CREATING SAFE SPACE

WESTWOOD YOUTH COLLECTIVE
In this session, we’re beginning a new discussion about
safe space: what it is, why it’s meaningful for different
groups of people, how it connects to scripture, and ways
we can start cultivating attitudes and practices that help
people different than us feel safe and affirmed.

To start, what image comes into your mind when you
think about “feeling safe”? Maybe it’s a person you trust
deeply, a cozy place in your house, a pet that gives you
comfort, or a movie or video game that helps you cope
with stress and anxiety. Where do you feel a deep sense
of safety, knowing that you’re accepted and loved?
UNDERSTANDING THE TOPIC DEEPER

A Definition of Safe Space
A safe space is a "space" where people can talk about their personal experiences without fear of judgment, violence, or shame. This is especially important for people and groups who are typically subject to public ridicule or stigmatization.

A Brief History of Safe Space
Historians have traced the origins of the idea of "safe space" to the 1960s. In many states during that time it was illegal to be openly gay, so members of the LGBTQ community created bars and social spaces where they could celebrate their identities and develop friendships without fear of social repression or arrest.

Empathy for All
When we talk about creating "safe space," what we're really talking about is cultivating compassion and empathy for all people, no matter how different they might be. Empathy is attempting to see from another person's perspective and to understand their emotional states. Creating safe spaces is about infusing the practice of empathy into our group gatherings, our learning environments, and our places of worship.
LGBTQ Band Camp
Click the image above to watch a beautiful, short video about the power of having your identity affirmed in a place free from judgment.

Neighborhoods
For many people, their neighborhood is a safe space where they experience the freedom to be themselves. In this video, London-based filmmaker, Leon Oldstrong, talks about his experiences growing up Black in England and the threat that gentrification poses to his community's sense of safety.

Classrooms
There's a lot of controversy about whether schools and universities should be responsible for cultivating safe spaces. Some say classrooms should be empathetic spaces, while others say that "safety" decreases exposure to new ideas. In this helpful video, students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill break down the arguments on both sides.
Question 1
Which video above spoke to you the most? What about it struck a chord with you? Maybe it was a particular person, feeling, or idea. There's no wrong answer here. Just do your best to explain how the video made you feel.

Question 2
Describe what it means to you to feel safe. Feel free to be creative! Perhaps you can draw an image of the person or place where you feel most safe. Maybe you could write out or share a personal reflection or fictional story. Let your imagination run with this. The key is to try to visualize and describe a safe space the best that you can.

Question 3
In our mission statement for the Westwood Youth Collective, it says, "Together we strive to create a safe space where we are empowered to learn from one another, support one another, and dismantle oppression with one another." While safe space is a core value of this group, we can always improve to make our space more welcoming. What practices could we put in place that would help you or your friends feel safer?
IS EVERYTHING CLEAR?

Take a moment to jot down any questions you may have. Keep these in a notebook to ask during our next Youth Collective meeting, or feel free to email Jake your questions at the address below!

jputich@westwoodpres.org
INTERACTING WITH SCRIPTURE

While the concept of "safe space" is a recent idea, there are many places in scripture where the importance of safety, inclusion, and empathy is expressed and advocated.

Here's just one example:

"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

Paul the Apostle, Romans 12: 3-5
Take some time to contemplate these words from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paint a picture, go for a walk, listen to some music that helps you think, light a candle and meditate, or spend some time in prayer. Take note of any thoughts or feelings that arise in you as you think about how a body, though composed of different parts, functions beautifully together. Be honest with your feelings. Take note of your questions if anything is unclear about the verse. There is no way to "fail" this exercise. There are no wrong answers or feelings or thoughts. The important thing is that you're honest.
**D I S C U S S**


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**Question 1**
How is a body an image of safe space? What does it take to coordinate the different functions of the body? As a Youth Collective, what would it mean for us to welcome in and accept different "members" of the body and to incorporate them into our group in an affirming way?

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**Question 2**
If you have LGBTQ friends, disabled friends, friends of color, etc., how do you make them feel safe? How do you let them know that you affirm them in who they are and won't pass judgment, even though they likely experience judgment from others?
GO AND DO

HERE ARE SOME WAYS TO START CREATING SAFE SPACE

Active Listening
When you're talking with your friends and family, you can build trust and safety by demonstrating concern, asking specific questions, and giving small verbal and visual cues that you're engaged in the conversation. When it's your turn to respond, go slow. Try to articulate back to the person what you heard them say (in your own words) and then ask if they if there's anything else they'd like to add before you respond. This will help build not only trust, but greater understanding and clarity.

Growing Empathy
One way to cultivate empathy is to simply be observant of others. While you're out in view of others, resist the impulse to scroll through your phone. Instead, focus your attention on the people around you. Try to imagine what they may be thinking or feeling based upon their body language and facial expressions. Ask yourself, "What kind of day is that person having?" As you do this, you may find that you begin to genuinely care about the wellbeing of those you see and observe.

Open Up
Empathy is a two-way street. You can only build trust by sharing your deeper motivations and feelings with others. As you engage in active listening, it's important that you also learn when to share about your own thoughts and life experiences. Sensitivity is really important here, because if we share about ourselves too much or at the wrong time in the conversation, it can make the other person feel as if their experiences aren't as important as yours. This is a difficult skill, but with time and practice people will recognize you as a trusted friend and a great listener, and that's how safe space starts.
Don't forget to check out our new website! Click the image below for more!