

PLEDGE TO MAKE OUR CHURCH A SAFE PLACE

PHYSICALLY, EMOTIONALLY & SPIRITUALLY

Whereas our Lord said “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”

Whereas our Lord taught that giving care to others is actually giving care to him

Whereas our Lord instructed us to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God,

And whereas we recognize that there are many persons in our community who are hungry, hurting, afraid, sick and strangers to our church,

We, the members of the Board of the _____ Church of the Brethren, commit ourselves and our resources toward making our church a safe place for all persons by:

- ❖ Understanding and breaking down the barriers that are keeping people from worshiping and entering fully into community.
- ❖ Recognizing those in our congregation who are hurting and silent.
- ❖ Sensitizing ourselves to the needs of those in our church and community who are suffering spiritually, emotionally or physically.
- ❖ Creating a safe and supportive church community in which all persons can share their strengths and vulnerabilities.
- ❖ Inviting persons to become a part of our church community with the assurance that they will be received with care and compassion.



Lesson Plan

Making Our Churches Safe Places

Materials needed:

Chalk board & chalk or
Newsprint & marker(s)
Bibles
Basin & towels (optional)

Introduction

The theme for Health Promotion Sunday is "Making our churches safe places," emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. Many people don't feel they can turn to the church in times of trouble or struggle because they have experienced the church as being judgmental and without grace. Too often something gets in the way of the church extending compassion and grace to those who are struggling, hurting or living with the consequences of their choices.

This Sunday School lesson will help participants to explore the meaning and significance of creating a "safe place" within the church for all people. The lesson begins with simple scripture passages referring to the human need for safety. The following exercises develop a working understanding of the term "safe place," and discuss the role of safe places within our lives. The last section of the lesson discusses the role of safe places within our churches. As we consider how this idea of safe space fits into our church community, we will continually refer to the question of God's will for our lives. Is this a divine calling, or just another trendy idea we have taken from popular psychology?

The structure of this lesson will help us to first focus on the individual and then on the larger church community. It is based on the belief that even the broken places in our lives can provide opportunities for God to work within and among us, to bring God's healing into the church community and to bring us into deeper, more genuine relationships with God and with each other.

This resource was developed for a wide audience. With this in mind, you are encouraged to use those parts that best serve your needs.

Opening Scripture Readings

Have participants read three or four of the passages below.

I Samuel 20: 13
Psalm 4:1-8
Psalm 12: 5
Matthew 10:40-42
John 4:13 - 15
I Timothy 1:12-17

Discussion of Terms

After reading these passages, have the group reflect on these questions:

1. What meaning(s) of “safety” are implied by these passages?
2. What faith values are common to each of these passages?
3. What does the word "safe" mean to you? What is a safe place?
4. What words do you think describe the opposite of safety?
5. What places can you think of that are not safe, either for yourself or others?

Imagery and Reflection Exercise

Divide into groups of 2 or 3 persons each. Then complete the following exercises:

Exercise One: Individually take a minute to think about a specific situation or setting that has, in the past, made you feel safe. Perhaps it was a particular place, a friend, a community, a song, or the reading of a scripture verse. Try not to make any judgments about this safe place. Simply imagine it. Imagine right now that you are in that safe space, and reflect on the following questions:

1. What is it like to feel safe?
2. How does your body feel?
3. What are your thoughts in this place?
4. What memories are associated with this feeling?
5. Are you connected to God in this feeling of safety?
6. What is it that you feel safe from? In other words, if you are safe here on the inside, what is on the outside from which you are being protected?

Ask each person to share their reflections with the others in their small group.

Exercise Two: Again, individually take a minute to think about a specific situation or setting that has, in the past, made you feel unsafe. Consider what feels dangerous, painful, or broken about that situation, and reflect on these questions:

1. What is it like to feel that you are not in a safe place?
2. How does your body feel?
3. What are your thoughts in this place?
4. What memories are associated with this feeling?
5. Are you connected to God in this place of danger?
6. What are you exposed to, or vulnerable to, in this place that makes you feel unsafe?

Ask each person to share what they can about these reflections on being in an unsafe place with the others in their small group..

Discussion:

The exercises just completed help us define what we mean by the phrase "safe place." Now we ask, "Where and how does the church fit into this?" The purpose of Health Promotion Sunday is to look at those things which impact our health - both positively and negatively, and our health is deeply and profoundly impacted by the access to (or lack of) safe places to be ourselves and to share the painful stuff of our lives.

Unfortunately, those issues that cause us the deepest pain or impact our lives most significantly are many times the issues which we are least likely to talk about at church. The next exercise is designed to help us identify some of those issues too difficult or painful to share and to ask, "Why don't we share these things with our church family?" and "What can we (a church family) do to make our church a safer place to share?"

Exercise: Thinking more about Safe Places

You will need a chalk board or newsprint and easel for this exercise. Divide your writing space into two columns,

Title the first column "We don't share", and write down those hurts or concerns you believe seldom get shared within your church community. (Examples: divorce, addictions, sexual dysfunction, infidelity, faith struggles or doubts, losing a job, death and dying, parenting struggles, mental health disorders.)

Title the second column "Why not?", and using brief phrases, record the reasons why these issues are not shared. (Examples: Family loyalty, not invited to share those things, shame/disgrace, fear, don't know how to respond, uncomfortable asking for help, fear of judgment or embarrassment, denial, impropriety.)

After having completed this part of the exercise, you will have in front of you words and phrases pertaining to the obstacles encountered in trying to create safe places for people in church. Now, consider the following three case scenarios listed below.

Taking one at a time, imagine each situation happening in your congregation. First, discuss why it might be difficult for the person named to share about their situation. Next, discuss the obstacles your church family might face in responding lovingly to these circumstances.

Case studies

- 1) Nancy stands up during the "Joys and Concerns" portion of worship, and says that her son Jonathan is gay.
- 2) Hector mentions to another board member after a meeting that his wife has been spending many evenings away from home. From his tone of voice, and the context of their conversation, the other member hears Hector saying that he fears his wife is being unfaithful to him.

- 3) Renita is home for Christmas vacation during her first year at college. She attends the high school youth Sunday school class on Sunday morning, and shares with them that one of her hall mates committed suicide during finals week.
- 4) Maria is in 8th grade at the local middle school and is the youngest of two children. She often wears secondhand clothes from her sister. Though she is welcomed by her peers in school she often comments that her classmates make fun of her appearance.

As you discussed these case studies, were there any new ideas generated for how your church might become a safer place? Add those ideas to the third column "What can we do?"

Finally, on a clean sheet of paper entitled at the top "What can we do?", write down what can be done to make your church a safer place to share? (Examples: Conflict resolution training, mediation services, District Shalom Teams, etc.)

Responding to someone's sharing can be as hard as doing the sharing itself. Especially at church, we may feel pressure to say the "right" thing or respond in a way that will visibly make clear our moral standards. Other times, we may not know how to respond. Why then would we want to encourage this kind of sharing? What is our responsibility, as a church community, in creating safe places? These are good questions, and ones that require a return to our focus question - what is God's will in our lives?

Closing exercise

Turn to a clean sheet of newsprint, or move to a clean section of the chalkboard.

Read John 4: 4-42

Share with the group, "Jesus was well acquainted with his community's judgments against the Samaritan woman at the well. He should not have spoken to her. He should not have asked her for a cup of water. His disciples considered it a shameful act for him to be seen speaking with this woman whose life was less than exemplary. Yet Jesus saw her as a child of God, one whose spiritual thirst was deep. Jesus knew everything about her, yet judged her not. Instead, he engaged her in discussion. He offered the woman an opportunity for confession and transformation, without causing her to lose any dignity.

Even after the woman confessed her brokenness, Jesus did not condemn or correct her. Instead, he offered her the life-giving water she needed. He revealed himself to her as the prophesied Messiah. He commissioned her to evangelize her own people, spreading the good news of his ministry. Notice that, while Jesus helped the woman, he also requested her help (a cup of water) and honored her ability to help him (by spreading the good news). As Jesus gave witness to the dignity and worthiness of the Samaritan woman, and called forth her gifts for ministry, his disciples were astonished (v. 27). They surely experienced a transformation of their own.

Ask the group to respond to the following questions: (Write down their responses on the chalkboard or newsprint.)

1. “What does this suggest to us about our role as individuals and as the church in creating a safe place for people to bring their sorrow and pain and find healing?”
2. “What can we (this church family/congregation) do to make our church a safer place for people to be and find healing?”

Share this information with your church’s leadership.

Closing prayer

Gracious and loving God, you are our safe place in which we find comfort, strength and healing - a harbor calm and deep that shelters us. Grant us the wisdom to know how we might best serve as a harbor when life weathers us with storm and loss. Help us live out your example faithfully and responsibly. In Jesus’ name. AMEN.

- *Kendra Sousley Mellinger*



A Service of Worship
Commanded To Love One Another
Christ's Healing Love Brings Safety and Peace

"God heals those who are suffering in two ways, through the science of medicine and surgery and through the science of faith and prayer."

Norman Vincent Peale

Invocation (unison)

Along with the Psalmist and Isaiah we affirm:

“O Lord, our God, we have cried to you, and you have heard us.

You forgive our sins, you help us fight our diseases.

You heal our broken hearts and bind up our wounds.

With your stripes we are healed.”

Come, o Mighty Healer, touch our brokenness and pain. Use this hour to cleanse and strengthen us. AMEN

Call to Worship

HYMNAL: A WORSHIP BOOK Healer of Our Every #377

Invitation to Give

Giving is one of the secrets to a healthy life; not only or necessarily money, but whatever each of us has of compassion, encouragement, sympathy and support

Litany

L. We are persons who have experienced pain and rejection.

P. We are persons who have experienced love and acceptance.

L. We are persons who have shown racism, sexism and exclusion to some who are different from us.

P. We are persons who have overcome prejudice and have included some who are different from us.

L. We have sometimes been legalistic and put rules above relationships.

P. We have sometimes overcome legalism and put the concerns for other people above old, unloving rules.

L. We have sometimes excluded the very sinners whom Jesus welcomed into his kingdom.

P. Sometimes we welcome the outcasts of our society to God's table.

All. We seek to bring Jesus' love into our congregation and our communities.

We seek to be free of physical or verbal abuse. We seek to live in peace.

Message

"Commanded to Love One Another."

OLD TESTAMENT Readings: Joel 2: 12-13, Isaiah 58: 6-11
NEW TESTAMENT Readings: Luke 6: 32-37, John 7: 16-18

Key Points:

- 1) We do not have consensus on who is right on controversial issues such as pacifism, abortion, tithing, homosexuality and divorce. But, it is utterly clear that we are to love one another.
- 2) We are to penetrate beyond the legalisms of the Scriptures to observe Jesus' identification with prostitutes, tax collectors, the poor, the ill and other outcasts. It is utterly clear that we are to love one another,
- 3) Who among us feels unsafe or unwelcome in our congregation? It is utterly clear that we are to love one another.

Benediction

Go now in peace. May the love of God, your family, friends and this faith community surround you everywhere you may go. AMEN

- *Charles Boyer*



A Service of Worship
And None Shall Make Them Afraid
Nurturing an Open and Welcoming Spirit

(The service grows out of the assumption that biblical writers believed that God has a vision for the people - a vision contained in the praise of a creating God in the Psalms and in the image of a new community under the Messiah in the writing of Isaiah. Paul, in several of his letters, believed that the church was an embodiment of that same vision, that the church was a gift from God, and that as the Body of Christ it was the fellowship in which the faithful live out their lives toward maturity.)

Announcements and Sharing Time

Prelude

**Call to Worship*

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! Leader: When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, People: the moon and stars that you have established; Leader~ what are human beings that you are mindful of them, People, mortals that you care for them? Leader: Yet you have made them a little lower than God, People.- and crowned them with glory and honor, Everyone: O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

**Hymn of Gathering "God is here among us" Hymnal: A Worship Book #16*

** Invocation Prayer*

Creating and Redeeming God, we *know* that you are out there, in the majesty and mystery of sides and seas and mountains and valleys. We know that you are in our past which we remember with thanksgiving and we know that you are the future in which we have hope. But we know that you are in here too, in the midst of our fellowship **and in the hearts and minds** of all who have gathered here. And where your dwelling place is, God, there is forgiveness and love and peace. And we know it most keenly through Jesus Christ, through whom we pray.

Old Testament Lesson Isaiah 65-.17-19, 25.

A Call to Prayer "Lord, listen to your children praying" Hymnal: A Worship Book #353

The Pastoral Prayer

Prayer Hymn "Help us to help each other " Hymnal: A Worship Book #362

New Testament Lesson Ephesians. 4.-1-6, 11-16

The Sermon

"And None Shall Make Them Afraid"

(The Psalmist, Isaiah and Paul believe that God's vision is that God's people shall live in harmony and peace and safety, The church, while it is not the fulfillment of that vision, is the embodiment of that vision. The church then is the Body of Christ, the fellowship of believers, where everyone has a place, where all have been given gifts for serving one another, where none are excluded or harmed or made to fear. The responsibility of helping the church to create and nurture an open and welcoming spirit is everyone's responsibility. The church is first and foremost a community of forgiven and recovering sinners, although we have **often** made the church something other than that. When the church is the kind of community that God intends it to be, then people in it will not fear; not fear of harm, not fear of self-exposure, not fear of failure, When the church is the kind of community that God intends it to be, then people in it will know that at the center of their life together God is dwelling, Where God is, there is love. Where God is, there is acceptance. Where God is, there is hope.

The title of the sermon is a quote from Isaiah in a version other than the *NRSV*, from which the scriptures in the service have been taken. It is an especially forceful way of stating the spirit of the kingdom of God, although it is stated in the negative. Obviously, another title can be substituted)

A Call to Offering

Let our gift-giving grow out of gratitude for that network of others who have given so much to us. Let our offerings be inspired by the blessings we have known, Let our commitment include not only what we have, but who we are.

Offertory

**Hymn of Sending "Heart with loving hearts united"* Hymnal: A Worship Book #420

**Benediction*

In the freedom of God's love in Christ, go out there to serve, knowing that the promise of a new humanity begins with what we have affirmed in here, where God has made a dwelling place among us, Amen.

- *Robert E. Faus*



A Service of Worship **Casting Stones**

Importance of The Church Reaching Out With Compassion

Scripture John 8:2-11

"Jesus stood up and said to them, 'Whoever among you has never committed a sin may throw the first stone at her.'"

Theme

In the way Jesus treated the adulterous woman, we see how important it is for the church to reach out to those whom we label as "sinners" with compassion rather than condemnation.

Sermon Outline

A pastor is washing his car in the driveway while his wife and children are gone. Twelve year old Robbie rides into the yard on his bicycle and asks to play with the pastor's sons. Although being told they are not home, the neighborhood boy does not seem to be in a hurry to leave. Robbie tells the pastor that he is temporarily living with his aunt, that his father is in prison, that he lived with his mother until she got drunk, and that he is getting poor grades in school. Then Robbie asks, "Knowing all this about me, can I still come over and play with your sons?" Knowing how influential peers are on young people, how would you feel as a parent with your children playing with Robbie?

What should be the Christian's attitude toward persons who get into trouble with the law or live morally questionable lives? How should we relate toward persons who sin?

I would like to address these questions by looking at the scripture which was read a few moments ago. (John 8:2-11)

The teachers of the Law and Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman whom they have caught committing adultery. They are trying to trap Jesus. If he suggests leniency, he would be contradicting their laws (which calls for stoning for this offense). If he approves her being stoned, this would contradict his compassionate image. Jesus masterfully handles this situation by suggesting anyone who has not committed a sin may cast the first stone. This answer takes the focus off the woman and puts it on her accusers. Jesus has granted permission for the woman to be stoned, but puts a qualification on those who would administer the punishment. Each of her accusers leaves and Jesus says to her, "I do not condemn you either."

What should be our attitude toward those who fall short of living up to Jesus' high moral standards? Jesus suggests that unless one meets the criteria of being sinless that one is not justified in pointing the condemning finger at another.

In a story entitled "The Magic Seeds," a thief is sentenced to be hung for stealing a small package of meat. Before being taken to the gallows, the thief indicates to the king that he is the only person alive who knows how to plant an apple seed that would grow and bear fruit

overnight. In order to atone for his crime he would like to teach that secret to the king's court. The king is intrigued and grants the condemned man his wish. The criminal asks for a shovel, an handful of apple seeds and a maiden who has never been kissed.

The next day the king, his 13 year old daughter and all his advisors gather. The thief digs a small hole and instructs the king's daughter to pour some water into it. Then the thief announces that the seeds need to be placed in the ground by someone who has never taken a single item, no matter how small or how long ago. Each member of the king's court (the prime minister, treasurer, etc) are invited to plant the seed, but each confess to having at some time in their lives taken something. Finally the thief asks why he is being hung for having taken a small amount of food when everyone in this court of trusted public servants also has taken something which had not belonged to them.

Do you remember Robbie who came from a broken home, got poor grades and seemed headed for a life of trouble and asked if he could play with the pastor's sons? What if he had also asked for permission to attend Sunday School and church? Would he have felt condemned or accepted by the good church members?

Unfortunately many persons at the time they most need a compassionate fellowship instead experience condemnation from members of the church. Do we meet Jesus' criteria for throwing stones?

Worship Resources

Call to Worship (responsively)

One: "Early in the morning Jesus went again to the Temple. All the people gathered around him, and he sat down and began to teach them."

All: We gather in this sanctuary to learn more about the ways of God as revealed through Jesus' teachings and life.

One: "The teachers of the Law and the Pharisees brought in a woman who had been caught committing adultery. . . They said to Jesus, 'In our Law Moses commanded that such a woman must be stoned to death. What do you say?'"

Prayer of Confession (unison)

O God--as the teachers of the Law and Pharisees wanted to stone the adulterous woman to death, we confess we at times also are guilty of condemning those who fail to attain the same standards of goodness as do we. We criticize those who fall short of living true to the demanding ideals of Jesus. Forgive us, o God, when we are more ready to condemn others than to compliment them.

Silent Reflection

Use these moments of silence to reflect upon a time recently when you were critical of another person. What was the wrong or sinful act of which they were guilty? Was there something complimentary or affirming you could have said?

Words of Assurance (responsively)

One: After the adulterous woman's accusers left, Jesus said to her, "I do not condemn you. You may go now, but do not sin again."

All: We celebrate this morning God's forgiveness which does not condemn us for our faults, but gives, us another chance to do what is right.

Offertory Thought

We often express our faith as a response to what we have received or experienced. For instance:

We forgive others when we recognize we have been the recipients of God's forgiveness.

We express love when we live in the assurance of God's grace.

We share our gifts out of an awareness we have been blessed by God's generosity.

May we now give as our response to what we have undeservingly received.

Benediction

(Each person is given a stone as they enter the sanctuary at the beginning of worship.)

You are now invited to hold in your hand the stone you were given when you entered the sanctuary. Let it represent your desire to condemn or criticize another person. You may want to throw your stone at your spouse, child, parent, boss, fellow employee, neighbor, friend or fellow church member. Before throwing your stone, be sure you are qualified. According to Jesus, only those who have never sinned may do so. If you meet this criteria, then hold on to your stone. If you do not, then you have no need for it. You might as well leave it here. In fact, why not: drop your stone now and let it lay.

(Pastor drops his/her stone and hopes others will follow.)

Did you hear your stone hit the floor? May that sound be a reminder of your failure to qualify to condemn others. Go now with a desire to not sin anymore, but when you do, know God is patient with you as you are expected to be patient with others who sin. Amen

Hymns

(numbers are in Hymnal: A Worship Book)

- 145 There's a Wideness in God's Mercy
- 327 Great Is Thy Faithfulness
- 363 Renew Your Church

- *J.D. Glick*



Small Group Devotional

An Open Welcome

Scripture Reading

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me - watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." Matt. 11: 28 - 30. Peterson's paraphrase entitled, THE MESSAGE.

Creating a positive, welcoming environment in our congregations is harder than most of us realize. The scripture lesson reminds us that "our" and "my" brand of religion often leads to our demise because we become self serving. Keeping Christ central keeps us from the pitfalls of building walls that keep outsiders out.

Researchers tell us that the longer a congregation is in existence the higher the walls become that separate the insiders and the outsiders. Insiders assume that friendliness is automatic. Outsiders are often looked upon with cold suspicion and piercing eyes. It communicates to visitors that this is a "cold church". Our body language communicates 60% of what we say and do. Our guests (visitors) pick up our signals during the first two minutes of worshiping with us. They sense our welcoming and inclusive signals as well as our tight knit and exclusive signals.

Romans 15:7; John 13:34 and Matthew 25:35 indicate that a friendly welcome must be communicated in our greetings and rituals. The needs of the "guest" always rank equal with those of the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoners and the sick. (I was a stranger and you welcomed me). All this begins by paying attention to and becoming intentional about an "open door" welcome. "Open door" policies of biblical hospitality include:

An atmosphere of relaxed fellowship preceding the more formal aspects of our worship experience. Remember, lonely people are hungry for relationships. This may be your only opportunity for connecting with them.

A two or three minute greeting spot during the worship service. This communicates a relational tone in your congregation.

A Pew Greeter for every two, three or four pews, depending on the pew size. This ensures a handshake greeting and welcome for every guest.

A fellowship time following the worship service. Be especially intentional to include your guests (visitors) in your relational circles. Then introduce them to your friends.

Do everything you can to put your visitors on the inside for Jesus' sake. God's Kingdom demands it. "Welcome others as Christ welcomed you for the glory of God."

Closing prayer:

O welcoming God; Teach us to accept, welcome and affirm others in the same way you welcomed, accepted and affirmed us. Grant us the privilege of helping "outsiders" become "insiders" in your holy family. May our Church doors be an open welcome for Christ's sake. Amen

- Fred Bernhard

