

How to Change a Light Bulb

ISAIAH 9:2-7 (NRSV)

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.*

(EPHESIANS 4:7, 11-16 NRSV) *But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ... ¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us*

come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. ¹⁵But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

The liturgical season from last Sunday until Lent is called "Epiphany." The word comes from a Greek word meaning to shine. Today I'm beginning a series of sermons on "Light", based on a text from Isaiah: "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...*" The first thing I note is that it indicates change.

How many Methodists does it take to change a light bulb? It takes six: one to hold the ladder, one to change the light bulb and four to reminisce about how good the old light bulb was.

"Remember the "Y2K" scare during the last half of 1999? There was fear that computers around the world were not programmed to roll over from 1999 to 2000. They'd either lock up or revert to the year 1900.

Either way, data would be lost: power grids would shut down, with massive blackouts around the world. Apocalyptic images abounded: hospitals without power and patients dying by the scores. Airport traffic control systems going down and planes colliding over major population areas. A breakdown of our military defense systems. Our nation would be defenseless. Remember?

How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? Presbyterians don't change light bulbs. Somebody's grandmother donated that light bulb, and they don't want to offend anybody. (I told that joke once in a sermon, not knowing there was a Presbyterian minister in the crowd. He came up to me after the service and said, "Now you know why Presbyterians are always in the dark!")

1999 was growing short. Microsoft provided a "patch"—a small program you could download to correct the problem. Still, it was strongly advised that all computers be backed up. It took three boxes of floppy disks—remember floppy disks?—to back up my laptop; and a case to back up the church's computers. I've wondered if the whole "Y2K" thing was a gimmick invented by the floppy disk industry.

Oh. How many Episcopalians does it take to change a light bulb? It takes four: one to hold the ladder, one to change the light bulb and two to mix the martinis.

On December 31, 1999 the countdown began. TV crews converged on Japan—the first nation west of the International Date Line. If anything was going to happen, it would happen first in Japan—at midnight. Would Tokyo go dark? Would there be chaos and looting in the streets?

Midnight came; and nothing happened: Tokyo; in Moscow; London; New York...

How many Disciples does it take to change a light bulb? ~~Change??????~~

Sometimes I get the feeling that any proposal for change—especially in church—has the same effect as “Y2K”.

Change is not an option: there will be change. There was change when I came on board as your pastor; there will be change when I leave. It’s not an option.

We do have options, however, concerning how we respond to change. In any given situation, you always have choices. You may not like the options; but you have choices: in every circumstance, at least three types of options. In each case there are predictable consequences.

First, you can do nothing. Just take what happens. Most churches have been doing that for sixty-seventy years; which at least partially explains why most churches have been in decline for that long: refusing to change, or refusing to respond to change.

If you choose to do nothing, change is going to occur, anyway. In an average congregation, 10% won’t like the change; and they’ll gripe and complain and stir the pot. In a normal congregation, 10% will applaud the change and support it. And 80% will say, “Whatever.”

Now, it’s those two groups of 10% that determine the consequence in a congregation that chooses to do nothing about change. If the most influential members of the congregation are in that 10% that approve the change, then it’s likely that there will be some positive, constructive consequences (although the other 10% will continue to gripe and complain and stir the pot).

If those most influential members of the congregation are among the 10% that don’t like the change, there is nothing good that can result.

In a congregation that does nothing about the change that is inevitable, there is a 10% chance there will be good consequences. There is a 10% chance there will be conflict and the pastor will depart under pressure. And there is an 80% chance that things will continue pretty much as they have been, and with about the same results. I think I’ve share my favorite definition of insanity: “Doing the same thing and expecting a different result.”

That’s option #1: do nothing. Take whatever happens.

Remember the cigarette commercial from a couple of generations ago: "I'd rather fight than switch!" **That's the Second Option: the classical "Fight/Flight Syndrome"**. We can choose to resist all change—which is an exercise in futility. Oh, you can hold off specific change for a time; but, the effort will divert energy from the church's ministry, and the predictable consequence will be conflict—sooner or later. There'll be frustration and anger, and some will leave under less than desirable circumstances—probably including your pastor.

Now, most people in most churches will say they want their church to grow; and most will be specific: we need more young adults. But most churches also do two specific things that keep young adults away.

My generation has provided most of the leadership in most of the churches since the late sixties. We're tired. We want the younger generation (and by that we're basically saying we want "Generation X") to take the leadership. "We need new energy and fresh, new ideas!"

So some "younger generation" person steps up and takes a leadership role. And the first new "fresh, new idea" he or she presents gets shot down!

Most churches want to grow—but not to change. It' ain't gonna' happen.

The third option is a proactive one, and the only one that holds promise for the church. We can choose to raise change to a new level: to anticipate it, mold it, shape it, focus it and use it. If we don't control change—if we don't decide how we will change, we will be controlled by change.

Now, I don't believe in changing for the sake of change. On the other hand, if you can't remember why you do something; and if it's not working, it's insane to keep doing it.

I have committed to focusing a major part of my time in the first half of this year on gathering a task force on evangelism and working with that group to develop a strategy for evangelism and church growth for our congregation.

Today's text from Ephesians tells us everything we need to know about the church. There is more we can learn about the church; but if we get these verses we can have the same results: *As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.*

That's what we all say we want for the church: to grow. And I think we mean it, except that some significant change will be required. Growth requires change; growth brings change; in fact, growth is change!

You don't worry about whether your children or grandchildren will grow, because you know that all healthy living things grow! Your concern is their health, because you know that if they're healthy, they'll grow. And when they grow, they

change. Sometimes that change is...

I believe the church is a living organism. It is the Body of Christ, and our text says each of us a part of that body.

The greatest need for change may be in us—the various parts of the body. The text says that the body is “*healthy and growing and full of love —when each part does its own special work.*” That’s the way God designed it; and each one of us has a part to play. When the body is healthy—in other words, *when each part does its own special work* —the body will grow.

And that’s a change we all can live with.