Jeff's Jottings
Creating safe space

March 11, 2015

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Diversity.

Barriers.

The sheer busyness of life.

As I've reflected with you these past few weeks on the Belhar Confession and the challenge of fostering a commitment to unity among Christians, I've named these three realities both as obstacles to and opportunities toward a sense of unity in Christ and common purpose as a presbytery. I've come to believe that we cannot live as intended in the body of Christ without coming to terms with, and in fact embracing, the diversity of the communities in which we serve; the barriers we too easily find (or construct) between us; and the sheer busyness of life that diverts us from collaboration.

Today, I want to add this fourth side to this foundation of unity: creating safe space in which to do this work.

Late last year, Google released the results of a multi-year quest to find the secret of well-functioning teams and groups. About what they had previously thought made good teams — the right mix of talent and functionality — they said, "We were dead wrong." It wasn't smarts, logic or ability that made great teams, they discovered; *who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact, structure their work, and view their contributions.* Further, they found that, "far and away, the most important" factor in building successful teams was **psychological safety**: the ability of team members to feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable around each other.

Google has, as one might expect, developed production metrics to prove this finding really is true. But I was more interested — especially in the context of this presbytery — in one of their "softer" conclusions: that while human instinct is to avoid behaviors that could negatively influence how others

perceive our competence, awareness and positivity, when we do exactly that **and** when we create the kind of psychologically safe space for others to risk and be vulnerable, we are far more likely to achieve a set of common goals.

Would you call this presbytery a safe space for us to do ministry together? Is this a place where we can debate and even disagree out of a non-negotiable commitment to protect others and foster unity in Christ? Are we committed to enter into each other's stories, in all their realism, not to fix each other but to be present and supportive; to love people right where they are? Or would these commitments take away from the kind of organizational responsibilities we owe our own churches, theologies or ideas?

Belhar says this to us: *We believe, that unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain (Eph. 4:1-16).*

This I know: I've rather quickly grown to love this presbytery, and this little slice of geography to which it has been called in ministry. I love the people I have gotten to know, and with whom I get to work. It feels like a real privilege to be here … most days, anyway. But it's hard, too, and a risk to love and serve like this, especially in this changing environment. Can we be a presbytery where taking bold risks is possible, where being honest and transparent is possible, knowing that, while it may be difficult, we do this work in safe and sacred spaces? What would we have to do to create that kind of commitment in this presbytery, whether at our meetings or in our day-to-day, week-to-week interactions?

This isn't about agreeing, about *kumbaya*; hard choices always abound. We will have to make them, and they will leave some of us bruised. This is about fiercely standing up for and protecting the people we say are all children of God.

Embracing diversity. Bridging barriers. Finding each other amidst the sheer busyness of life. Creating safe space. The four pillars on which I believe unity can be built.

We can do this.