For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. (2 Corinthians 4:6-9, NRSV)

1. Introduction of theme: the cracks that let the light shine through

The theme for our annual conference this year is: light shines through. The words come from a Leonard Cohen song. Leonard Cohen died last November about the time we were discussing a theme. His music had a poetic, even prophetic, messages to them. One of my churches in Minnesota actually had a loose-leaf songbook with his songs and they usually sang at least one in every service!
Leonard Cohen was a “spiritual” person, actually an ordained Buddhist monk. His writings and music didn’t flinch from human frailty or flaw, whether it was personal or political. He saw the reality around him and it wasn’t always bright and shiny.

Once he wrote, “Dance me through the panic ‘til I’m gathered safely in.” In our age of uncertainty and anxiety, I love the image: Dance me through the panic ‘til I’m gathered safely in!

He died the day before the election but throughout that week, his music and words rang in many ears as this song resonated with the state of our souls:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.

Life is not perfect; there’s a crack or imperfection in everything but in fact through that imperfection, light can shine through. We are like those cracks—imperfect as we are—that actually let light through...here and there!
Retired Bishop Sharon Brown Christopher published this photo shortly thereafter, also referencing the song. And the image for me became a prayer about a lot of things this year: the state of our souls, the state of our church, the state of our annual conference, the state of our nation and our world. It seems as though more doors of welcome kept closing instead of opening, minds stopped up with certainty instead of curiosity, and hearts shutting others out…except, except where there are cracks of hope that let the light in!

The light of Christ. A light that gives us just enough to take the next step by faith and not by sight. And when we join our light of hope with a host of others, we can light up the world, our nation, our church, our annual conference.

Recently my mother asked me, “What’s with this word dystopia?” She was reading about how dystopian literature has “flown off the shelves” and onto our iPads. I explained that it’s an imaginary place or state where everything is bad, dark, and beyond hope.

I underscore the imaginary place or state in the sense that as people of faith, while doors may be closed, minds may be stopped, and hearts shutting others out, as Christians, we are called to be people of hope. As someone said to me recently, “When I see hope in others, it gives me hope to keep the faith.” Our calling is to look for the light that shines through and to let the light shine through us.

So as the passage from 2 Corinthians says (please join me responsively):
We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

Or, to quote a popular French saying, “The hour calls for optimism; we’ll save pessimism for better times.” I would say that as United Methodist Christians, the hour calls for hope; we need to save cynicism, despair and dystopia for better times…

2. The light shines through cracks in our local churches

Our local churches increasingly experience the literal closing of doors, or at least the threat of it, in many places. There are more part-time churches, lowering of salaries, heavy financial liabilities for massive buildings, and of course a rapidly changing religious landscape where fewer and fewer people of all ages, not just young people, are involved in church. No more can we rely on a sense of duty, winsome fellowship and chicken dinners to entice people to come and know us…and Jesus, too. Many people just aren’t into us!

But the light shines through cracks all over the Northern Illinois Annual Conference.
You will find in the conference booklet our Mission/Priorities/Values/Vision diagram. This continues to guide our work. Under values, you will see “experimentation and risk-taking (with room for failure).” There are some amazing experiments going on in our local churches. I can’t begin to do justice to them all but I want to give a few examples for you to think about what experiments and risk-taking you can do in order to let the light shine through your church.

We have some new configurations of churches working together to be in ministry. In our Landscape survey two years ago, we discovered low clergy morale. I don’t think that the Barrington/W. Dundee/Carpentersville/El Mesias “cooperative” (we don’t know what to call it) started as a way to encourage clergy morale, but as these congregations or at least their clergy work together, have staff meetings together, coordinate worship together, interact with each other’s congregations as clergy and laity in order to better resource each other, I personally believe this configuration contributes to a higher clergy morale. There are some clergy who still want to be lone rangers but there are more clergy who would like to be in a supportive, creative, dynamic, on-going relationship to “up their game” and keep their spirits up when it’s easy to be discouraged. Who knows where this “cooperative” will end up? There is no pre-determined idea…we’ll wait to see how the light shines through.

It doesn’t just happen with a large suburban church and a few other smaller ones around it. It also happens in the rural areas. Five churches in four small villages in La Salle County who are just a few miles apart from each other wanted to keep a UM witness in each village but wanted a more dynamic ministry together. One church—Wedron—merged in with another and then there were four-- Serena-Sheridan-Harding-Norway.

These churches became a cooperative. They hold worship services at the various churches on Saturday, Sunday and Wednesday. They come together to provide a thriving weekday children’s program that any one of them couldn’t provide but they are better together! Ministry has become vital through this cooperative and while some of you are afraid that all the annual conference wants to do is shut your church, quite the contrary, we want to have a vital ministry in our communities, especially our rural villages where it can be a struggle. But it takes some creativity, experimentation and risk-taking!

We also have a couple of churches in Chicago whose massive old buildings are literally falling down around their heads. They are working with district committees as well as their own leadership to see if they can redevelop the property to include such things as senior living units, a parsonage, a worship space, maybe some retail space and community space. It takes a developer to really make it happen but they are working on getting one. This is a new venture for us and it’s literally “walking by faith, not by sight” for these congregations. With the support of various architectural and building people who are UM, and with a very clear vision of who they want to be, we pray that these experiments will produce fruit.
But it’s not easy! It can put all the church’s financial resources on the line. And in some neighborhoods, there is resistance.

Indulge me for a second to give a snapshot of the light shining through for one of these churches. The church was holding a community meeting in their sanctuary where a local organization was resisting any change to their building even though it is in really bad shape. It was getting very tense when…the light shines through…a 2-year-old who regularly attends worship there, piped up in the silence and said, “Is it time to pass the peace now?” Maybe that’s what we all should be asking when we’re involved in experimentation and risk taking!

We don’t know whether any of these experiments will pan out or not, but there is no failure unless we fail to learn from what doesn’t work and allow others to benefit from it. If they take these risks, and it doesn’t go well, what will happen? But let me ask you: If they don’t take these risks, what will happen? What about your church? What’s the risk you need to take?

This evening during the Program Council’s report, we’ll hear more about some of the creative, innovative ministries that churches are doing—these are all experiments to see how to engage in our communities with the gospel of God’s love. In addition to changing communities for the better, they bring vibrancy to the congregation.

Another one of our core values as an annual conference is to try to get training closer to the local church and to use a different kind of learning/training process. One different training process involves learning some new ideas, making plans about how to use what has been learned, going home and doing something with it! But the trick is, to come back again and report on what you did—whether it worked as you expected or not! You have to utilize the training you have.

Congregational Development’s TeamWorks and Rockford district’s Healthy Churches/ Hopeful Future were two different 4-session workshops with accountability built in.
3. The light shines through cracks in our annual conference

One of my goals as the bishop of the NIC is to work on what I call the “infrastructure” of this conference. We need to be more streamlined, better coordinated and focused, aligned in mission and money, and more nimble in how we make decisions. One of the ways that we have been working on this has been to develop a new annual conference organizational plan. This plan is designed to “enhance our connectionalism” so that local churches are better connected to each other (through districts) and so the annual conference can better equip local churches to do ministry because the annual conference better recognizes the needs of the local churches. As you see on the Mission/Priorities/Values/Vision diagram, our Landscape survey and analysis revealed that our priorities include:

- Equip both leaders and churches
  - To reach new members using new strategies
  - To help members grow as disciples
  - To be more effective in community outreach
  - Resource struggling churches
  - Rethink how to be vital churches
  - Cultivate trust within the conference

Last year you approved legislation that would design a new organization. The Organizational Task Force has worked throughout the year and will present legislation to this annual conference. The TF will report later this morning on their work which we hope you have had the opportunity to read.

Some of you remember 20 years ago there was an attempt to reorganize the structure of the annual conference and the Judicial Council didn’t allow it. Since then, the Book of Discipline has changed and now allows flexibility with some restrictions. The TF has paid close attention to those restrictions and to keep the focus of the structure to be centered on making disciples in our local churches. Let me refer you to BOD Par. 610:
The annual conference is responsible for structuring its ministries and administrative procedures in order to accomplish its purpose,” It is “permitted the flexibility to design conference and district structures in ways that best support the mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ . . .” ¶610

The proposed design for our annual conference organization isn’t perfect; all who participated in the TF would readily agree to that, but we are confident that we can get it up and running by the first of the year (January 2018) with built-in opportunities for evaluation to see how it is working by AC 2019.

The task force was very diverse. All 27 of them had a hand in the creation of the design that is before you. I only helped with process for the task force; this is a design created by people of this annual conference!

It is urgent that we have a new organizational structure that enhances our connectionalism and helps us to be a sustainable organization in order to “ride the rapids” of whatever disruptions may occur in our annual conference related to what happens in the general church.

A new organizational structure won’t make disciples in and of itself! But it can help us work together better, strengthening the annual conference’s ability to equip local churches in what is needed to fulfill our vision:
Our vision: Making and supporting vital Christians in vital congregations that engage
with their communities and the world for peace, justice and mercy.

4. The light shines through the cracks in the denomination

Sometimes it’s hard to see where the light shines through in our denomination right now
when there is so much chaos, uncertainty, hurt, fear, mistrust and anger. A member of this
annual conference requested a ruling last year on the BOOM’s statement about its
aspiration to be fully inclusive in its consideration and protection of candidates regardless
of sexual orientation in the commissioning and ordination process.

The result was a Judicial Council decision—the Judicial Council is like the Supreme
Court of the UMC—that reinforced the Discipline’s statement that persons who are
LGBTQ cannot be recommended by the BOOM. The BOOM is committed to fulfilling
their responsibilities but will review their policies and procedures in the coming year.

This ruling along with other related JC decisions was painful for many LGBTQ persons,
friends, families and supporting congregations. Yet the light shines through…

In one of our reconciling congregations, the pastor reported recently that they received 5
new members who each expressed that the congregation’s call to inclusivity and
reconciling welcome of LGBTQ persons was a major reason for joining. A new lesbian
member “longed for a church home for decades” that would accept her. They weren’t
necessarily LGBTQ persons themselves but they wanted to be a part of a congregation
that was welcoming. We need congregations and clergy who are accepting of all people,
including LGBTQ persons, whether you are a reconciling congregation or not.

I grieve at the pain that exists in our church—I am pained myself—over a matter which
we can’t seem to agree on so we continue to hurt each other. If you read the section of the
Discipline entitled, “Doctrinal Standards and Our Theological Task,” you will find that
John Wesley never intended for us to agree on all matters. In fact, I commend that section
to you. It says in part:
United Methodists respect the diversity of opinions held by conscientious persons of faith. Wesley followed a time-tested approach: ‘In essentials, unity; in non-essential, liberty; and in all things, charity.’

Our LGBTQ persons contribute greatly to the ministry and mission of the UMC. Yet as a church we keep telling them that they are “less than.” When will we stop hurting people who just keep giving to us all? We are stronger together with our full diversity than we would be if we deny the gifts of the Spirit that LGBTQ persons offer us.

So let me ask you:

Is our difference over human sexuality, as some have said, “the greatest moral and biblical challenge of our time”? What about racism and poverty? What about violence and war? What about the care of God’s creation?

In fact, how do you exactly divide a denomination…without shattering it? In any given pew of a UMC, there would be different convictions or degrees of conviction about human sexuality, not to mention, different opinions about a lot of things!

It’s at a time like this that it becomes apparent how much many of us don’t know about all the good the UMC does in all the places and through all the means. The President of the Council of Bishops, Bishop Bruce Ough, recently said this to the COB:
…if we divide, nearly all our essential unifying institutional activities would be lost or severely diminished – our ecumenical agreements, educational processes and institutions, prophetic statements, mission initiatives, global mission partnerships, communication plans, discipleship resources, benefit programs, publications, and the relationships among those who do this work. I don’t even know how to begin to assess this cost!

On the other hand, a division could also compromise and impoverish our dynamic biblical, Wesleyan faith and devotional practice. What is the cost to our souls and witness if in the name of theological or doctrinal preservation we violate our own General Rules of doing no harm, doing all the good we can and staying in love with God? And I would add, staying in love with our neighbor. (Bishop Bruce Ough, President of the Council of Bishops)

On September 16, we will have a conversation about Unity and Human Sexuality.
Every active clergy at the Clergy Session or here at Pheasant Run should have received a copy of *Unity of the Church and Human Sexuality*. As I said at the Clergy Session, there will be a test because we will be using some of its questions at charge conferences as well as on the 16th of September. Retired Bishop Sharon Zimmerman Radar will be leading us in conversations based on the resources that have come to us through this little book. We will also utilize the questions that have been given to each annual conference by the COB for reflection and discussion:

- In our diverse and global existence, what is the shared mission/purpose of the Church?
- Is there a proactive way for us to live together in our differences that doesn’t presume that we will resolve our differences? What would it be?
- What might be a form of unity that would empower us living together?
- What is our witness and what can be our witness to the world in relation to our differences?

I commend the book and the discussion to you. I hope you recognize from these questions that we are being called as a church to be focused and united in our mission. If there is any unity, it is in our mission, not in a unanimity or agreement.

As you may know, there is a Commission on the Way Forward which will present recommendations to the COB on our future as the UMC. A special General Conference in February 2019 in St. Louis will consider its recommendations. Let me remind you of the Commission’s vision:
The Commission will design a way for being church that maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible, that allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and that balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible. This unity will not be grounded in our conceptions of human sexuality, but in our affirmation of the Triune God who calls us to be a grace-filled and holy people in the Wesleyan tradition.

For me, the question is how then will we live together for the next 20 months before the Special General Conference? We need to live together in such a way that we do no harm and do nothing that is difficult/impossible to un-do after the decisions of the Special General Conference.

Here is a statement adopted during a recent meeting of the United Methodist Chancellor's Association (before the release of the Judicial Council decisions):

We, the chancellors of the annual conferences of The United Methodist Church, recognizing that there exist sincere beliefs and deep divisions within our connection, urge all persons, congregations, districts, conferences, and organizations of The United Methodist Church to refrain from any action that would prejudice the ability of the Commission on a Way Forward and the special session of the General Conference in February 2019 to preserve our denomination as one.

I urge us to heed this advice from these non-ideological chancellors of our church. This annual conference has lived together in its differences over the years. Now is not the time to become punitive or to further harm the potential of any clergy with actions that would be difficult to undue after the Special General Conference if there is the opportunity to live together in a more contextual way.

Please pray for our church and each other. Please be gentle and kind with one another even in our differences. Please pray for the Commission on the Way Forward and the Special General Conference in 2019.
5. The light shines through us in our nation and world

You may have noticed that there are a number of petitions to this annual conference to make statements about the increasingly vulnerable people in our midst and we as Christians need to speak and stand up for them. Our communities, state, and nation are experiencing many economic and political hardships. I can’t begin to name them all!

- Changes in health care that may leave many people without affordable health care in the future.
- The most vulnerable among us are threatened by the proposed federal budget, with among many other things, cuts in global AIDS funding that may cost 1 million lives.
- Friends, families and members of our churches who face deportation.
- Not to mention, we still don’t have a state budget after almost 2 years!

The list continues with concerns that we have for our natural world, our nurturing communities, our social communities, our economic community, our political community and our world community. Those are the categories of our UM Social Principles. I commend our Social Principles to all of you at the beginning of this quadrennium for study and reflection and at this critical time in our state, nation and world.

A poem that comes from a Somali woman born in Kenya and an immigrant to London has become a prayer for me every evening after a day’s worth of news:

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later that night
I held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?
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later that night
i held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?

it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.
—Warsan Shire

I’ve always said that one thing I love about being UM is that as soon as I know that it hurts somewhere, even everywhere, in our communities, country, and world, somehow the UMC will be there…and like with UMCOR, the last to leave. I value the scope and historical scale of our church to be “everywhere” for those who hurt. Again, how can we learn to live together with our differences so that the fundamental, often taken-for-granted reality of our church isn’t jeopardized? We must not let the problems of the church keep us from being the church. We are called to let the light shine through, bringing hope to a broken world.

6. Conclusion:

Perhaps it feels like there’s more “bad news” than good; I said that it seems in so many places doors of welcome keep closing instead of opening, minds get stopped up with certainty instead of curiosity, and hearts shut others out. But there are still cracks of hope throughout where the light of Christ keeps shining through…through you and all of us together…and in our local churches, through our annual conference and, yes, the UMC!

I would like to share a story attributed to the 20th century activist, Fannie Lou Hamer. There was an old man who was very wise, and he could answer questions that were almost impossible for people to answer.
So some people said, "We're going to trick this guy today. We're going to catch a bird, and we're going to carry it to this old man. And we're going to ask him, 'This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or is it dead?' If he says 'Dead,' then we're going to turn it loose and let it fly. But if he says, 'Alive,' then we're going to crush it."

So they walked up to the old man, and they said, "This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or is it dead?" He looked at them and smiled. And he said, "It's in your hands."

I believe that it’s in YOUR hands as to whether or not our local churches, annual conference and the UMC are the cracks of hope in an otherwise dismal church and world. You/we all hold the mission of Jesus in our hands! Let’s save cynicism, despair and dystopia for better times and live in the reality of our world with the faith and hope of Jesus’ followers!

Where do you see light shining through in unexpected but beautiful ways in your local church, the annual conference, the denomination and/or through us as United Methodist Christians in the world?

The good news is that we’re not alone—God and a connection of United Methodists—are with us! We’re better together! It’s in your hands to let the light shine through!