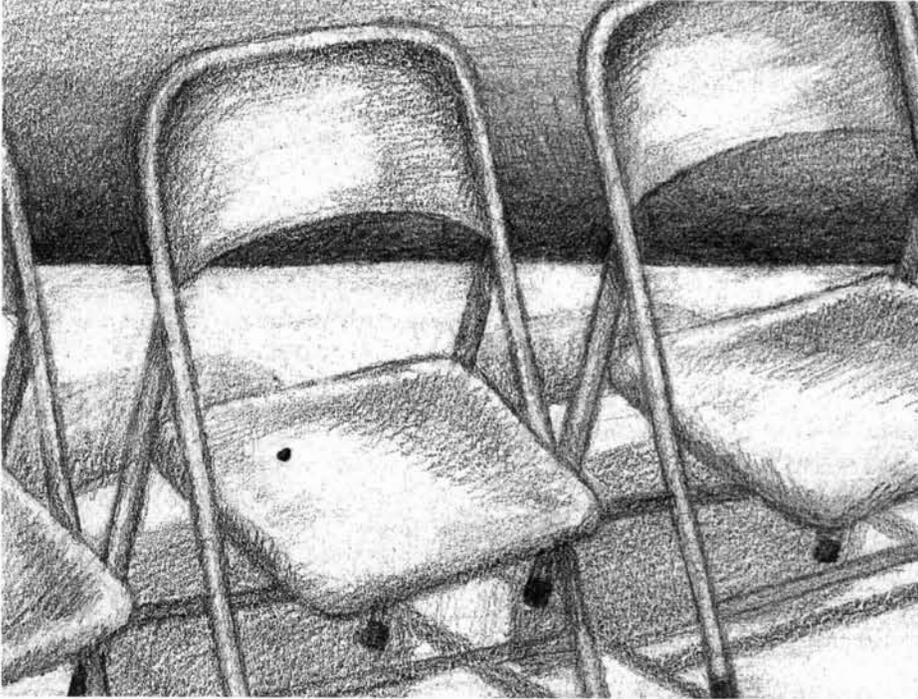


THIS SIDE OF THE TRACTS

OF PRIMARY CONCERN

By Rebecca Chandler



ANNALISE WARNOCK

I am sad for the children of correlation and consolidation. In the name of "Primary" they endure inordinately long blocks of time on metal folding chairs in a sterile multipurpose room.

"SO . . . how was Primary today?" I asked Alexis, my nine-year-old daughter, on that long ride home from the consolidated meetings one summer day. "Oh . . . about the same," came the characteristic reply. I was tempted to let it go at that, but we were alone in the car that day, so I pressed. "The same as what?"

"The same as it usually is."

"And how is it usually?"

Well, it was usually pretty boring. Her teacher hadn't been there . . . again. She wasn't actually sure who her teacher was because she had had three that year. There were only two or three kids her age left in the class, and apparently her teachers had been having a hard time taking such a small class

REBECCA CHANDLER is a writer and English teacher living in Shaker Heights, Ohio.

seriously. Most of the Primary presidency was out of town as well, and for the past three weeks the kids had been watching *Saturday's Warrior* during what must have been "sharing time." She might have enjoyed the video if we hadn't been given a copy for Christmas two years before that was practically worn out now.

She wasn't complaining—merely responding to my questions. She had never asked permission to stay home as her older siblings did routinely. And it was summer . . . maybe things would improve in the fall.

I must have sighed.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

"Oh, I was just remembering summer Primary when I was a kid. It wasn't much like what you just described."

It's a long drive home, and she was curious, so I launched into a reverie that star-

ted me, partly because I hadn't thought about the Primary of my childhood in decades, and partly because of what I found myself remembering.

"Summer Primary," I told her, "was the best. We went on Tuesday mornings at 10 o'clock. It was okay to wear shorts if you wanted to as long as you remembered to be reverent."

"Tuesdays? Really?"

"Um hmmm. We had winter Primary on Tuesdays, too. At 3:40. North 21st Ward was next door to Longfellow School, and we just walked across the grass after school let out. The other ward went on Wednesdays. We always met in the chapel, but we had to line up in the hall first and walk in quietly. Being reverent was a big deal, and someone was always reminding us how lucky we were to be using the chapel. We *felt* lucky, too. It was quieter on Tuesdays than it was on Sundays. We had the building all to ourselves, and we were very reverent."

It was nice, I told Alexis. I liked being there with my friends in all that quiet. The benches were hard, but solid. They didn't tip or make clanging noises. The chapel was cool with pale green walls and white woodwork. There was a balcony in the back and inspiring paintings of the First Vision and Jesus Christ hung about halfway down the aisles on the sides. You had to earn the right to look at the paintings by growing up enough to move back a few rows.

I loved opening exercises. White-haired Florence Rasmussen led the music. She had fair powdery skin and ample arms. There were peppy opening songs like "Father, Thy Children to Thee Now Raise," "The Golden Plates," and "Shine On," and there were silencing prayer songs like "Reverently, Quietly" and "I Thank Thee, Dear Father in Heaven Above": all arms folded, every head bowed, feet stilled.

I loved practice singing, too. We learned seasonal songs like "My Grandmother's Old Fashioned Garden" and "Westward Ho" in the summer time. We prepared for fall by singing "Autumn Day, Bright and Gay." We also previewed hymns from the grownups' book, such as "I Stand All Amazed," "We Love Thy House, Oh God," "Oh, How Lovely Was the Morning," and "How Great the Wisdom and the Love." We weren't permitted in Sunday School opening exercises until we had been baptized, and Sister Rasmussen's Primary children always went there knowing at least some of the hymns. I enjoyed Primary music even when I became old enough for it to be fashionable to complain about the "baby songs." It was fun to

We now have a generation of young parents who are trying to raise their children "in the Church" as they themselves were raised, but who are often getting a good deal less help from effective Church programs than their own parents did.

watch the little kids learn to sing, and we older girls were made to feel important by helping out with our strong voices. I don't think the older boys were required to stay for practice singing—they would have ruined it for sure. It seems to me that they left early to get on with their knot tying and trail blazing or whatever it was Trekkers and Blazers did.

"Called to Serve" was one song that always stirred my blood. It made me feel as if I were part of a significant corps of young workers in the kingdom of God going forth to defend the faith. I loved that bass chord that comes in just before the chorus. I also remember the songs that taught me gospel principles far more eloquently than I have heard since:

Help me, dear Father, to freely forgive
All who may be unkind to me
Help me each day, Father, to live
Nearer and nearer to Thee.

And:

I am thankful today for the sunshine
For the skies of grey or blue
For within my heart
Is a song of love
I'll live, I'll work, I'll DO!

Life was as simple as those little melodies.

In many ways, so was Primary. I knew, from week to week, whom to expect at the pulpit conducting the opening exercises and who would be teaching my class. I also knew, to a surprising degree, who my teachers would be as I got older. Sister Kaliwias taught Seagulls, and you had to wait a long time to be in her class, but, all the older girls assured me, she was worth the wait.

Our classes must have been an hour long, and they were full of serious instruction and lots of activities. I know we learned about the Bible, and Church history and doctrine. I can still recite, on command, every one of the thirteen Articles of Faith, complete with key words. (Article #1, key word, "Godhead": "We believe in God the Eternal Father. . .") We also learned useful arts. Cross-stitch when we were nine, crocheting (around a pale peach wash-cloth with sage green thread) the next year, and knitting before we turned twelve. Judging from what I have saved over these thirty-odd years since that time, I must have valued my Primary lessons enormously. I still have my Co-Pilot/Top Pilot pin and the complete set of pictures we were

given, one at a time, to keep in our bedrooms. Somewhere in a drawer is a moth-eaten, light green bandelo with tacky plastic birds and notes signifying my progress through the three-year "Homebuilder Girls" program. I suppose I should be offended by the sexism implied by the program, but I loved it then, and, frankly, "Homebuilders" sounds more important to me even today than "Merrie Miss" does. (My friend Lynn Arnold suggests that we try calling the boys of corresponding ages "Jolly Joes" and see how that flies.) The cross-stitched sampler I made the summer I was a Lark said: "Greet the Day with a Song / Make Others Happy / Serve Gladly." It hangs, recently re-framed, in a second-floor hallway along with more recent and rather more sophisticated examples of my stitchery.

Summer Primary often included neighborhood walks or picnics at Lindsay Gardens. I don't remember missing a day. We didn't have a car until I was older, and most of the time my little sister and I walked the four Salt Lake City blocks with our mother, who was the Sunbeam teacher. Mom taught four-year-olds for most of my life. I think we were sometimes jealous of her commitment to those little kids. She spent hours on her lessons and on activities and prayer charts and little crowns for their birthdays. For as long as I can remember, her "Primary sack" lived behind her bedroom door, and it was strictly off-limits to the family. We knew better than to even *ask* to use the scissors (that actually cut), the fresh sets of crayons, the uncoagulated glue. These things were sacred. It was, however, consoling to contemplate that other mothers in the neighborhood also had Primary sacks they kept away from their children because they were preparing lessons just for us.

I REALIZED, with a start, that I was getting carried away. Surely by now I had put my poor daughter to sleep. But I was wrong. She was listening as attentively as I've ever known her to, and finally commented wistfully, "Oh, I would love to have Primary be like that."

I am sad for her that it never has been. Alexis is a child of the mission field, and, more significantly, a child of correlation and consolidation. In the name of "Primary" she

has endured inordinately long blocks of time on metal folding chairs in a sterile multipurpose room. The Primary staff, most of them harried young mothers who are missing out on Relief Society to serve in the Primary, struggle, sometimes heroically, sometimes half-heartedly, with young families, part- or full-time employment, pregnancies, husbands who are in school or training programs, and their Primary callings. Many of the manuals and programs seem unnecessarily restrictive and unimaginative compared to what I remember. And there are the added difficulties of sharing space with the rest of the ward and of the everpresent need to keep all activities well within the bounds of what is "appropriate to do on the Sabbath." My daughter goes to church willingly enough—she doesn't like the alternative of being left home alone for an entire morning or afternoon—but that may well change as she gets older.

I can't say, for a fact, that I gained my testimony during those cool, quiet hours of summer Primary. A child's testimony is an ephemeral concept to deal with, in retrospect. But I do know that my experience there was so overwhelmingly positive that I *wanted* to go back every chance I had—to Sunday School where we met upstairs and sat in miniature green wooden pews and had the sacrament administered just to us—and later to MIA and seminary and eventually to sacrament meeting on my own, without any particular encouragement from my family, because I, myself, wanted to be there.

I REALIZE that my longing for the LDS world I remember so fondly is, in many ways, part of a more comprehensive national nostalgia for a simpler world that made Church auxiliaries like summer Primary possible. Weekday Primary (and Relief Society and Cub Scouts and Girl Scouts and, to an extent, even MIA) depended on a willing cadre of full-time wives and mothers who had the freedom in their schedules to make major commitments to the youth of Zion. I know of few wards in which that kind of work force would even be available today. As a people, despite prophetic admonition, we have not remained significantly apart from the economic realities that have created a nation of working wives and mothers.

Consolidation seemed like a good solution to the problems thus created, and to what was, at that time, a national energy crisis; but solutions do tend to breed new problems, and some of those problems warrant our attention.

Of particular concern to me are children of non-member, part-member, or less active families who once made up a substantial portion of Primary rosters. Plenty of kids in my Primary classes came from families like mine. They were sent, rather than taken, to Sunday School, and they attended Primary regularly. Many of us had never actually been to sacrament meeting. Our families did *not* have Family Home Evening, regularly or otherwise, and no one ever suggested that the gospel should be taught in the home. That's what Primary and Sunday School were for.

We have created a situation now that virtually excludes all children who do not come from reasonably committed, generally active families who are willing to spend a large block of the weekend attending church meetings. LDS church activity is now pretty much an all or nothing proposition, and the kinds of compromises that were once possible in religiously divided families are far more difficult to achieve. My mother, who had moved her career as a Sunbeam teacher to California when the consolidated schedule went into effect, noted that Primary attendance in her ward dropped by at least a third. A fair number of Primary board members asked to be released at that time as well.

My mother may not have been aware at that time we were growing up, and I didn't realize until later, that she was typical of many Primary workers a generation ago in one particular respect: her husband was not active in the Church. For any number of women in her situation, Primary (and, I suppose, weekday Relief Society for many) was the extent of their Church activity. It was their consecration, and it was one they embraced with a degree of fervor I have never seen since. A weekday commitment made it possible for them to contribute to the ward, set an example of service for their children, and, in some cases, keep from rocking the boat at home. Any number of families may have been deemed "partially active," but partial activity seems preferable to dropping out of sight altogether, and the children of such households could remain completely involved with their peers in the ward.

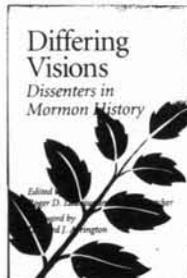
The new schedule, with its stripped down auxiliaries, doesn't help active families as much as we might hope either. We now have a generation of young parents who are trying to raise their children "in the Church" as they

Benchmark Books has something new for you . . .

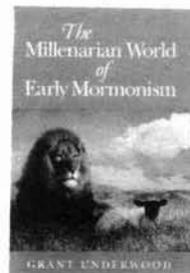
Many know of Benchmark's large selection of used, out-of-print, and rare LDS books (including our popular out-of-print book search service). But what some may not know is that we also stock new and in-print titles which can be ordered by mail or phone. Here are just a few examples:



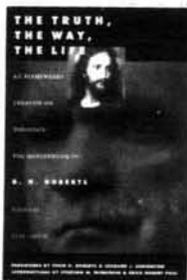
The Angel & the Beehive:
The Mormon Struggle
with Assimilation
\$29.95



Differing Visions:
Dissenters in Mormon
History
\$32.50



The Millenarian
World of Early
Mormonism
\$29.95



The Truth, The Way,
The Life
Stan Larson, Ed.
\$28.95

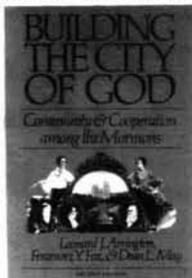


The Truth, The Way,
The Life
John W. Welch, Ed.
\$25.95

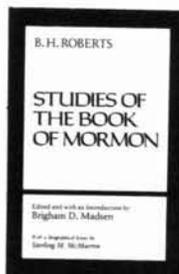


In Their Own Words:
Women and the Story
of Nauvoo
\$14.95

We also have many titles reduced 40–90% off the original price; here are a few examples:



Building the City
of God (paper)
Orig. \$16.95
Sale \$4.95



Studies of the Book of
Mormon
Orig. \$24.95
Sale \$8.99



The Seer
(reprint with index)
Orig. \$29.98
Sale \$9.99

These and many other books may be ordered by phone with Mastercard/VISA/Discover or by mail with check or money order. Please add \$2.50 for the first book and \$1.00 for each additional book for postage/handling.

Utah residents please add 6 1/8% sales tax. If you are looking for hard-to-find LDS books (in-print or out-of-print), call, write, or visit our shop at 3269 S. Main, Ste. 250, Salt Lake City, UT Monday–Friday, 10–6, or Saturday, 10–4.

Benchmark Books

P.O. Box 9027, Salt Lake City, UT 84109-0027, (801)486-3111

I realize that my longing for the LDS world I remember so fondly is, in many ways, part of a more comprehensive national nostalgia for a simpler world that made Church auxiliaries like summer Primary possible.

themselves were raised, but who are often getting a good deal less help from effective Church programs than their own parents did. No one would say that parents today need less help than they did a generation ago. Just about anyone would concede that it's a good deal harder to grow up and maintain Mormon standards now than it was for their parents. Yet, as Primary (and later Young Men and Young Women) become less effective, less and less help is available to young people or to their parents.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

Take Primary out of the consolidated schedule

I CAN'T understand why no one seems concerned about this situation. Are these the Last Days or not? Is it part of the winnowing process—the separating of the wheat from the chaff to have whole families, whole categories of families, excluded from participation in Church programs? Are the children of less active or part-member families deemed spiritually inferior and not deserving of religious training if it is not being proffered by “goodly parents”? Perhaps we misunderstand the timetable, and it's just

about up, leaving no particular need for another strong generation of young Mormon adults?

If your own responses to these (clearly rhetorical) questions are as disquieting as my own, it may be time for some evaluation. If the threefold mission of the Church truly divides our endeavors in thirds, I respectfully suggest that a good measure of our “Perfecting the Saints” attention needs to be directed toward our own children. It is hard for me to get excited about yet another name extraction program for our kindred dead many generations removed, about yet another missionary frontier that has been opened—another brand new culture to “Mormonize”—when we seem so willing to let our own children, who have every right to share in their Mormon heritage, their own birthright, slip through our fingers because Primary programs are too inaccessible or not engaging.

Could we make a commitment to address the needs of a contemporary American culture and still create a Primary that will be appealing to children? Could we take a hard look at a schedule that was clearly *not* designed with the needs of actual children in

mind, and find responsive and creative ways to plan time? Does the Sunday block, in fact, *have* to be *three* hours long? (Is there something moral or metaphorical we are trying to teach about “enduring to the end” here, or is it time to be more realistic about the teachability of children within a given time frame?) Do Primary meetings have to be held in such aesthetically drab surroundings? If we retain a Sunday format, is there any way we could “lighten up” some of the restrictions so little children could get some much needed rest from sitting still for so long? Is there any way individual wards could assess their *own* needs in matters of scheduling and formatting, and design programs that better address their own children?

STAFFING is a related area of concern. Within the existing schedule, a woman who accepts a call to work in Primary is automatically excluded from regular attendance in Relief Society—often at a time in her life when she is most likely to benefit from that auxiliary. It is hard for a woman to joyfully accept a calling in Primary if she really misses attending Relief Society or if she feels that she needs the Relief Society lessons or the supportive sisterhood that would be available to her there. A reluctant Primary board is not going to do much of a job for the children.

Some wards have extended Primary callings to sensitive and nurturing men, on the grounds that parental responsibilities such as teaching young children ought to be spread around a little. There are, undoubtedly, some wards in which priesthood holders have contributed a great deal to their ward Primaries. But Primary presidents I've spoken with generally complain that, for the most part, when the priesthood comes to Primary, including the bishopric members who have direct responsibility over Primary, these brethren generally have a hard time taking such responsibilities seriously and seem to invest little effort on behalf of the children they have been called to serve. Where do we go with that one? Give in to it? Find a way to *force* fathers to face up to their responsibilities?

One thing that might help in some wards is to hold off dividing the ward until there is truly a large enough congregation to fully



“Do you think this policy of taking temples to the people has gone a little too far?”

staff two complete organizations with enough sisters left over to attend Relief Society rather than simply hoping that division will, in and of itself, promote growth. It is often the sense of being spread too thin that takes the joy out of a Primary calling—or any other calling for that matter. Similarly, wards whose memberships have dwindled (for whatever reason) need some boundary readjustments to prevent core families from becoming discouraged, or new families from hearing that this is a ward to avoid if they care about the experience their children will have.

In her article, "Jesus Wants Me for . . .," Lavina Fielding Anderson makes a number of suggestions that would significantly improve Primary within the existing meeting schedule. She advocates that children be a priority on the ward's agenda and that callings be issued to ward members who have the most to offer children, rather than to individuals, who, themselves, need development. She suggests that administrative, music, and teaching talent be concentrated where it is most urgently needed—on our young people—and that (sometimes radical) steps be taken to ensure that ward members be made aware of such priorities. My personal favorite is her suggestion #8:

The counselor in the bishopric should, in my opinion, be the standby substitute teacher whenever a teacher doesn't show up. I think this would create new motivation to find reliable, competent teachers. Similarly, if a classroom is inadequate, that class should meet in the bishop's office until a satisfactory solution is discovered.¹

Anderson's suggestions all presuppose a pool of potential Primary workers whose energies and priorities simply need redefinition and redirection. Wards like mine that are too small to adequately staff four auxiliaries scheduled concurrently and have any adults left over to attend probably should stop trying to do the impossible. I agree with Anderson that the children's needs ought to be considered before the convenience of adults. Perhaps it would make better sense in some wards and branches to abolish Sunday Primary and other auxiliaries altogether in favor of a streamlined but more effective Sunday School. The meeting block could be shortened to two hours with the usual seventy minutes or so for sacrament meeting and then Sunday School classes for all. Children could have some kind of "closing exercises" for ten minutes or so with opportunities to learn Primary songs and perhaps

have short talks and a closing prayer.

Primary could exist as a non-Sunday vehicle for children's activities, perhaps twice a month on Saturday afternoons or in the early evening on a weeknight. One activity could be for small groups of children within a given age group, and another could include all the children for a Halloween Party, sledding, or a ward Christmas party. I also suggest (respectfully) that we *might* be willing to try something like the successful vacation Bible schools our neighborhood churches offer every summer. Existing Primary programs could be modified to run for a large block of time—say all morning—for two or three weeks in the summer. We could go back to having the building all to ourselves and letting the kids wear shorts and teaching them to be reverent. The girls could go back to learning the old fashioned arts of knitting and sewing (and as Claudia Bushman suggests in her "Modest Proposals," the boys could be taught how to milk cows and drive ox teams and so on to preserve *their* pioneer heritage as well). I, for one, would find it much easier to make a commitment to a concentrated Primary program like this than to

try to balance a complicated life with a Primary calling on the weekends. There may be others who feel the same way, especially if Primary were, once again, to become genuinely enjoyable, and if it didn't come at the price of essentially foregoing Relief Society.

Meanwhile, I am trying, I don't know how valiantly, to raise my children in the Church. My daughter Alexis comes to a school in our neighborhood with me and her sister Lindsey every day and has a fine time learning to use computers, tennis racquets, and balance beams, while I teach a young writers' workshop. She goes on field trips twice a week, and daily snacks are provided. She has friends in the neighborhood, a bike to ride, and a neighborhood pool to swim in. She's happy enough with her life. Except on Sundays. All things considered, she has a lot more going for herself than I did at her age. So why do I have this nagging feeling that in the long run—perhaps the very long run—she's really losing out? ☹

NOTE

1. Lavina Fielding Anderson, "Jesus Wants Me for . . .," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 25 (Summer 1992): 104.



PURGED

dark rises from me like steam
lifting from my head
in a mushroom cloud.
my intention steers it
toward a polluted place;
may poison rain on poison,
someday turning medicine again.

still i smoke here, a fired pistol
absorbing silence, ignorant of my
trigger. i ask, born into the race
that honors words and reason,
what word, *which* reason freed
the dark at last?—despite the drugs
we take to numb acid, hurt, distress.

lacking a sweat lodge or the vision vine,
we track a tortured trail through books,
music, talk, and symbols, unearthing
our lost ways, our shards and ruins.
and finally that sweat, too, alerts
the spirits we can't hail, who trip
the trigger, and let our bodies pray.

—LINDA SILLITOE