating safe space is perhaps the most important thing we can do in our churches. There is virtually nowhere in our culture where we are able to be completely open about who we are, what we are struggling with, and what and who we love. The Church is a place where everyone is welcomed, known, and accepted by God. So what keeps our churches from being safe places?

In thinking about how to respond to Jesus' call to love one another by creating safe space in your congregation, here are some questions to discuss:

- ✘ What make a space or a relationship 'safe' for truly open sharing? Think about a time when you felt like you couldn't or shouldn't share something that you felt or believed. What held you back? What were you afraid of? What did you think could happen if you opened up and were vulnerable? Likewise, think about a time when you felt like you could share deeply. What made that possible? What helped ease your fears of sharing? What did it 'feel' like to be able to share?
- ✘ What "issues" feel unsafe to share in your small group or congregation? Why? If a person/group within the congregation or small group raised one of these issues, what would happen to that person/group within the congregation or small group itself?
- ✘ There are those who feel silenced and those who choose to be silent. In what ways do those who choose to remain silent sometimes add to and perpetuate the silencing? When is silence appropriate and when does silence do harm?
- ✘ What does it mean to feel safe? How do you know when you are safe? What does it mean to create a safe place? How do you know when you've created a safe place? What does safety 'feel' like?
- ✘ What are the barriers to safety and openness in your congregation? Where do these barriers come from? How aware are people that they exist? How could you remove these barriers?
- ✘ How has your congregation created an atmosphere of safety? What more can you do?

## For Group Discussion Leaders: Ways to Encourage Safe Space

If you are leading a group, **be open about what your group is about and what you want it to be** so that the people who are there want to be there. No safety is possible if there is coercion to participate. Encourage people to participate fully in shaping the group.

**Create a welcoming atmosphere.** Seat the group in a circle, if possible, or in some way where all are on an equal level and are facing one another as much as possible. Light a candle, offer a brief moment of worship, invoke God's accepting, loving presence among you.

**Be mindful of 'asymmetry', or power inequalities between the people in your group.** The Church Board Chair or other long-time leaders may intimidate a new member just by being present. People in the minority (a man in a group of women and vice versa, an African-American in a group of Caucasians, etc.) may feel isolated by nature of their experiences, church participation, culture, or communication style. Remind everyone that they are equal within the group in an appropriate way and watch for situations where the asymmetries may hinder safety.

**Agree together on ground rules for communication.** You might consider 'rules' like:

- ✘ no interrupting while someone is speaking,
- ✘ giving each participant a chance to speak and 'equal time' (perhaps using a speaking stick or passing some other object),
- ✘ allowing silence and the chance to 'pass' if a person does not wish to share,
- ✘ pledging to keep the conversation confidential within the group (you might need to agree on consequences if this is broken),
- ✘ agreeing to ask questions to clarify a person's thoughts or positions but agreeing not to give advice to or pass a judgment on another member,
- ✘ refraining from judgmental or sarcastic remarks,
- ✘ refraining from gossiping
- ✘ using 'I' statements as much as possible,
- ✘ and many more.

**End your group with a short round of commenting about the process of the gathering itself.** Ask each person to share (if they wish) about how they felt the discussion went, if anything about how the conversation went (not the content of the conversation itself) was particularly helpful or hurtful, how they feel about the group, etc. Give everyone a chance to speak.

**Remember...**

**Safe space is not created overnight. It takes time and care to build relationships.**