A few months ago I suddenly realized the fact that there had been two light bulbs out in my office for many months. No wonder everything seemed so dark! The bulbs are now replaced and light has returned to my office, but it got me to wondering, “Just how many light bulbs are there in this huge facility?” It’s a big job just to keep up with all the light bulbs that burn out. It reminded me of a classic joke that pokes fun at the differences between religious groups.

1. How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? Ten, one to actually change the bulb, and nine to say how much they liked the old one.
2. How many Calvinists does it take to change a light bulb? None, because God has predestined when the lights will be on.
3. How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb? CHANGE???? Who said anything about change?
4. How many TV evangelists does it take to change a light bulb? One, but for the message of light to continue, send in your donation today.
5. How many fundamentalists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, because any more would be compromise, and standards of light would slip.
6. How many Catholics does it take to change a light bulb? None. They always use candles.
7. How many campfire worship leaders does it take to change a light bulb? One, but soon all those around can warm up to its glowing.
8. How many United Methodists does it take to change a light bulb? We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that a light bulb works for you, go for it! You’re invited to write a poem or compose a liturgical dance about your personal relationship to your light bulb and present it next month at our annual light bulb service, in which we will explain a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, compact fluorescent, three-way, long-lived, spotlight, tinted and LED, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence through Jesus Christ.

Our theme today is a critical one in United Methodism because one year from now, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church is meeting in Portland, Oregon. For two weeks, 850 people, half clergy and half laity, will discuss and decide upon church doctrine and polity for the next four years.
The General Conference is our worldwide legislative body and represents 14 million United Methodists across the globe, including Asia, Europe, Africa and the United States. The percentage of U.S. delegates continues to decline as the church in other parts of the world grows. In 2016 only 60% of the delegates at General Conference will be from the United States. In several weeks, the Detroit Annual Conference will elect its three clergy and three lay delegates. West Michigan elected their one clergy and one lay delegate last June.

In a denomination as large and diverse as ours, there will no doubt be many occasions for disagreement, and there will be close votes. The primary issue that will again dominate the 2016 General Conference is our stance on the practice of homosexuality and gay marriage. This is especially critical because the Supreme Court began deliberating last week whether the U.S. Constitution guarantees same-sex couples the right to marriage. Petitions were filed by couples in five states, including Michigan, that still prohibit gay marriage. Another important issue in the church is how we can facilitate diversity of practice, structure and belief in our denomination based on cultural and geographic context.

How can we be united as one body of Christ called United Methodists in the midst of our differences? If it’s any consolation, the early church had its share of controversy as well. The primary dilemma in the first century church was what to do with Gentiles, those people who were not Jews. Gentiles were generally regarded with more fear and loathing than some people still regard the African-American, Muslim or LGBTQ community today.

At first, the early followers of Jesus simply ignored the Gentiles. With the power of the Holy Spirit poured out upon them at Pentecost, these followers went out preaching, teaching and making converts among the Jews. If a Gentile happened to want to become a Christian, they had to first become a Jew. Early Christian leaders were convinced that Gentiles could not be saved unless they were circumcised and participated in all the rites and traditions of the Jewish faith.

The Holy Spirit continued to shake things up in the early church, though. After Paul was converted, he came to believe that his mission was to the Gentiles. And Peter, the leader of the early church in Jerusalem, had an experience at the Gentile Cornelius’ house where he saw with his own eyes the Holy Spirit being poured out on Gentiles. It totally blew away his prejudice and misconceptions about Gentiles.

A church-shaping crisis, indeed a world-shaping crisis arose over the mission to the Gentiles. An apostolic conference was called in Jerusalem around 45 A.D. The conservative Jewish Christians felt that Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Others, like Paul and Barnabas, did not feel it was necessary for Gentile Christians to be yoked with the demands of the Jewish law. The fate of Christianity lay in the hands of this council.

Peter, who previously had leaned toward the conservative side, stood up and told about his experience with Cornelius and how he now believed that Christians are saved by grace, not by keeping the Jewish law. Then James, the brother of Jesus, also in touch with the conservatives, made the great compromise breakthrough that allowed the gospel to explode to the Greek and Roman world. His proposal was that Gentile converts had to abstain from only three things: sexual immorality, eating food sacrificed to idols, and eating blood.
Why did this conference work? Five reasons.

1. The opposing sides agreed to meet and listen to each other’s stories.
2. Their minds were open to discerning God’s word for them.
3. Those who had the most influence in the debate, Peter, Paul and Barnabas, spoke from personal experience because their lives were actually touched by Gentile Christians.
4. They realized that keeping the Jewish law was not at the heart of Christianity. No, the heart of the Christian faith is that you and I are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ as God’s son. If the Gentiles believe in Jesus, there is no reason they cannot be saved.
5. The conference worked because they were willing to compromise.

Now let’s jump seventeen centuries to John Wesley. I have Flat John and Flat Charles Wesley here with me today. We are asking our children and all of you to color the Wesley brothers, take them with you out into the world as you live the Methodist Way and send us some pictures! Flat John and Charles went with Gary and me on vacation and had some great adventures.

We also have an engraving up front from our Wesley collection. The picture is of John Wesley and his Holy Club, a group of young men who eagerly discussed theological issues and didn’t always agree. Even John and Charles did not agree on everything. John would occasionally change the words to Charles’ hymns when they seemed too Calvinistic!

John gave his people a set of doctrinal standards that he considered to be the main beliefs of Christianity and about which he thought there was general agreement throughout the Christian church. These essential doctrines included five things: 1) a trinitarian understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or another way of expressing it, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer; 2) an acknowledgment of the seriousness of sin; 3) a dependence upon the grace of God that goes before us, makes us right with God, and leads us into right living; 4) Jesus’ death as the means by which you and I receive that grace and are reconciled to God; and 5) the work of the Holy Spirit, which cultivates in us holiness of heart and life.¹

These were Wesley’s essential doctrines. But Wesley also spoke about what he called “opinions,” theological views that are less important than the essentials because they are not necessary for salvation. On matters of opinion, there are great differences among Christians, and, for Wesley, that was okay.

He also realized that other churches were not nearly as tolerant as Methodists. Wesley wrote, “Look all around you; you cannot be admitted into the Church, or society of the Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Quakers, or any others, unless you hold the same opinions with them... The Methodists alone do not insist on your holding this or that opinion; but they think and let think...” Wesley continued, “Now, I do not know of any religious society, either ancient or modern, wherein such liberty of conscience is now allowed, or has been allowed, since the age of the Apostles. Here is our glorying; and a glorying particular to us.”

John Wesley realized that Christians are not always going to agree on “opinions” and felt that people had to be free to decide for themselves. No one should be forced. Wesley said, “Everyone
must follow the dictates of their own conscience in simplicity and godly sincerity. They must be fully persuaded in their own mind and then act accordingly to the best light they have.” (Catholic Spirit, 1750) Wesley urged Methodists to have a “catholic” or universal spirit toward one another. Despite differences of opinion, we can and must treat each other with respect, patience and kindness. Wesley’s beliefs are often summarized in this phrase, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.”

What does United Methodism have to offer our world, then? **First, we offer tolerance.** Wesley said, “The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort.... We think and let think.” Opinionated beliefs, prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness are not part of our Methodist heritage. Rather, we accept people who believe differently and even encourage them to follow the dictates of their own conscience in simplicity and godly sincerity according to the best light they have.

When we include people of widely differing views, we not only honor the legacy of John Wesley, we also honor the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. However, when we bicker among ourselves, how can we possibly set an example for the rest of the world? This, my friends, is a primary reason why many of our churches are devoid of young people. They are turned off by our intolerance.

**Second, The United Methodist Church offers an openness to listening and learning from one another.** This is a critical time in The United Methodist Church. We need to focus on the church’s primary mission of making disciples for Jesus Christ. But the truth is that we have become distracted, demoralized and diminished by divisive debate over our opinions. In addition, too many of our local churches are so obsessed with mere survival that we miss the opportunity to save our collectives lives by losing them in service to our communities. Too many of us are reluctant to be quiet, listen to God’s guiding voice and learn from one another, even if it means rethinking some of our cherished convictions.

You know what I think? I think the naysayers and doom and gloom specialists in our denomination underestimate the strength of United Methodists, for we have so much to offer the world. I am extremely optimistic because I look at our church, First Church, and I see a congregation that is alive and Christ-centered. I see a congregation that is united by the essentials of Christianity and strengthened by our many opinions. I look out at all of you and what I see is light.

Now, maybe that’s because our Director of Facilities, Tony Kotwicki, says that our main campus has 2,195 interior and exterior light bulbs. 2,195. Tony changes an average of 10-15 light bulbs a week at a cost of from $1.25 to $30 a bulb. Tony, are you in the sanctuary? We have a spotlight out right above me! You can start with this one.

There’s a lot of light in this place! Yes, we don’t agree on every issue, but we’re not going to let that get in the way of our oneness in Christ. When our earthly discernment is unclear, we are willing to compromise with integrity. For, in the end, our one great certainty is our unity in the love of Jesus Christ.
So where are you? Will you welcome all people to Christ and this congregation, regardless of their opinions? Do you encourage others to act according to the best light and Holy Spirit energy they have? Are you seeking to build up the church at all times? Will you support the people of Nepal, grieving the loss of so many people in the earthquake? Will you pray for the citizens of Baltimore as racial tensions flare after the death of Freddy Gray was ruled a homicide?

Remember, our distinguishing mark as Christians is not our opinions; nor is it the number of people it takes to change a light bulb, although if you see any that are burned out, let us know! No, our strength is our tolerance, our openness to listening and learning, and our willingness to act according to the best light we have. Most of all, though, it’s our love, which is symbolized by the bread and the cup, offered to all. “The distinguishing marks of a Methodist are not his opinions of any sort...” Will you think and let think, and then act according to the best light you have?