

Building without Walls

Church building and church buildings can often take a significant role and much time in congregations and communities. We build an architecture of visions, plans, and schedules for church growth as much as we busy ourselves with our buildings' architecture and management. We are challenged to look at the church through a different lens, one of reconciliation and the breaking down of traditions that divide and diminish our people.

Focus scripture: Ephesians 2:11–22

Scholars argue that Paul was not the author of the letter to the Ephesians, and that it was likely a general letter addressed to all churches in a variety of communities. They suggest it was written like this: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in ___," with the writer filling in the blank. On the most ancient versions, the blank isn't filled in at all, instead the letter is simply addressed to "the saints."

Ephesians 2 begins with the assumption that there is knowledge of what has gone before. "So then" (v.11) is a reminder to consider what has already been said while reading what is to come. That is, keep in mind that God's reconciling and unconditional love for all was shown in Jesus the Christ.

Christian communities throughout Asia Minor were finding their way. They consisted of people from different backgrounds, and the old animosities and traditions that existed between them were hard to shift. There seems to have been a hierarchy undermining the nature of the communities, with those from a Jewish tradition claiming superiority over the Gentiles, describing them as "the uncircumcised, thus propagating the idea that Gentiles didn't quite measure up, didn't qualify to be included in God's covenant with God's people. The writer of this epistle challenges this notion – Gentiles do not need to become Jews, as indeed Jews do not need to become Gentiles; in Christ, they are united as Jews and as Gentiles. All are welcome in the new order of the covenant between God and God's people, and everyone is drawn into community together through the spirit of peace.

At a time when peace was a "peace" enforced by the power of the Roman Empire, we might wonder how the peace described in the letter was perceived. Was it considered purely as a spiritual practice, or was a daring

political message also heard? The unity of diverse people through something other than Roman citizenship may well have been seen as insubordination.

The early church is called to build something new and unprecedented around the cornerstone of Christ. It is a paradoxical building with a strange architecture – built when walls and divisions are broken down and two humanities are reconciled into one. The language used implies that this is not something taken from the past, it is a present time occurrence – it is something that is being done now and will be done into the future. Everyone and all things will be changed by what is built.

2 Samuel 7:1–14a God's makes a promise to David and his descendants. They will be settled into a home and no longer a nomadic people.

Psalms 89:20–37 celebrates God's covenant on which the house of Israel is built. While law, commandments, and ordinances set up the house of Israel, the author of the letter to the Ephesians celebrates that God's family is broadened and extended to include every cultural background as Gentiles are welcomed into the family as brothers and sisters in Christ.

This reconciling love is seen in **Mark 6:30–34, 53–56** as Jesus responds with compassion to all when crowds rush to be healed.

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This week's scripture readings celebrate God's loving vision for healing, wholeness, and unity, and the compassion of God who provides a home to the homeless, healing for the sick, and welcome to those considered outsiders. The readings invite us to into deeper reflection on what this all-are-acceptable-and-all-are-welcome attitude means for the life of the church.



Focus scripture
Ephesians
2:11–22

Additional scriptures
2 Samuel 7:1–14a
Psalms 89:20–37
Mark 6:30–34, 53–56



Seasons of the Spirit
is based on semi-
continuous readings of the *Revised*
Common Lectionary.

**God of all, as we
build our lives
with the kaleido-
scope of rooms
and corridors
within which we
dwell and serve,
may Christ be the
cornerstone by
which we take our
measure. Amen.**

Lection Connection
links current events
with this week's
scriptures. Go to www.seasonsonline.ca
and click on the link.

The Focus for Ages 5–12

Children have many opportunities to notice the ways in which people differ as well as the things that they share in common. In their families, two siblings have the same colour of hair but one might be left-handed and the other right-handed. Among their friends they will know that not everyone likes the same kinds of food, or the same kinds of sports, or the same kinds of quiet time activities. Older children in this age group are increasingly aware of themselves both as individuals and as part of a larger whole. They enjoy doing meaningful activities in a group, which gives them a sense of belonging. They appreciate recognition for

their contributions to community life. Some may enjoy leadership roles in classrooms or on teams. They value adults who affirm their achievements.

This week's letter to the early church will reinforce this idea of belonging to the community of the church family. The image of building blocks, used in this week's session, can help the children recognize that everyone is an important part of the church family. Pray that each child in your group will know that he or she is a child of God, and will experience welcome and affirmation within the church family.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Ephesians 2:11–22, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 59).
- ❑ Review article "[Exploring Ephesians](#)" (p. 122).
- ❑ Review extra resource sheet "[About the Early Church](#)" (p. 119) and set up a "house church space."
- ❑ Bring offering basket, [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2), matches, candle snuffer, and, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 7), *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 7), and CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.

Gather

- ❑ Bring a small bell or "singing bowl."
- ❑ Bring, if possible, "Children of the Spirit" (pp. 8–9 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #4 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).
- ❑ Bring a variety of Lego pieces, or wooden blocks, cardboard tubes, and other building materials.

Engage

- ❑ Make a copy of this week's resource sheet "[No Longer Strangers](#)"; cut out the letter, roll it like a scroll, tie with ribbon or yarn, and place in basket in house church space.
- ❑ **Word study group:** copies of section

"[Cornerstones](#)" (p. 63)

- ❑ **Music group:** song "Friend to Friend" (#28 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7; or purchase the downloadable MP3)

Respond

Choose one or more of the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- ❑ **Writing zone:** invite an older person in the congregation to write a letter of encouragement to the children.
- ❑ **Building zone:** wooden blocks; print "Jesus" on an extra block
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** copies of resource sheet "[Postcard](#)," addresses of national or international partner churches, stamps
- ❑ **Craft zone:** copies of this week's resource sheet "[Making Mosaics](#)," materials listed, pattern templates (see patterns in "Virtual Resource Booklet" in Library and Action Zone at www.seasonsonline.ca)
- ❑ **Community zone:** resource sheet "[Poster Board Banner](#)" (p. 120), art and craft materials, poster board banner from last week or sheets of construction paper

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, "God's Family" (p. 18 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #12 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).



Building without Walls

Scripture

Ephesians
2:11–22

FOCUS To celebrate that we are joined together by God's love

Gather

Welcome the children as they arrive. Introduce newcomers to the group.

Call to gather Ring the bell or “singing bowl” as a signal to gather in the “house church space.” Invite a child to light the candle.

Pray the following prayer, inviting group members to repeat each line after you:

Dear God, thank you for the church,
And for all those who follow Jesus
and live in your way. **Amen.**

Sing, if possible, the song, “Children of the Spirit” (pp. 8–9 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #4 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

Receive the offering. Extinguish the candle to signal that the opening ritual has ended.

Connecting with the focus

Invite the members of the group to work cooperatively to build a structure using the materials provided (form smaller groups for this activity if needed). As they work together, encourage conversation about how much more interesting the connected structure is compared to the individual items by themselves. Admire the finished structure. Explain how this could be a symbol of the variety of people who are part of the church as a community of faith.

Engage

Preparing for the story

Invite a child to bring the Bible from the worship table and use the bookmark to open it to the letter to the Ephesians. Remind the children that we are reading letters that the first Christians wrote to each other, and imagining what it was like to be part of a church in those days. Share information from the resource sheet “[About the Early Church](#)” (p. 119) to introduce the group to this letter and to the early house church communities.

The Bible story

Invite a child to take this week's scroll (from the resource sheet “[No Longer Strangers](#)”) based on **Ephesians 2:11–22**, unroll it, and read it aloud. When the letter is finished, invite a child to help glue it onto a sheet of poster board.

■ What are the main ideas in this section of the letter to the Ephesians?

The letter speaks of the apostles (followers of Jesus) and the prophets as the foundation of the church.

■ What do you think that means?

Exploring the story further

(To enable the children to explore the scripture reading further, according to interests and abilities, explain the two options and have each child select one.)

Word study group (for older children) The children in this group will have an opportunity to explore the meaning of “cornerstone.” Distribute the information about [cornerstones](#) (p. 63) and look at the illustration. If there is a cornerstone in your church building, take the children to see it. Discuss the questions together. If time permits, create a group “body sculpture” with one person being the cornerstone, and others using their bodies to “build” a structure around it.

Music group The children in this group will have an opportunity to explore a song which speaks of sharing peace and love with others. Help the group learn the song and create actions for each verse.

Reporting Ring the bell or “singing bowl” as a signal to gather as a whole group again. Invite the word study group to share what they learned about cornerstones; invite music group to teach the refrain to the rest of the children.

The Bible story and us

The letters to the church in Ephesus gave some advice about how to be part of God’s family.

- **What are some ways that we can treat people as friends instead of strangers?**
- **How can we help to break down the walls that can separate people from each other?**

Respond

Invite the children to select a zone and work with the materials there.

❑ **Writing zone: Letter** The letters that were sent to the early church provided instruction and encouragement. Explain that someone in our church has written a letter to us. Read the letter that was sent to the group and invite children to comment on it. Then distribute slips of paper and invite children to each write something to send back to that person. Glue all the slips onto a sheet of paper, place in an envelope, and make arrangements to deliver it to the person.



❑ **Building zone: Wooden blocks** This week’s reading speaks of Christians being like bricks being built into a holy meeting place for God. Distribute wooden blocks and invite children to decorate their blocks using felt markers, adding their names. Then have them work together to use their blocks to build a structure, with the “Jesus” block as the cornerstone. Add more blocks, writing on names of others who contribute to creating the church.

❑ **Outreach zone: Postcards** (for younger children) We are all joined together in love. Distribute copies of resource sheet “[Postcard](#)” and invite children to write postcard messages to another



Christian faith community. Follow the instructions for making the postcards and explain to children where these will be sent. Add stamps and make arrangements to send them in the mail.

❑ **Craft zone: Mosaic** (for older children) The community of faith includes many different people from different backgrounds. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Making Mosaics](#)” and pattern templates, and invite children to use the materials to create mosaics. They can make individual mosaics that are combined into a group project, or work together to design and create a group mosaic. As they work, comment on the ways in which all the tiny individual pieces of a mosaic make a whole.

❑ **Community zone: Banner** (stand alone or ongoing activity) Invite children to create their own poster using symbols and phrases to remind them of the messages from this week’s reading from the letter to the Ephesians or continue working on the banner begun last week. Review information on the resource sheet “[Poster Board Banner](#)” (p. 120) and invite children to create symbols and choose words and phrases based on this week’s reading.

Bless

Gather in the worship space and relight the candle.

Pray (*inviting children to repeat each line after you*)

Loving God,
 help us build your church,
 one hug, one kind word,
 one helpful act at a time. Amen.

Sing, if possible, "God's Family" (p. 18 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #12 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

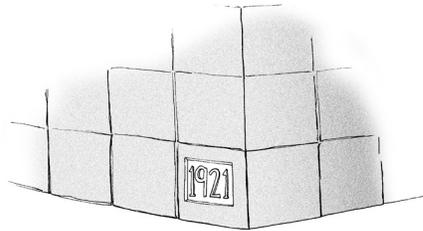
Blessing Send the children out with these words, "We are all joined together in love with all God's people."

Reflect

In what ways did today's session help to build a sense of community in the group? How might you continue to help the children grow in their sense of extending this community to others?

Cornerstones

The cornerstone of a building foundation is laid first. It sets the mark for the whole foundation. The rest of the sides and corners of the walls are measured from it.



- **What does it mean that Jesus is the "cornerstone of the church"?**
- **What does it mean to you to be a "brick" or part of the church?**





No Longer Strangers

(based on Ephesians 2:11–22)

Dear friends,

Remember how some of you used to be outsiders. You didn't know about the love of Jesus or God's promises.

Well, all of that is over now.

Jesus has broken down the dividing wall that kept us apart.

We are no longer strangers and aliens to one another.

We are all members of God's family together.

We are one in Christ – new people making a new story together.

We are like the bricks that go together to build God's house.

The apostles and prophets who went before us are the foundation and Jesus is the cornerstone that holds everything together.

Brick by brick, we are being built into a holy meeting place for God.

With Christ, no one is a stranger any more.

Isn't that wonderful!

Praise to God!

Amen.



Postcard

Instructions:

1. Cut the post-card shape out and fold in half, glueing the two sides together.
2. Write your name in the top left hand corner of one side. Add a stamp and the address of a church.
3. On the other side, write or draw something about your church and add a message, such as "We are all part of God's family and we are praying for you."

Post Card

Place Stamp Here



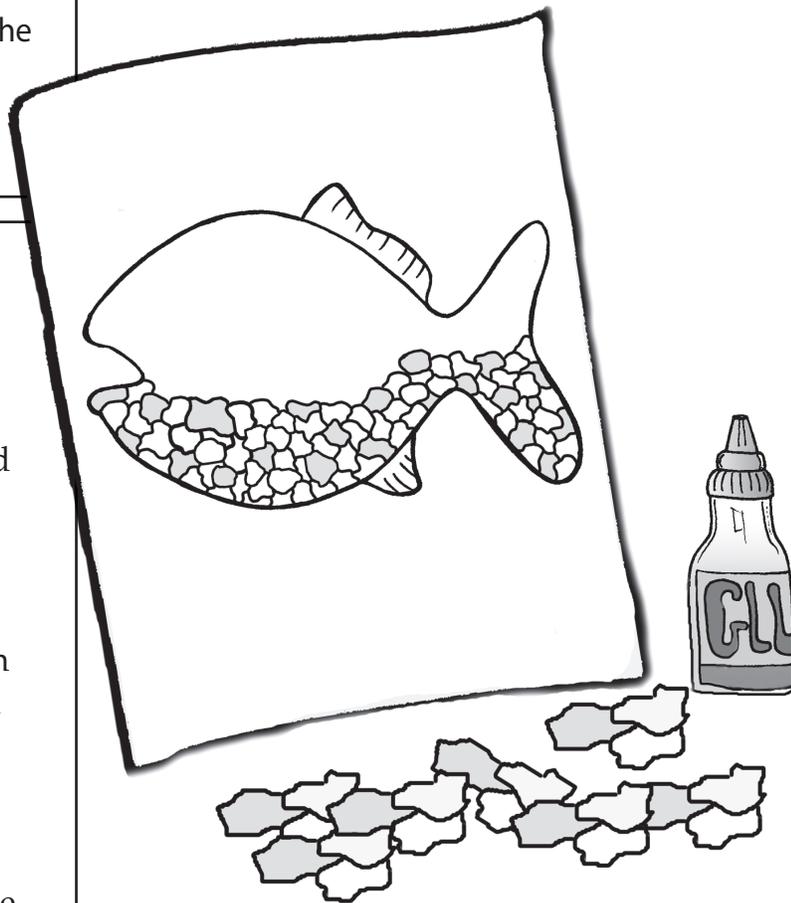
Making Mosaics

Materials

- items in a variety of shades (paper, crushed dyed egg shells, aquarium gravel)
- background material strong enough to support the mosaic material
- glue strong enough to hold the mosaic material
- pencil

Instructions

1. Select a design for the mosaic; one with few details works well.
2. Sketch it on the background material.
3. Select the shade for each section of the design.
4. Place the mosaic material in each section to check if you like what you see.
5. If you are not satisfied, rearrange the materials.
6. When you are satisfied, glue the materials in place.



For pattern shapes such as fish, dove, cross, flame, footprint, heart, and butterfly go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on "Library" and then on "Virtual Resource Booklet."

About the Early Church

The early church

Most of the first Christians were probably Jewish and went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. But as Christians they also met on Sunday, the day that celebrated Jesus' resurrection. They would meet in one another's homes, rather than in the synagogue, for worship and fellowship. Both men and women shared leadership in these "house churches," where Christians would pray and sing together, read from the Hebrew Scriptures, tell stories about Jesus, and exchange news of other Christian communities. This news often came in the form of letters. The apostle Paul was instrumental in the formation of many house churches. Letters in his name were often addressed to such groups. People might also receive letters from other Christian communities as a way of encouraging and supporting each other.

Sharing food

Those who gathered together in the early house churches would usually share meals together. Often they would remember Jesus' last meal in a ritual of sharing bread and wine. The leftover food from their communal meals would be gathered by the deacons to share with widows and orphans in the community and those who were infirm and elderly.

Weekly ritual

July 15 and July 22, and August 5 to August 26 the children will gather in the "house church space" for their opening worship time and to explore that week's reading from the letter to the Ephesians.

- Gather in the house church space, sitting on the mats, and putting on biblical costumes if desired.
- Participate in the gathering worship and activity together.
- Invite a child to get that week's letter from the basket, open it and read it aloud.
- The children will share a snack together as they listen and discuss the questions.
- After each letter has been read it will be glued onto a sheet of poster board to create a display.

Creating a "house church space"

- ❑ Place a low table or box in the middle of an area and cover with brightly coloured fabric.
- ❑ Place on the table a Bible with a bookmark placed in the letter to the Ephesians, a candle in a holder or small oil lamp, a plate and goblet (clay if possible), and a jug.
- ❑ Beside the table place a basket (to hold the weekly scroll letters).
- ❑ Around the table provide small mats (or folded towels) for children to sit on.
- ❑ Shawls, cloaks, and/or headdresses could also be provided as simple costumes.
- ❑ Prepare the letters by making a copy of each week's resource sheet, cutting out the letter, rolling it like a scroll, and tying with a ribbon; place in the basket.
- ❑ Place a snack on the plate each week; bring juice to place in the jug and small glasses.



Church chant

One by one, two by two (*two people join hands, then two more*)

the early church grew and grew.

Three by three, four by four (*more join, then all join hands*)

love was shared, more and more.

No matter how big (*spread hands wide apart*), no matter how small (*bring hands close together*), we can all share God's love, we can share it with all. (*Put arms around each other's shoulders.*)

One community all are we (*hold hands in a circle*) bringing peace and harmony! (*Raise joined hands high.*)

We Are the Church

(*tune: "Row, Row, Row Your Boat"*)

You and I, we are the church.

We are the church together.

Sharing love and sharing joy,

we are the church together.



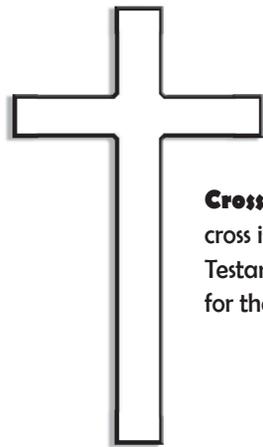
Poster Board Banner

Symbols Different symbols can remind us of the messages in each week's readings from the letter to the Ephesians. Here are some common Christian symbols and their meanings.

Dove — the most common symbol for the Holy Spirit

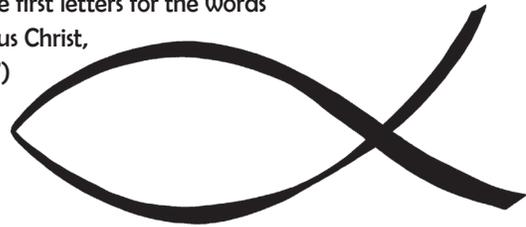


Flame — symbol of the Holy Spirit



Cross — an empty cross is a New Testament symbol for the risen Christ

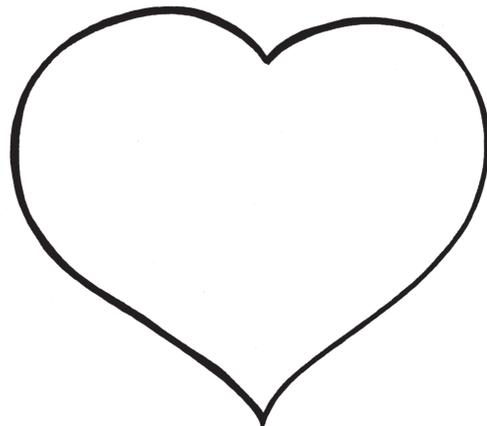
Fish — early Christians often used the fish as a symbol of Christ (the letters of the Greek word for fish are the first letters for the words in the sentence "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour")



Butterfly — a symbol of Jesus' resurrection



Heart — symbol for love (of God, of Jesus, of people)



Making a banner

1. Make templates of the patterns of different symbols (*see note below*).
2. Use the patterns to cut symbols from craft foam or different kinds of paper such as construction paper, wallpaper samples, gift wrap, corrugated cardboard.
3. Arrange symbols on a sheet of poster board.
4. Add words and phrases from each week's reading from the letter to the Ephesians.

For pattern shapes such as fish, dove, cross, flame, footprint, heart, and butterfly go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on "Library," and then on "Virtual Resource Booklet."



Exploring Ephesians

By John Indermark

The New Testament epistle entitled *Ephesians* opens with this verse: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful . . ." Would that it were so simple.

Some key early manuscripts lack "in Ephesus" and instead read "to the saints who are also faithful." (*The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2003, p. 2091, footnote "a.") That and several other details lead many scholars to view *Ephesians* as a cover or circular letter dispatched to a group of congregations. The fact that Ephesus was the capital of Asia Minor argues strongly that a group of churches in that region were the intended audience (Ephesus among them, but also Laodicea and others).

The other detail in that opening verse that has generated much debate is its attribution of the letter to Paul. Stylistically, the letter differs with those epistles where Paul's authorship is uncontested (*Thessalonians*, *Corinthians*, *Galatians*, *Philippians*, and *Philemon*). For example, read Ephesians 1:3–14. The English rendering of the grammar is highly misleading. In the Greek original, this is one very long and very complex (some might say rambling) sentence, a feature not found in Paul's uncontested correspondence. It is to be noted that the same extended sentence structure occurs in 3:1–7. There is nothing in *Ephesians* that deals with issues peculiar to an individual congregation – or a specific individual, as in the case of *Philemon*. Yet another critical issue is the close ties between *Ephesians* and *Colossians*, another letter attributed to Paul but whose authorship is even more contested than this one. For all these reasons and more, most scholars (but not all) hold that Paul did not write *Ephesians*. More likely that it was penned by someone influenced by Paul's theology.

Six passages from *Ephesians* are used in this Season after Pentecost. Why such an extended emphasis on this letter during this season's tradition of exploring what it means to be the church? Simply put, *Ephesians* frames a theology of the Church as in the Church Universal. Moving beyond matters of local dispute, so much at the forefront in *Corinthians* and *Galatians*, the author of *Ephesians* bids the faithful community to consider more expansive themes. For example, the six passages utilized by the lectionary (1:3–14; 2:11–22; 4:1–16; 4:25–5:2; 5:15–20; 6:10–20) address among others these issues for Christian communities everywhere:

- ❑ Is creation unravelling in the chaos of war and tribalism and ecological crisis – or is creation headed toward ultimate unity with God? And if the latter is the case, how does that frame our mission as persons and communities of faith?
- ❑ Are the divisions among us ultimately so entrenched that "separate but equal" is our highest hope in church and society – or are redemption and reconciliation two sides of the same coin? And if the latter is the case, how does that frame our mission?
- ❑ Does the "one body" of Christ structure itself as a hierarchy of descending power or as a community of Spirit-given gifts to all? And if it is the latter, how do we go about celebrating and employing the gifts of all rather than the few?
- ❑ Does life in Christ relate solely to how we go about being the church, or does life in Christ intend to permeate how we engage in community with others outside the church? And if it is the latter, what "newness" does faith bring to those engagements?
- ❑ What constitutes wisdom and wise living in the midst of times and societal contexts that may be difficult and even oppressive? In what ways might worship itself become a witness in the midst of those times and trials?
- ❑ With what does God "equip" the Christian community for life together and wider witness and ministry? In what ways does that equipping join us not only to God, but to (and for) one another?

Do not let the legitimate questions over authorship or original audience deflect you from the core intent of this powerful epistle. For in the end, *Ephesians* is not there for the sake of our articulate speculation. It is there for our faithful embodiment of Christian faith and community.

John Indermark is a minister in the United Church of Christ. John writes devotional books and Christian Education curricula, and has been a regular contributor to Seasons of the Spirit.

