



Sterling Seaverns photo

## Observing Children's Sabbath *by Shannon Daley-Harris*

The medical office receptionist's note to the doctor read "Please call [the] mom. [Her son] Jason is either deaf or ignoring her." The 6-year-old boy's failure to hear what the mother said was so noticeable, persistent and frustrating that the mother finally dragged him in for a medical examination. Turns out, the problem had nothing to do with the child's physiological ability to hear, and everything to do with his lack of desire, attention and commitment to hearing what she said to him.

Such selective hearing isn't unique to Jason. Most of us have a remarkable ability to tune out what we don't want to hear – requests to clean up a mess, a criticism that hits too close to home, soothing words when we're seething mad, discouraging or distressing stories on the evening news.

Too, selective hearing is nothing new. The eighth-century BCE prophets, like those before and after them, struggled mightily to get the people's attention to hear God's word they came to proclaim. Not too surprisingly, no one was lining up, all ears, to hear that they were perverting God's justice and failing the divine charge

to protect the orphan, welcome the stranger and provide for the poor.

In the last years of his life, modern-day prophet Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached an unpopular message that few – even those who previously marched with and sang with and supported him – wanted to hear. His Poor People's Campaign challenged our nation to end the poverty afflicting millions of Americans of all races and to confront the entrenched triple evils of racism, materialism and militarism threatening our nation and world. Many of those who had listened with rapt attention to his dream proclaimed from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial now seemed to have fingers stuffed in their ears when Dr. King talked about war, poverty and continuing racism.

But that reluctance to hear didn't stop Dr. King from proclaiming the message. In *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Dr. King wrote:

The stability of the large world house which is ours will involve a revolution of values to accompany the scientific and freedom revolutions engulfing the earth. We must rapidly begin the

shift from a “thing”-oriented society to a “person”-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy.

Forty years after Dr. King’s assassination, his prophetic warnings of the triple threats of racism, materialism and militarism have still not been heeded and we as congregations and as a nation have not yet answered his challenging call to turn from chaos to community marked by love, justice, and peace. We see the triple threats still affecting the lives of children all across our nation:

- In our wealthy nation today, one in six children lives in poverty while the rich get richer and millionaires reap tax breaks they don’t need.
- In our powerful nation, we still resort to guns and violence rather than the power of nonviolence to solve problems in neighborhoods and among nations.
- In our nation founded on the truth that all people have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, rampant racial and economic disparities in access to quality health care and education combined with zero tolerance laws that criminalize children at younger and younger ages put Black boys born in 2001 at a one in three lifetime risk of being incarcerated, and Latino boys born the same year at a one in six lifetime risk of the same fate.

Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) founder and president Marian Wright Edelman warns that: “America’s Cradle to Prison Pipeline® crisis, about which CDF

recently issued a deeply disturbing report, threatens to turn back the clock of racial and social progress unless the nation opens its eyes and ears and hearts and sees and hears and responds to the cries of our children trapped at the dangerous intersection of poverty and race. We must act together with urgency to reset our nation’s moral compass.”

## ACTING TOGETHER, HEEDING THE CALL

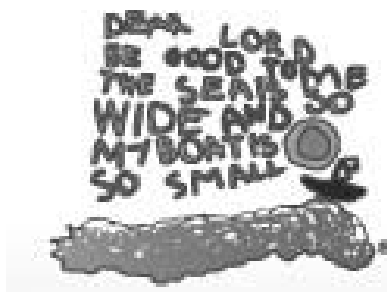
The 2008 National Observance of Children’s Sabbath weekend will be devoted to answering the question “When will we hear?” and exploring ways that we as congregations and a nation can heed the warnings and answer Dr. King’s call to embody God’s beloved community of love, justice and peace. By joining our voices together – across lines of denomination and faith tradition, across all lines of race

and place, of ethnicity and income and political party – we can make King’s call heard by others and announce our own commitment to living it out.

The Children’s Sabbath was created by CDF 16 years ago to unite the thousands of congregations of all faiths who seek to put their faith into

action to nurture, protect and seek justice for our nation’s children. It is guided by an interfaith advisory committee and endorsed by hundreds of denominations and religious organizations. Congregations participate out of shared concern for children and common commitment to improving their lives and working for justice on their behalf.

Most Children’s Sabbaths take place in individual congregations during their customary worship, fellowship and educational times. In some communities, however, congregations of many faiths come together for interfaith Children’s Sabbaths. While the third weekend of October is the designated



Children’s Sabbath weekend each year (Oct. 17-19 in 2008), congregations who cannot participate on that date are encouraged to find an alternate date.

Children’s Sabbath celebrations typically have four elements: worship, education, immediate action and long-term efforts. At the heart of a Children’s Sabbath is the service of worship, in which God’s call to love, nurture and protect children and seek justice on their behalf is lifted up in prayers, scripture, music and the sermon. Children often play a larger than usual role in the service, but it is not a typical “Youth Sunday” in which adults are merely “audience.” This Children’s Sabbath weekend is about the responsibility all of us bear – young, old, and in-between – for speaking out and standing up for children.

The second element of a Children’s Sabbath is education. Using the Children’s Sabbath lesson plans for all ages or inviting speakers from the community, congregations learn more about the urgent needs of children and explore the teaching of their own faith tradition that call us to respond. This is education for action, where what is learned is aimed to equip participants to take action.

The third element of a Children’s Sabbath is action that weekend. When people have reflected on faith’s call in worship and learned about the urgent needs of children in educational programs, they are eager to get into action! On the Children’s Sabbath weekend, congregations provide a range of opportunities for congregations to engage in compassionate action to help children and families directly or in passionate justice seeking advocacy.

The fourth and final element of a Children’s Sabbath is the long-term efforts which it inspires. If every congregation in the country celebrated a Children’s Sabbath on the weekend, yet none did anything different come Monday, it would be

a colossal failure. Fortunately, that’s not the case! Congregations use the inspiration and information of the Children’s Sabbath weekend to motivate new, long-term action for children throughout the year. In some places of worship, that means the individual members find new ways to take action – volunteering with a child-serving or child advocacy organization, donating goods or money to a program helping children and families or speaking out for children to members of Congress and other leaders. Other congregations use the Children’s Sabbath to launch a new, collective effort to

help children. This effort might be led by the congregation itself, launched in partnership with another place of worship or undertaken in partnership with a community organization or resource.

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**NATIONAL OBSERVANCE  
OF CHILDREN’S SABBATH  
RESOURCES**

The Children’s Defense Fund prepares resources each year to help congregations

plan worship services, educational sessions, congregational service and advocacy activities and long-term efforts to help children. In 2008 CDF is offering an exciting range of resources and opportunities:

- *Print resources for the Children’s Sabbath:* CDF will once again prepare a printed interfaith resource manual with everything that Children’s Sabbath organizers need to prepare an extraordinary weekend and effective follow-up initiatives. The resources provided include planning steps, promotion ideas, worship suggestions for various traditions, prayers, readings, sermon helps, bulletin inserts, a reproducible seven-day devotional guide, activity ideas, follow-up suggestions and more.

- *Web resources for the Children’s Sabbath:* In addition, Children’s Sabbath organizers can access a user-friendly set of resources on the Children’s Defense Fund’s Web site ([www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org)). The

Web resources will include print materials, such as prayers and litanies that can be downloaded to paste into a worship bulletin and lesson plans for all ages that can be printed and distributed to Sunday school teachers. The Web resources will also include a PowerPoint presentation that can be shown to Children's Sabbath planning committees or others considering hosting a Children's Sabbath, links to speeches by Marian Wright Edelman and Martin Luther King, Jr., to offer valuable insights and perspectives on the theme and streaming video of noted religious leaders and others addressing poverty, racism and nonviolence.

- *Nationwide Conference Calls:* New this year, CDF will be hosting several nationwide telephone conference calls for Children's Sabbath organizers. These conference calls will link participants with each other and with dynamic speakers who will address the urgent children's concerns and theological perspectives the Children's Sabbath brings together.

#### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Congregations will answer Dr. King's question, "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" by their participation in the 2008 Children's Sabbath. Join the nation-spanning community of congregations committed to love, justice and peace for our children. Join the courageous community of congregations who are determined to wrestle with the challenging and uncomfortable conversations around racism, poverty and excessive materialism and militarism.

It takes courage to declare opposition to the entrenched forces of poverty, racism and militarism, and to engage in that conversation and action in congregations and communities. Last year my daughter Sophie, then 5, asked me for a piece of paper. She drew a heart encircled by doves with the word "Peace" in the middle. Next to it she wrote, "The Lord we pray loves us for our wisdom and our courage no matter how small." My first thought when I read it was that she recognizes that God loves the

wisdom and courage of the small – children like her.

On reflection, however, I realized that the prayer may be for us big folks. God loves us even when our wisdom and courage are small and don't feel up for the task. We can tackle racism, militarism and poverty. We can. And God will love us through it all.

Join the bold and determined Children's Sabbath community of congregations encouraged and sustained by Dr. King's proclamation:

"Our only hope today lies in our ability to recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world declaring eternal opposition to poverty, racism, and militarism. With this powerful commitment we shall boldly challenge the status quo and unjust mores and thereby speed the day when 'every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places plain.'"

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#### UNCLE WILLIE AND THE SOUP KITCHEN by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan

First Mulberry Edition, (New York, 1997).  
ISBN0-688-15285-6, 30 pp.

This wonderful children's book presents a complex and often emotional subject in a compassionate, matter-of-fact manner, providing parents and teachers a basis for introducing the topic of poverty to children. Throughout the story, the illustrations convey a sense of joy.

The two main characters, Uncle Willie and the boy he takes care of, simply walk us through several days in their relationship. In the story, a school holiday allows Uncle