

Finding Community, Diversity,

Diversity,

By JULIO C. MUÑOZ

Reimagining Sabbath

I'm sorry, I thought I was in Sabbath school!" A middle-aged couple stood up abruptly and walked out. "Don't know what this is . . ." the man mumbled as they walked out the door.

The members sitting in a tight circle looked at each other, slightly surprised, slightly amused. I hit the pause button on my computer, stopping the movie scene we had been watching. A couple gulped the hot beverage they had been sipping.

"Our Sabbath school," I began to answer, still a bit stunned. The door closed. I shrugged again; we looked at each other, smiled, and resumed the video we had been watching.

The offending clip was a pivotal scene in the Academy Award-winning film *Glory*. The movie tells the story of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, one of the first all-Black regiments in the Union Army during the American Civil War. It was not at all unusual for discussion leaders in our class to use popular art such as film clips, books, poetry, music, and current events to launch into a conversation. Discussions ranged from the current Sabbath school lesson to an exchange of views about our faith and, most important, honest talks about the challenges we faced as young and young-at-heart parents and professionals. In fact, that's why our Sabbath school started.



AND Acceptance

school for the twenty-first century

Your Sabbath School Wants You

A year earlier, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder as I sat in a different Sabbath school, in a somewhat wider circle of adults, my son's kindergarten Sabbath school. Our church had wonderful children's Sabbath school classes. As you walked the hallways, you could sense the excitement of children who never seemed to find their "indoor voices." A cacophony of singing filled the air. The problem was that the children's classes were getting too full—of adults.

Many children entered their classrooms, followed by a gaggle of relatives: a mother, father, visiting grandparents. The relatively new parents were so starved for adult conversation that their animated gabfest had the desperation of lungs that had not held oxygen in hours. Sabbath school teachers sought, desperately at times, to keep the two sets of students under control.

I turned suddenly and saw Darlene, the Sabbath school superintendent, who animatedly motioned for

me to follow her out of the classroom. I labored out of the chair designed for someone a third my height, limping a bit as blood rushed back into my legs. Darlene was fast. She was always full of energy, zipping around from class to class. She put people half her age to shame. From beginner to the adult Sabbath schools, she kept the morning study hour humming like a performance engine, which was no easy task in our church of more than 1,000 members. She looked back into the classroom, a

A Ministry for Children *and Their Parents*

By LYNETTA MURDOCH

Are we losing young parents (and/or grandparents) by not providing facilities that in most cases would cost far less than an evangelistic series?

Many of us can probably remember the days when children were expected to sit still and be silent during the worship service. Fussy, noisy children were not tolerated; and the withering stares received by their frustrated parents reinforced that notion.

But a growing number of parents seem to be forgoing the worship service altogether, rather than missing the blessing because of their squirming children.

"If there was any time that someone was in need of their church and its help, it's as a young family," posted a young parent on Facebook. "Yet, in my experience, and in many of my

Facebook mommy groups, I hear stories about how awful the mother's rooms are, or how they are looked at if they nurse in the sanctuary. . . . This should be the ideal time for a church to witness and bring in families, yet it is such an afterthought."

That post was written by a Seventh-day Adventist mother of a toddler and twin babies who is eager for spiritual food and Christian fellowship. She and her husband have given up attending the local Adventist church for lack of even so much as a changing table. They now attend a Baptist church that shows its regard for parents and their young children by providing child and baby care.

If you have been a parent of a small child, you might remember wondering why you even attended church at all, given the struggle to get there on time and the usually exhausting attempts to keep children quiet and respond to their many interruptions.

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hint of frustration betraying her typical exuberance.

“Julio, I want you and Quentin to start a new Sabbath school class,” Darlene said, looking me straight in the eye. She wasn’t asking as much as telling me. Did she know she was asking me to do something I detested, although I had never done it before? My mind raced to find a kind way to let her down. “You know Quentin, right?”

“Well,” I stammered.

“Julio, there are too many young parents in the children’s classes,” she said, her finger punctuating each word for emphasis. “Teachers are having a

hard time teaching the kids.”

“I know!” I agreed emphatically, “It’s so . . . unruly.” I shook my head slowly, rolling my eyes to show my disgust with my fellow parents. I found my strategy. I would become her ally in getting Quentin to start the new Sabbath school class.

“But Julio, I’m more worried about all the young professionals who aren’t coming to church anymore.” Her frustration morphed into a grandmother’s concern. “Julio, I want you guys to start a new class that pulls the parents out of the children’s class. I also want a place where those who don’t want to come to church anymore feel comfortable.”

“Well, I, you know, I, well . . .”

Never a great Bible student—as anyone who knows me can attest—I confess that the story of Moses comes to mind as I recall that conversation.

“Darlene, I’d love to, but you know I travel a lot, and I’m not sure that I know that much about leading a Sabbath school class. I don’t think I’ve ever studied the quarterly, and I’ve never taught anything.”

“Julio! I need you guys to start this class,” she nodded emphatically to punctuate her quasi-request. “I’m asking you because I think you understand these young people that don’t want to come. They don’t fit in other adult classes. They need something relevant to their lives. They want a place to visit with friends, to find fellowship, community, Julio.”

“Community.” I repeated the magic word.

“Darlene, we don’t have time to

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The mother’s comment (above) instigated two separate and long Facebook conversations. A summary of comments is below:

Problems

- No room, except the bathroom, which has no changing table
- No privacy for nursing mothers
- No changing table
- No nearby restroom
- Sound too loud or none at all
- No view of the service
- Unsupervised, noisy kids, making it impossible to train one’s children how to behave in church
- Parents’ room turned into overflow seating
- Poor ventilation, air-conditioning, or heat
- Adults chatting loudly during the worship service

Suggestions

- Ideally, two rooms: one for small children and one for breastfeeding moms
- Changing table(s) with pad and washable covers, with a neatly organized supply of tissues, wipes, diapers, and burp cloths
- Gliders/rocking chairs with removable, washable covers
- A private, quiet room for breastfeeding, with adjustable lighting and sound and secure doors. Folding privacy screens are better than nothing if a separate room is unavailable.
- Recently purchased cribs (meeting current safety codes) and Pack and Plays and/or Rock and Plays with several sheets and covers, plus a well-managed system for cleaning them every week
- A clean, well-ventilated connected bathroom (new moms and pregnant moms have “super sniffers”)
- No-touch covered trash cans with deodorizer
- Quiet toys, books, color books, crayons, puzzles, etc., appropriate for different ages

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study the quarterly. We don't have time to study, period. That's the honest truth. I'd be so much better off with a good parenting tip than a 45-minute discussion of whether there is or isn't a sanctuary in the sky and what it means."

She nodded, understanding in her eyes.

"You've been there; we don't get much sleep. And we certainly don't have time to study a lesson every day," I replied, suddenly unloading years of frustrations. "And it's not being a parent; we just don't find the discussion relevant to our lives. There has to be a different approach. No judgment, Darlene."

"That's what I want, Julio," she smiled as we were finally on the same page. "I have a small budget, but you let me know what you need. Anything you need. I want to get those young professionals back in here. I want them to find a community."

The Learning Class

Our new class was given the room right across from the children's classrooms, so they could easily find us. It had been a room that was often used by music groups to prepare for the divine service. Darlene had new chairs brought in, cleaned up what had been a depository of music paraphernalia, and, because we often became so engrossed in our conversations, gave the order that we were not to be disturbed until our class ended. She knew that for many, that class *was* church.

But it became something far more important than church for our eclectic group. It became our community, our church family.

Like most communities, we had members who ranged from very conservative to those who felt the Bible was not entirely literal. It was a vibrant group, with everybody's diverse per-

spective adding to the richness of our conversations. We took turns leading out each week, presenting the discussion from our unique outlook.

One Sabbath, before the upcoming presidential elections, while we shared as members arrived, our class decided that the issues of the economy, their impact on the poor, and our larger community were worthy of discussion. We put aside the planned presentation and engaged in a meaningful conversation about public service, transforming society, and the community to which we belong.

It was always different, but I was the movie man. I had understood life and spirituality through the cinematic arts. And here, in our small community, I had found a place where I could use my love of film to explain, understand, and share spiritual principles. A movie clip here and there helped ignite some of the most meaningful

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ISTOCK

Consider

Providing for single parents who might have children in different age groups, such as a mother with a nursing baby plus small children who need watching while she is nursing

A "crying room" with some soundproofing where parents can take distressed children so as not to disturb others

Finally

Be tolerant and responsive to parents with little ones in church. One pastor, a grandparent, commented: "We had a mother come to [our] church with two preschool children. She told me later that she knew we were her home church the moment she walked in the sanctuary. 'It was noisy,' she said. Her previous church had been a 'strict silence' church, and she was exhausted at the end of every worship service.

"As an aside, I'm fairly sure the children on Jesus' lap were noisy and had short attention spans."

- Tinted or one-way glass for large window between sanctuary and parents' room (high enough so that small children can't bang toys and hands on it)
- Kid-friendly flooring (soft for tender knees or falls, easily cleaned)