

The Most Amazing Church Nursery in Town

Meet the most amazing church nursery in town! At Saturn Road Church of Christ in Garland, Texas, these church folks know how to bring up babies right, and they've done it for more than 35 years...

It's Sunday morning, and Jackie Brown is seated on the floor behind a specially made half-circle table, singing about Creation to her class of toddlers. One of her students, 1-year-old Hudson, sits up very straight in his tiny bench chair, clutching a little plastic fish in anticipation of the moment he'll get to dunk it in the fishbowl Jackie passes around. Finally it's his turn. With a dramatic flair, he drops the fish in and beams proudly as everyone in the room applauds and exclaims. Then he forgets about himself and cranes his neck to get a better look at what Jackie does next.

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This is a typical Cradle Roll class at the Saturn Road Church of Christ in Garland, Texas, and the teachers are teaching a class to students most churches don't think about actually teaching — babies. Saturn Road's philosophy is that just putting babies in nurseries until they are 3 is a waste of time. So they start teaching as soon as the children enter the church, even when babies are just a few days old. Today, the teachers use singing, a Creation theme, and lots of toys to teach Bible classes to their very youngest church members.

The colorful room teems with life and children and toys. Bright, colorful animal toys fill the shelves — enough small toys so children can each hold one for each lesson. For every two kids, one adult helper sits in a regular chair behind the children. Jackie and her helpers perform a carefully choreographed routine: When she needs a toy, it's already washed and held out for her. Others turn the lights off and on at

appointed times, comfort any children who start to cry, and sing the songs with Jackie.

"I'd never heard of anybody having classes for babies. Most churches just baby-sit up until 3 years," says Karen Stafford, a Cradle Roll coordinator who has now been teaching Cradle Roll for 28 years. "But I just loved it. I was amazed at what the babies could learn. It's a whole new world to them. Everyone is so excited. It's just a miracle watching them."

And what's clear to Karen is clear to any observer — these tiny babies are learning. Even the littlest ones kick their legs, bounce up and down, sway side to side with the songs, and pay attention in class. For the older babies, once they can talk, it's obvious that they're learning from their classes.

One Cradle Roll parent took his 9-month-old daughter to the doctor and told him she said her first word: "Bible." The doctor said it was too early for the baby to talk and that she was just babbling. Then the father pulled out a book, and his daughter pointed to it and said very clearly, "Bible."

"I stand corrected," said the astonished doctor.

The children also remember and anticipate the lessons, which are based on repetition. When Cecelia Bingham, children's education coordinator, borrowed the toy cars another Cradle Roll teacher used in class to simulate driving to church, a 2-year-old asked, "Where are our cars? We can't drive to church!"

Many have dubbed this hands-on teaching method with babies the Palma Smiley method. Palma Smiley is an early education consultant from Lubbock, Texas, who's been teaching babies since the '50s. "The difference is that these [Cradle Roll] babies have a memory. They can

identify all the animals that go into Noah's ark. They know what you're talking about. They know how to sit in class. They know how to learn. They learn how to participate on a higher level."

A FERTILE GROUND

Cradle Roll began at Saturn Road back in the early '60s. One of the program's coordinators, Martha Davy, still keeps an article she clipped from a 1963 Parents magazine that says babies learn the most in their first 18 months of life. When she read this, Martha decided to enroll her 13-month-old daughter in the class for 18-month-olds, but the teacher said she could only join the class if Martha came too — as a teacher.

Martha enjoyed it so much that she decided to start classes for even younger babies in 1970. And more than 35 years later, she's still leading the program, which now averages 60 babies and more than 35 volunteers.

Saturn Road is an ideal home for these Cradle Roll classes because of its strong emphasis on Bible classes and its focus on children. In the hour between the church's two worship services, dozens of Bible classes meet for all ages — everything from Cradle Roll classes to classes for senior adults. More than 70 percent of the 1,800 church members who attend services also attend Bible classes.

"Bible class is really considered to be important," says Cecelia. "That's where people feel like they get connected with each other."

And it's obvious that children of all ages are a valued and essential part of Saturn Road Church. During the acappella worship service, an entire section of pews is filled with youth, who pay close attention to worship and clasp hands during the prayers. Teacher Tom Winkler

prays about teaching children to take ownership of God's will, and the evening theme is "What Children Need From Their Mothers."

"That's the strength of this church — the little ones and the teenagers," says nursery coordinator Liz Robinson. "My 16-year-old was the one who brought me here."

TEACHING BABIES

So how do the Cradle Roll teachers do it? To provide personal attention, they divide the babies into three sections of 10 children or less: birth to 7 months, 8 to 14 months, and 15 to 21 months.

"As soon as children turn 15 months, they move to the next class," says Cecelia. "You're really teaching to a parade, as we term it. That's why we use repetition — it gives them stability. The older ones know what the routine is, and they're starting to respond. When the new ones come in, it helps them get in the mode. The more experienced ones are examples for the younger ones."

The next step is getting down to the babies' level. The teachers kneel or sit on pillows at specially made half-circle tables with the babies arranged in jump chairs around the tables. On each jump chair tray is a chewy animal toy and a key ring so the babies have something to chew on and something to play with.

The Cradle Roll classes are taught entirely in song. "I'll never forget the Sunday we began to sing everything," says Lois Whitaker, one of Cradle Roll's founders. "The kids sat there and listened. As long as we sang, they were fine. When we stopped, they were not!" The songs are all written on laminated cards and placed on three big rings so the teachers can flip through them easily and add and delete songs as they wish.

Once class begins, the first step is to welcome the babies. Martha sings each baby a little welcome song, using the baby's name and looking at him or her through a cardboard funnel or something with a mirror so the babies can see themselves in a kind of Peekaboo game. One of the songs is sung to the tune of "Where Is Thumbkin?" "Where is Susie? Where is Susie? Did she come? Did she come? Come to Bible claaass. Come to Bible claaass..."

BACK TO THE BIBLE

After welcoming each baby, Martha reaches for the Bible and encourages each baby to pat the Bible. Then she places the Bible on a special holder where it remains throughout the rest of class. Some of the older babies receive their own little Bibles. (Lois recommends using black-and-white Bibles rather than those with color pictures because little eyes need the stark contrast.)

Palma clearly establishes the need to make the Bible central to the lesson. "If you don't tell a child about the Bible, he'll never learn it. If you tell him about it, he will," she observes. "The #1 story across the board that parents tell me is that their baby's first word is 'Bible.' That's because we point to the Bible and have them pat it. To the parents it is the most exciting thing in the world."

Then Martha sings about Creation, one of the central themes of all Cradle Roll classes. It's a natural because children love animals and flowers and, as Lois points out, Job 12:7 says, "Ask the animals, and they will teach you."

On the walls of the birth- through 7-months class, seven numbers represent the days of Creation, and the teacher illustrates each with appropriate toys and props. The classes can touch on everything from families, prayer, the five senses, to animals, and the sun and stars. The

Cradle Roll teachers are careful to apply each lesson to the Bible. After each lesson, the teachers repeat, "How do we know? Our Bible tells us so!"

VARIATIONS WITH A THEME

In these classes, volunteers have to be constantly ready to comfort crying babies and then place them back in their jump chairs. Most of the children, however, are watching Martha's expressive face as she sings. They bounce and sway with the songs and strain to see what she's going to pull out next. For each day of Creation, she sings a little verse. For example, "Day Four, Day Four," while she and the other helpers raise four fingers and wave them back and forth, encouraging the children to join them. Then she pulls out a black velvet glove with gold stars on it, and the children bounce up and down with excitement.

There's a marked difference in the lessons for the babies 8 months and older just across the hall. Teacher Karen Stafford employs active learning by having each baby smell and touch something to illustrate each lesson. The teachers try to have enough props so each child can hold his or her own, including clouds made from old rinsed-out Clorox bottles so the babies can chew on them and latex stars and fish for each child. Of course, these have to be cleaned constantly! The children are moving around in their jump chairs, and sometimes have to be encouraged to turn back to the table. But for the most part, they're intent on Karen in her bright suit as she holds a "cloud."

The use of props is critical to the Palma Smiley method. "What we're doing in the birth to 21/2 years class is building a memory," says Palma.

"If I say to you a cumulus cloud, you know what that is, but a baby doesn't. So when you say that to a baby, you show her a picture, you glue a cotton ball to a tongue depressor stick and let her hold it. And you say, 'Thank God for the cloud.'"

The children are now holding up tentative fingers for Day One of Creation, and Avery, a little girl with curly light brown hair and a blue dress, leans delicately forward to smell a rose Karen offers to her.

"Thank you, God, for flowers," Karen sings.

Next door in Jackie's 15- to 21-month-old class, the children sit in tiny cushioned chairs, and they talk to her. When she holds out an apple, they identify it and she sings: "Oh, who can make an apple? I cannot.

Can you? Who can make an apple? Only God. 'Tis true."

When it's time for Day Four, one of the volunteers turns out the lights so the children can exclaim over their glow-in-the-dark stars. "Twinkle, Twinkle, little star," sings Jackie. "God has put you where you are."

"The basic plan is the same for each age," says Martha, "but it varies and it grows."

Using repetition is essential, according to Martha and the other teachers. The children start to anticipate the next step, and they use the motions at home. Parents are always approaching the teachers to ask what this or that motion represents, and the teachers will explain, "Oh, that fist is what we do when the elephant comes out." Or, "That raised index finger is for Day One of Creation."

GO WITH THE FLOW

In the Cradle Roll program, flexibility is a must.

"You teach children; you don't teach material, says Lois. "I may stop in the middle of a song if I lose them. We've learned in pacing to do something noisy and then something quiet. And teaching babies requires more use of the element of surprise — boxes that shake and have little stars inside, bells to ring, stuffed animals that move and

make noises, real flowers to smell mixed in with a bouquet of artificial flowers. A child will pay attention to anything that holds his interest, and it's the challenge to the teacher to hold children's interest," says Lois. "Like commercials — quick, action, lots of singing. If I stop, they all start crying. As long as the mind is active, they're going to be fine."

Always have bubbles nearby, the Saturn Road teachers advise. Bubbles distract crying babies and can be used for raindrops and bubble-blowing fish. "We're continually adding to our supplies," says teacher Karen, who pays for a lot of the toys she buys out of her pocket. "It's just part of our ministry — you've just got to have it."

When Karen or Martha is behind the table teaching, there are at least four volunteers (women and men) behind the babies cleaning toys, picking up crying babies, and handing the teacher any props she may need.

"Besides the teachers, you've got to have a lot of helpers in case the children get fussy and want to sit in a lap," says Cecelia. "That's a lot of what the men do, and the children really respond to them well."

SPREAD YOUR NET WIDE

To have a ministry, you have to make sure new parents know about your program. That means finding out who's expecting.

"I've tried to work it to just have a spy in young marrieds [Bible study] groups," says Martha. "We have to keep eyes and ears open!"

Once the teachers know a baby is expected, they spring into action. For 30 years, the Cradle Roll program has sent the same "children won't wait" card to new parents inside and outside the church. The card contains information about Cradle Roll classes and a poem about

teaching children. But the teachers don't stop there. Saturn Road has a shower or brunch for every family. Volunteers make burp pads and blankets, and they take meals to the new parents.

With nine new babies expected soon, Martha says, "You nearly lose control, but we like to make a contact with the family if we can."

Volunteer Judy Jordan makes blankets for all the new babies — both quilted and lightweight blankets — with a heart patch on the back with the baby's name and birth date.

"When my kids were little and someone took time to make me a blanket, it was special to me," Judy says. "It meant a little more."

When the Cradle Roll volunteers bring meals, "It gives them a chance to meet parents and have parents meet them. Then they say, 'We're really looking forward to having your child come to Cradle Roll!'" Karen says.

ANY VOLUNTEERS?

Finding volunteers like Judy and Karen isn't easy, and you need a formidable volunteer base to create the kind of program Saturn Road has.

"Everyone is a volunteer!" Cecelia asserts. "It really is incredible considering we have such a large program. Martha goes in during the week to wash the linens and stock the snacks. Trish Sparrow, one of the nursery coordinators, and her husband, James, are so dedicated that they serve in the nursery every morning during the first service, then teach a Cradle Roll class, and then go to the second worship service. They just love these babies!"

The key for Saturn Road has been recruiting parents to help with the program. Almost all the volunteers got hooked by sitting in on classes

to see what their babies were doing. They were so amazed at the results that they joined the program.

"Once you get in there and see the babies are learning, you just get so excited," Karen says. "You want to be a part of it...We don't have a big turnover."

There are lots of husband-and-wife teams. Martha's entire family helps — two of her three daughters, Lori Deshong and Alisa Wimpee, have been volunteering since junior high, and her husband, a graphic designer, also helps with designing forms and letters.

"It takes a whole crew, all of your family working at it," Martha says with a laugh.

Cradle Roll also asks church members to volunteer for small, specific tasks such as sewing diaper bags and pillows, building chairs and teaching tables, creating bulletin boards, "reporting" pregnancies, mailing brochures, taking meals to new parents, and, of course, teaching and helping in class. This allows everyone to help according to his or her abilities.

WHOLE-FAMILY MINISTRY

Once everything is ready, it's still a big leap of faith for new parents to leave their little ones with someone else. So the way the teachers greet their students is very important.

"You've got to show them that you care," says Karen. "When they come in, we take the babies and give them a hug. We touch them, call them by name, play Peekaboo with them. When they put the fish in [the bowl], we clap for them and they're just so proud of themselves. Even with little babies, we try to build their self-esteem."

They get excited about each baby that comes to the nursery or class, even the difficult ones. "You can't turn someone away because you may turn them away from the Lord," says Trish.

Another key to parental approval is cleanliness. Every teacher knows a story about someone who wouldn't join a church because the nursery failed the smell test or the toys weren't disinfected properly — it's that important to parents, especially brand-new ones.

"We're really hung up on keeping things clean," says Martha. "If parents don't think it's clean, they won't bring their babies. I had one mother who wanted to read all the labels on the cleaning products! But she approved!"

Saturn Road is committed to its active learning program, but that means lots of little latex toys to clean. Volunteers clean all the toys before and after use, and only the teacher touches the major props (stuffed animals and flashcards). Whenever a child is allowed to touch a toy, that child is the only one to touch it, and it's disinfected during or after class.

Another reality of safely working with children is that you must screen your volunteers carefully. Saturn Road has a child abuse protection policy that requires anyone volunteering with children and youth to attend a one-hour training session, undergo a criminal background check, and learn and follow Saturn Road's rules about working with children.

"We want to protect our children as much as possible and we want all the parents to feel comfortable leaving their children," says Trish.

All Cradle Roll volunteers are clearly identifiable with picture ID badges, which are the handiwork of coordinator Susan Burns. When the babies come to class, ID tags with a picture of the baby and the

parents' names are placed on the diaper bags and ID tags are placed on the babies' backs. The teachers also pass out pagers to parents, especially if they're visitors. The Cradle Roll staff can reach the parent quickly if the baby cries for more than five minutes. For visitors, the teachers can verify that they're taking the right child because they match the pager.

Cradle Roll even has a special fire drill plan. If the alarm goes off, the volunteers place five babies on a bed and then two adults carry the bed out, rather than each person trying to grab one baby.

Cradle Roll teachers minister to parents as well as children. The program has three primary objectives: to teach babies about God and family, to help and encourage the family, and to reach out to unchurched parents.

"For me, it's an adult ministry," says Liz. "It gives me an opportunity to reach out to visitors. Unless you're in the nursery, you don't know they're visitors."

Cradle Roll's success is all the fruit of its motto: "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6).

"By the time they're old enough to say words, they're saying the words they learned in these classes, such as 'God' and 'Jesus' and 'Bible' " says Cecelia. "Some people say they really don't learn much at this age, but, oh, they do!"

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