



# Warmth, Challenge & Grace

*by Julianna Shults*

**T**he word “safe” truly doesn’t describe the church and is not the “safe space” our culture promotes. Instead it provides a place of warmth, challenge, and grace all focused around what Jesus Christ as done for us on the cross.

**T**he term “safe space” has gotten thrown around a lot lately in educational and social settings. The term has been used to define various kinds of spaces, especially on places like university campuses. Some are free of topics that may create real injury to those struggling with mental health issues. Others are unrealized utopian spaces free from any cultural bias and conflict. As our world becomes ever more divided, and conflict rises around us, young people are searching for a place where they can wrestle with questions, express doubts and receive true, reliable information. Is what they are searching for “safe space” or is it something else entirely?

The 2017 LCMS Millennial Research and subsequent focus groups found that the overall atmosphere of a church has an impact on faith resiliency and retention. In our recent focus groups with active LCMS young adults, we asked them to help define what it meant for the church to be a “safe”, “warm”, and “authentic” space. We soon learned that those words can be fraught with baggage. It was clear we needed very specific language around what a healthy, Christ centered church environment is.

Throughout the research, it was clear that the environment of the church was critical for faithful growth in God’s Word. Congregations are communities of believers can build trust, Christ-like relationships, and support that weather the storms of teenage and young adult years. Or they can develop an unhealthy atmosphere, making it easier for young people to walk away. While not all inclusive, we continue to circle these three words that best describe what young people told us helped keep them attached to the church community: Warmth, Challenge, and Grace.

Warmth is characterized by displaying Christ’s love for all people and a personal invitation be a part of the congregation. Warmth strives for every visitor to be greeted and made comfortable. A strong welcome helps dissipate confusion or distraction and allows their worship experience to be focused on God’s gifts for them. Our actions should reflect God’s love and desire for all to know Jesus as their savior.

Beyond the initial welcome, warmth happens when all Baptized members are consistently reminded they are an important part of the Body of Christ. In these communities of faith, stories of failure, repentance, God’s grace, and joy are told. People across generations are known and want to know others. God designed for us to see and reflect God’s love for us to others.

Challenge is characterized by a willingness to share the truth in love so that all may know and remain in the faith of Jesus Christ. Challenge doesn’t just let sin and conflict slide. It is willing to engage in tough spiritual conversations. Standing firmly in God’s Word, it faces the questions and confusion we experience living in the darkness of sin. These conversations start with good listening, and do not deflect difficult topics. Instead, they build relationships through honest, open discussion that is centered around God’s Word and promises.

The other opportunity to provide challenge comes as believers seek to live out their faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. Challenge doesn’t underestimate young people. Instead it gives them opportunity to live out their various vocations, even when it stretches them. It can be hard to give young people opportunities to serve and lead, especially when there is the potential for failure. Members should be encouraged to take the work of Christ seriously in their various vocations.

Grace is characterized by echoing God’s love and forgiveness of us to others. The words of confession and absolution should be our regular vocabulary, especially as young people struggle with faith. Young people are learning (and failing) so much so quickly. They need a community of believers that constantly reminds them of their God who loved and sent His Son for them. Grace creates an environment where questions are not feared, attacked or ignored. As young people struggle with faith, grace gives them support to address their concerns head on with faithful parents and supportive adults. It keeps their answers and identity focused on Christ rather than on sports, social media or other distractions.

The word “safe” truly doesn’t describe the church and is not the “safe space” our culture promotes. Instead it provides a place of warmth, challenge, and grace all focused around what Jesus Christ as done for us on the cross. Unfortunately, there is no program that will create this for your ministry. It is going to look different for every congregation. Yet, the effects are the same. You can start assessing where you are by asking key leaders to describe the congregation’s environment. Have other Lutheran congregations send someone to visit and ask for their feedback. Congregations can do significant things for youth ministry by seeking not safe spaces, but places of warmth, challenge and grace that constantly point young people to Christ. ■

## Discussion Questions

- As you begin to think about your congregation being or becoming a warm, challenging, graceful space for youth and young adults, what perceptions come to mind?
- What, if any, issues or topics do you believe you or others in the church are equipped to handle? Explain.
- Which issues or topics are you not equipped or prepared to handle? Explain.
- In what ways is your church consistent or inconsistent in the ways it handles different issues or topics? If it is inconsistent, how can we change our inconsistent practice to be in conformity with God’s Word and with each other?
- To what extent do the people in your congregation view it as a place where they experience warmth, challenge, and the unconditional love of God?