

Lavishing Grace

This Sunday, we turn our focus from leadership toward grace. God's abundant grace for all people. It is through this grace that leadership takes root, sprouts, and flourishes.



Focus scripture
Ephesians 1:3–14

Additional scriptures
2 Samuel 6:1–5,
12b–19
Psalm 24

Mark 6:14–29

Focus scripture: Ephesians 1:3–14

Ephesians 1:3–14 sets the tone and focus for a letter written to the church in Ephesus and other surrounding churches near Asia. Written in the name of Paul, many think the letter was meant to be read aloud as a sermon.

The language used in Ephesians 1 draws the reader into an understanding that we are God's chosen people and that God's grace extends to all people in all time. Using the metaphor of adoption, the writer helps us understand the extent to which God cares for humanity. Adoption, both in modern times and in the first century, signals a person's inclusion into a new family in name, loyalty, and inheritance. Adoption in the family of God includes an inheritance of eternal life with God. This would have been particularly significant to first-century hearers and readers, as Gentiles were considered outside the faith and the family of God. Yet this passage asserts that God has included all people since the beginning of time. How do we experience this inclusion today? How is it embodied in our churches and lives?

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b–19 King David dances before the ark of the covenant as it is brought to Jerusalem. As David dances, the reader can picture the story with joy and excitement, but Michal, Saul's daughter and David's wife, despises David's openness to God before the people. After dancing, David offers burnt offerings to God and then distributes food to all of Israel. David's care for all people is


reminiscent of the lavishness of grace that Paul describes in this week's reading from the letter to the Ephesians.

Psalm 24 This psalm of thankfulness reminds us of God's great love for all people; love, grace and blessings that call us to dance before God in gratitude.

Mark 6:14–29 This story about the beheading of John the baptizer is a flashback in time before Jesus' ministry. Despite King Herod's fear of John, Herodias, King Herod's wife, convinced Herod to execute him. This story serves to show how leaders can go astray. Additionally, the writer of Mark's gospel included the narrative to help hearers and readers identify Jesus as the Messiah. Immediately before our pericope, the disciples question Jesus' authority, and the writer uses King Herod's words to illustrate that Jesus is not Elijah or John the baptizer, but the Messiah.

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God's grace is captured in the readings for this week. In 2 Samuel and Psalm 24, David testifies to this grace and love by dancing before the Ark of God with thankfulness in his heart. In the gospel of Mark, the dancing changes from thankfulness before God into something more seductive that persuades a leader to do something wrong. Yet the passage stands to testify to Jesus' identity. The letter to the Ephesians leads to a deep understanding of our inclusion in the family of God.

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

Most Holy God, lavish your grace upon us this day, remind us you have chosen us as your children. Encourage our hearts as we seek to live as your people. In the name of your blessed son, 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

The younger children in this age group have differing ideas of what constitutes a family. For most five- to seven-year-olds, the word “family” may still mean their immediate family, and may include grandparents or uncles, aunts, and cousins if these people live in the same community and are seen frequently. By the time they reach eight, children usually have a broader understanding, knowing that family can include relatives they have never seen or known. Most of the members of your group have probably enjoyed receiving letters in the mail, or emails, or communicating by Internet with relatives who live in another city, which helps them to stay connected with their wider, extended family. Their intergenerational church family

can also offer children opportunities to connect with older adults.

In this week’s session, children will be introduced to the first Christians who gathered in house churches, the focus for all but two of the last eight weeks of this half of the Season after Pentecost. In these sessions, they will explore the ways in which their church family is similar to those first gatherings of Christians. Because children at this age are primarily visual and kinaesthetic learners, there are suggestions on the resource sheet “[About the Early Church](#)” (p. 119) for setting up a “house church space” for your weekly gatherings. Pray that children will know they are beloved members of God’s family.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week’s focus scripture, Ephesians 1:3–14, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 51).
- ❑ 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 photo directory of the church and/or photo album of church events.

Engage

- ❑ Make a copy of this week’s resource sheet “[From the Very Beginning](#)”; cut out the letter, roll it like a scroll, tie with ribbon or yarn and place in basket in house church space.

- ❑ **Bible research group:** Bibles
- ❑ **Chant group:** copies of [chant](#) (p. 119); save copies for future sessions.

Respond

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

- ❑ **Writing zone:** write lyrics for “God’s Family” (p. 18 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7) on piece of newsprint or poster board and display.
- ❑ **Art zone:** copies of this week’s resource sheet “[Our Church](#),” construction paper, ink pads (washable ink)
- ❑ **Craft zone:** thin wooden dowels or wooden chopsticks, fabric scraps, yarn, people shapes (for pattern see *Virtual Resource Booklet* in Library at www.seasonsonline.ca)
- ❑ **Poster zone:** used magazines, poster board, copies of jigsaw pieces from this week’s resource sheet “[Jigsaw Collage](#)”
- ❑ **Community zone:** sheet of poster board, resource sheet “[Poster Board Banner](#)” (p. 120), art and craft materials

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, “Come Build a Church” (p. 14 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #16 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).



Lavishing Grace

Scripture

Ephesians
1:3–14

FOCUS To be encouraged with the early church to grow as God's people

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 Jesus,
who showed people how to live in your way.
Thank you for the people in this church
who show us how to live in your way. **Amen.**

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

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

Connecting with the focus

Show the children the picture of your church building or look together through the photo album to see the pictures of church events. Talk about the different things that happen in the church building, such as singing, praying, church school and youth group, mid-week groups (like Brownies or Scouts), potluck suppers. Invite those who have visited or attended other churches to talk about what was the same and different from this church.

■ **What are some of the things you like about coming to this church?**

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. Explain that this week we will start to hear stories about the first Christians and imagine 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 “[From the Very Beginning](#)”) based on **Ephesians 1:3–14**, 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 do you think God's “plan of love” for the world would include?**
- **How did Jesus show people how to care for each other?**

Exploring the story further

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

Bible research group (for older children) The children in this group will have an opportunity to learn the names of the other letters, or epistles. Distribute Bibles and have them work in pairs or small groups to make a list of all the names of the letters between Acts and Revelation. How many are there? Look at the beginning of some of the letters to see who might be the authors, remembering that some letters, like Ephesians, may have been written in Paul's name.

Chant group (for younger children) The children in this group will have an opportunity to learn the “[Church chant](#)” (p. 119). Teach the words, then practice the chant and actions. Talk together about some things that bring peace and harmony.

Reporting Ring the bell or “singing bowl” as a signal to gather as a whole group again. Invite the research group to share what they learned about the epistles and invite the chant group to teach the chant to the rest of the children.

The Bible story and us

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians says that we are all children of God, part of God’s family.

- **What do you think it means to be a child of God?**

Just as the first Christians were part of a church community, we also belong to a church.

- **What are some of the things in our church that are the same as the early church?**
- **What might be some differences between the early church and our church today?**

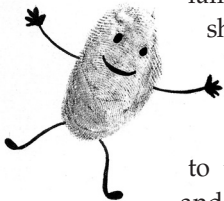
Respond

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

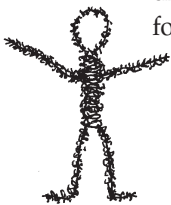
- **Writing zone: Poems** *(for older children)* The letter to the Ephesians speaks of being God’s children. Write the lyrics for the song “God’s Family” on a large sheet of newsprint or poster board, so children can see them. Read the verses together, and then invite the group to write poems that could be additional verses for this song, helping to explain what it means to be part of a church. Children can work as individuals or in pairs.



- **Art zone: Our church** *(for younger children)* Like those in the early church in Ephesus, those who come to our church are also part of God’s family. Distribute copies of the resource sheet “[Our Church](#)” and help children follow the instructions for cutting out and glueing onto construction paper. Show them how to add people to their churches by making thumbprints and adding arms, legs, and facial features. Remind children that the church is like one big family.



- **Craft zone: Mobile** *(for younger children)* Like the early Christians, our churches are made up of different people. Invite children to make figures for a hanging mobile. Distribute pipe cleaners and have them bend and twist these to create stick people figures. Work together to tie dowelling or chopsticks together to form “X” shapes and tie figures on with lengths of yarn. Suspend the finished mobile from the ceiling of the room. More figures can be added for visitors.



- **Poster zone: Collage** There were many different people who gathered in the first house churches. There are many different people who come to our church too. Distribute jigsaw pieces from the resource sheet “[Jigsaw Collage](#)” and invite children to cover their pieces with images of people (different ages and ethnicities) cut from magazines. Then have them join their puzzle pieces to others to form a collage of images, glueing them onto a sheet of poster board. Have them choose a title for their poster, such as “We are all brought together as part of God’s family.”



- **Community zone: Banner** *(stand alone or ongoing activity)* Many churches have stained glass windows or banners that use Christian symbols to offer messages. Invite children to create a banner using symbols and phrases to remind them of the messages from the letter to the Ephesians. This activity can be done in one session (creating a banner based on this week’s reading) or it can be an ongoing activity, adding a symbol and words each 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 O God, thank you
that we are part of this church.
Help us to follow in your way,
in all we do and say. Amen.

Sing, if possible, the song, "Come Build a Church" (p. 14 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 7; #16 on the *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 7).

Blessing Send the children out with these words, "Go out and share God's love with the world."

Reflect

In what ways did the children acknowledge themselves as part of God's family? Consider sending short letters or post-cards to the members of your group to let them know you are glad they're a part of your community.



From the Very Beginning

(based on Ephesians 1:3-14)

Grace and peace to you, dear friends.
How blessed we are!

Before the world began God loved us.
God had a plan of love for the whole world, a plan from the very beginning of time.

We and the whole world have been surrounded with the love of God.

God has connected all things through our friend Jesus.
Jesus helped people to know how much God loves them.
Jesus has also shown us how we can love God and live in God's way.

Even when we turn away from God,
Jesus reconnects us.

We are God's children through the Spirit, we are all part of God's family.

We are blessed, and sealed with Jesus' love.
The love that we learned from Jesus brings us together.
It helps us to do God's work in this world.

God has marked us with the Holy Spirit.

God is with us in a very special way through the Holy Spirit.
The Holy Spirit helps us to see and feel God's love.

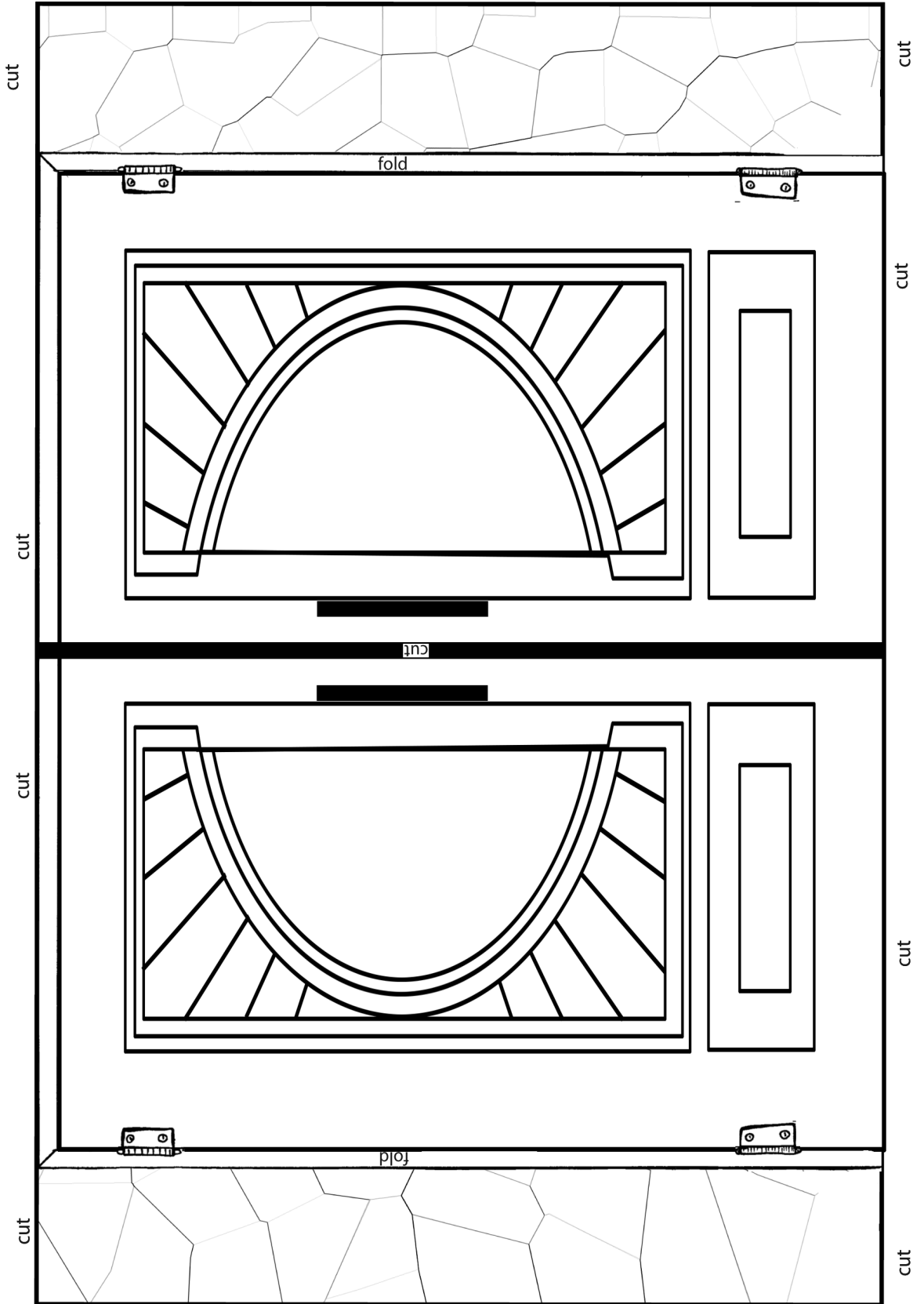
So, in the name of Jesus, we say,
"Thank you, God!"
Amen.



Instructions:

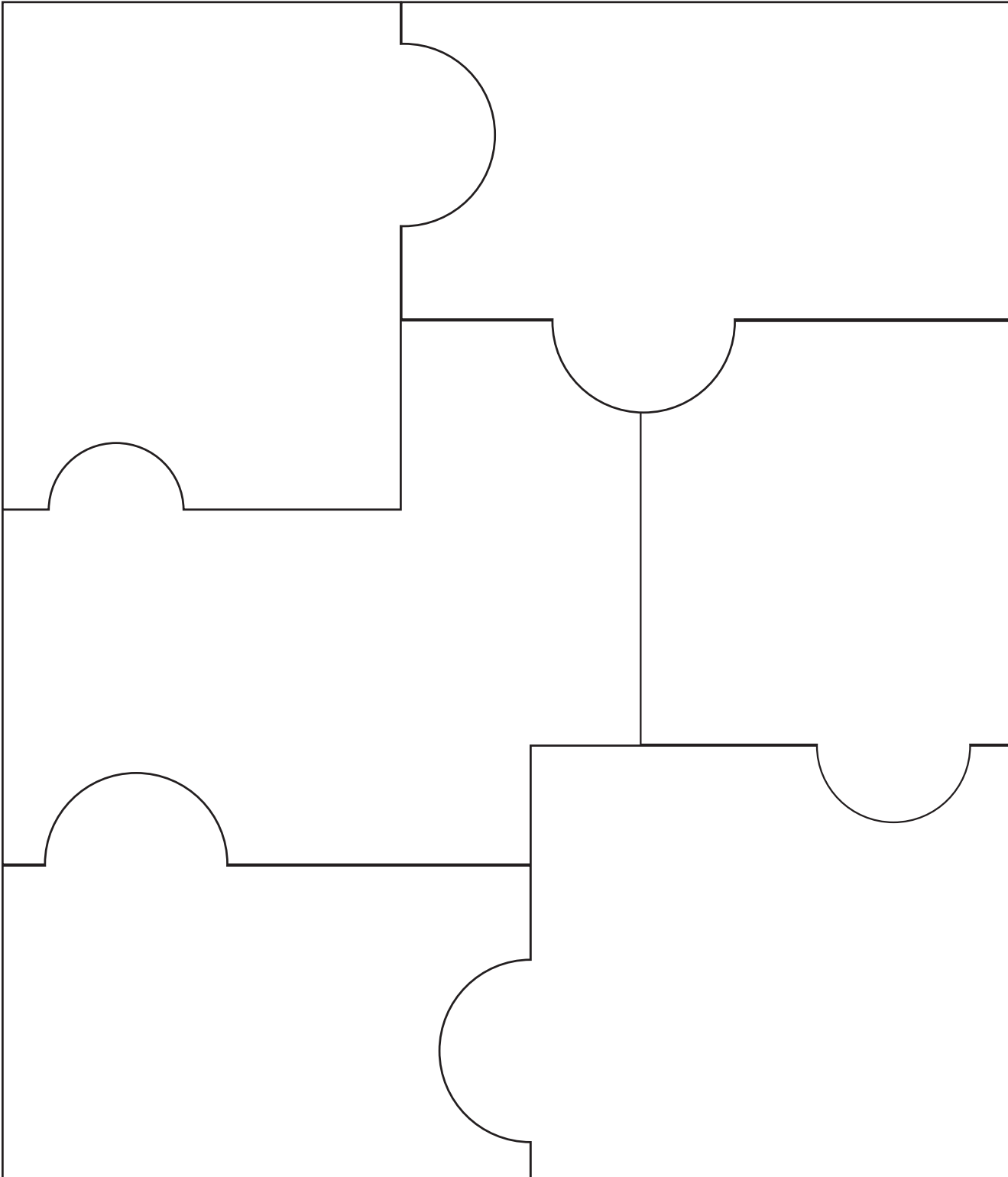
- Cut along the middle and outside lines as indicated to create two "doors."
- Glue the two side "walls" of each half to a sheet of construction paper, so that the doors meet.
- Fold back the doors to open them and fill the church with pictures of people.

Our Church





Jigsaw Collage



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.



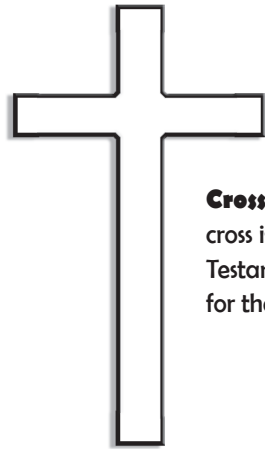
Poster Board Banner

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

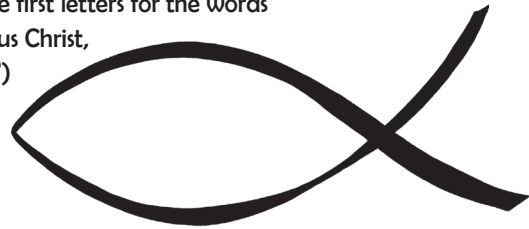


Flame — symbol of the Holy Spirit



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

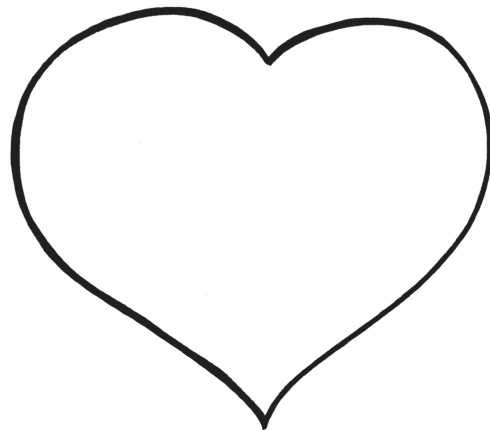
Fish — early Christians often used the fish as a symbol of Christ (the letters of the Greek word for fish are the first letters for the words in the sentence "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Saviour")



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.

