

Episcopal Teacher
Focus Issue

Vacation Bible School



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Lisa Kimball and Dorothy Linthicum, editors

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For information: 703-461-1885 or cmt@vts.edu.

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Should We Offer VBS at Our Church?

If you are reading this publication, it's because you are already hosting Vacation Bible School or are thinking about offering it next summer. There are as many ways to offer VBS as there are churches.

Why should we invest in VBS?

From my perspective, VBS is one of the best evangelism efforts you can make with your congregation. No matter how or when or where you offer VBS, it gives you the opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with children, teachers, youth helpers, and parents. A good VBS tells participants every day in words and actions that God loves them, they are good, and you love them.

Parents in your congregation or greater community are always looking for quality programs for their children's summer vacations. What better way to introduce new families to your church? It is easier to enter the front door on a Sunday if they've been in and out of it for a whole week. Don't forget to invite families from the community to other events such as parish picnics, back-to-school fairs, or other offerings.

VBS gives different people in the congregation an opportunity to be in leadership positions, especially young people (see pages 8-9). It also addresses the lack of biblical literacy both in children and their parents. Children are introduced to Bible stories they might not have heard, which you intentionally share with their parents.

Finally, VBS is fun. It is a week when we can be less formal at church, where flip flops are acceptable for all ages, where laughter and joy are in abundance, and where it is easy to live into a ministry we are called to, whether it's giving out hugs, making snacks, creating crafts, or telling stories.

Who is the targeted audience for VBS?

Traditional Bible School usually offers programs for ages 3 through age 11, which is basically preschool and elementary school ages. The prepackaged materials usually fall into that age grouping, although some may offer resources for a separate middle school or intergenerational program.

Consider the community in which you are located. Are there many families with young children in this community? Is there interest in expanding the coverage to everyone in the congregation for an intergenerational experience?

When do we offer a VBS program?

What is the rhythm of summer at your church and in the community? Most programs are offered in June immediately after school is out. Churches have found that families often don't immediately go on vacations, and so this time has traditionally been good. Other churches have discovered that the last week before school starts gets the highest attendance.

The traditional time for VBS has been in the range of 9 to noon, or some variation. Some churches offering intergenerational programs have moved to an evening time slot that includes a light dinner, followed by joint and separate activities. One successful model offers programming three nights in a single week, while another meets one night a week during a summer month.

How do we involve the whole congregation?

A church in Richmond creates VBS prayer cards to give to each person in the congregation two Sundays before VBS begins. The cards describe the theme, the participants, and brief prayer. Congregants are asked to pray at least once a day during the church's VBS program for all of the participants. Many programs also include a mission project that involves the entire church.

You can help families reinforce each day's activities by providing daily liturgies for family worship. The outline can include a call to worship, each day's theme, scripture passage, Bible story summary, and prayer.

Add a spark of joy to your church this summer with VBS!

Dorothy Linthicum

How to Select the Right VBS Curriculum

Whether you create your own curriculum or purchase a new or perennial program, it is important to match it to your congregation's interests, the gifts and talents of your volunteers, and your goals for VBS.

How is VBS organized?

Most programs, purchased or created, use a rotation model or learning centers. After a gathering/worship exercise, participants are divided into small groups that rotate to different activity centers. If you are doing an intergenerational program, tracks are often created for adults, adolescents, older children and younger children. If you have a traditional program for children, you may divide them by age or randomly to create multi-age groups.

Most purchased curricula provide separate materials and programming for preschool children, with games and activities that are developmentally appropriate for young learners. Typical learning centers are storytelling, crafts, art, music, games, cooking and snacks. More elaborate programs have six to eight stations, while others, like MennoMedia VBS, limit the number of activity centers to three.

A thematic program explores one central idea. Each day includes a scripture passage or Bible story to help participants understand the central theme in more depth. Intergenerational programs, which usually have less time and structure, often include a gathering, breakout groups by age or interest, and a closing worship and sending forth.

Should we create our own program?

A program's size does not dictate the answer to this question. A self-created program can be designed to be a part of a church's ministry or mission. For example, if there is a garden on your grounds, you may want to develop a curriculum that uses it throughout the program.

After selecting a central theme and daily focal points, identify centers that will allow participants to explore the theme and focal points. One common complaint I often hear is that too little time in centers results in everyone feeling frantic, instead of moving at a more leisurely pace. The goal of activity centers is to allow participants to respond to the Bible story or theme for the day. They are not just busy work.

Should we purchase a packaged VBS program?

There is no magic answer that is right for every church. Some argue that programs created from scratch are better fits theologically and pedagogically than those that come out of a box. But if time is an issue for volunteers, those same boxed programs can be lifesavers.

Begin by purchasing a "starter kit." That will provide you with the basics, including a helpful Director's Guide. Most of the other items, such as postcards, student booklets, scarves, t-shirts, and craft items are not necessary.

Any program you purchase cannot be used without a careful reading and understanding of all the parts. Many of the flashiest, most eye-appealing



programs include messages of salvation that are not consistent with liturgically-based churches like the Episcopal Church. You can still use these programs by modifying them with wording that reflects an understanding of baptism as the entry into the Church.

A good place to begin your search is our publisher reviews located on pages 10 and 11. We have discovered that although themes shift, publishers' basic theology and pedagogy remain similar over the years. We are confident that our publisher top picks will continue to provide quality programs in the future.

How important is music?

Music is one of the most memorable components of programs you either purchase or create. Many prepackaged kits come with CDs of music the children learn during the week. There will be extra expense for providing CDs to every participant, but it may be money well spent. Enthusiastic musicians can make the music come to life during the program. Some of your best musicians may be in middle school—don't overlook this rich resource.

When VBS is over, take some time to assess the program and make recommendations for the following year. Most of all, encourage everyone involved to have some fun! ♦

Dorothy Linthicum

Why VBS and Clergy Are a Natural Fit

By Matthew Kozlowski

Throughout my career as a minister I have participated in many Vacation Bible School weeks, and regardless of the church or the theme, VBS always puts a spring in my step. Last year I joined children, teens, and adults for VBS at St. Paul's in Alexandria, Virginia. For me, the week was a blessed blast. And it made me think: Why is VBS so powerful *as a clergy person?*



1. Cheering for Formation Staff and Volunteers

VBS appears through countless hours by formation staff and volunteers. Clergy have a joyful opportunity to commend, congratulate, and bless VBS efforts, especially the efforts of the VBS coordinator. As we all know, words of affirmation go a long way in ministry.

CLERGY TIP: Find your affirming catch phrase and use it often: before, during, and after VBS.

2. Working Side by Side with Formation Staff

Nothing builds a working relationship like taking on a project together. When clergy help at VBS – beyond just observing or checking in – we form bonds, especially with formation staff. The VBS coordinator and I planned the opening sessions for each morning, after going over the themes and scripture for each day. During the sessions themselves, we tag-teamed, 'passing the mic' back and forth for prayer and announcements.

CLERGY TIP: Enjoy the freedom of not being in charge at VBS. A great clergy line at VBS is, "Where do you want me?"

3. Honing Preaching and Teaching Skills

Teachers, parents, and ministers know that if you can explain a concept to a 4-year-old, you can explain it to anyone. VBS provides an exciting – and challenging – opportunity for clergy to share the good news of Jesus Christ with little ones. (And by the way, those older kids and teen volunteers are also listening very carefully, even if they don't appear to be.) Clergy often develop sharp, succinct, and clear explanations for theological concepts, which is a blessing for future preaching and teaching.

CLERGY TIP: What are the two or three truths you want children to hold in their hearts? Think about how you can express those truths in as few words as possible.

4. Meeting and Greeting Adults

I saved this one for last, because VBS is for the children and the teens. But that being said, VBS is also a chance for clergy to meet and greet parents, grandparents, caregivers, and all the other wonderful folks who walk through the doors. Clergy can think of greeting adults as side-door advertising for the church, but more important, VBS is the perfect setting for friendly clergy interaction.

Remember that by its very nature, VBS is a welcoming and joyful place to be. It is where the church really shines, showing values of community, education, scripture, and nurturing children. Clergy at VBS can take advantage of this positive atmosphere, engaging parishioners and guests alike. ♦

CLERGY TIP: Put on your best extrovert hat at VBS and chat up anyone and everyone. Remind yourself, "This is our church being the best we can be: loving children, loving Jesus, building Christian community."

Matthew Kozlowski manages, edits, and writes for Building Faith. He is also a priest associate at St. Paul's in Alexandria, Va., where he lives with his wife Danielle and two young daughters. Matthew has been a teacher, camp counselor, school chaplain, camp chaplain, Sunday school teacher, parish priest, Alpha Course coordinator... and VBS helper.

Building a Staff for VBS

By Lisa Brown

VBS staffing is a chicken and egg question. Do you begin by building a team of volunteers, which will determine the number of children you can safely register? Or, do you set a registration goal, such as 40 children, and then begin gathering enough volunteers to supervise this number?

Enlisting volunteers for any program is rarely easy. It involves starting early and blanketing your parish and community with written announcements through every media channel – from worship bulletins to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others.

Most important, recruitment involves making personal face-to-face invitations. During these conversations, you can respond to questions and concerns. Volunteers are more willing to work with you if you can meet their needs. For example, you may decide to shift coverage for someone who needs to arrive late or leave early. You may allow volunteers to bring an infant or small child in order for them to participate in the daily program.

Meeting volunteer needs, though sometimes logistically challenging, can result in a more diverse group of people working with VBS and a greater connection between VBS and the congregation.

Where to find volunteers in your congregation

What groups in the congregation might provide people to staff your program? Think outside the box! Who are the adults and teens in your parish that are available and reliable? What times are volunteers available, and what reasonable commitments can you ask of them? Are there specific volunteer roles that do not involve being present onsite every day, such as buying craft or snack supplies?

Existing children's ministry volunteers and Sunday school teachers

A strong pool of children's ministry volunteers is certainly a bonus. But turning to the usual group of "go-to" volunteers for VBS increases their risk of burnout. VBS is an excellent time to cast a wider net, especially if the program you have created or selected calls for volunteers with specific skill sets.

Parish youth

Teenagers are your secret weapon. Nothing is cooler to a little kid than a big kid. Middle-schoolers love being in charge of younger kids. True, they are goofy, can be silly, and often need to be supervised themselves. But teens can also be wonderful mentors and inspire faith connections in little kids in ways that adults simply cannot. Teens that are too young (or immature) to be responsible for younger children can be very successful in supervising craft activities, handling snacks, and leading songs. Find ways not only to assign them jobs, but also to tap into their boundless creativity.

Adults who can't make a long-term commitment during the program year

VBS can be an opportunity to expand the number of adults connected to children's ministry. Adults unable to make a long-term commitment during the program year may be available for a short-term VBS program.

Teachers and other professionals who have the summer off

Identify those who do not have summer work commitments in your congregation. Respect their need to take a break, but ask if they might be open to help plan activities or suggest resources for different age groups.

Grandparents and other older adults

Make a point to ask parents if there is a grandparent who is not a part of the congregation who could be a volunteer. Often grandparents enjoy this connection to their grandchildren. Older adults in the congregation might be enlisted as storytellers, youth mentors, group leaders, or greeters.

College students (from the parish or nearby colleges offering teaching degrees)

Contact the placement offices of local colleges. If you have funds available to pay a stipend, consider working with other churches in your community to create a summer-long position. A college student could work for a different parish each week.

Babysitters and nannies who work for families in the congregation

Caregivers of children who are already employed by families in the congregation and who will be dropping children off at your VBS program might be willing to assist with activities. Be sure to coordinate this request with families who have outside caregiving arrangements.

Neighboring churches

Consider creating a VBS volunteer partnership in the community. Reach out to other local churches to share resources or even offer a community VBS. Some community VBS partnerships have existed for years, with the program rotating each summer to the participating congregations. Churches will need to come to an agreement about the theology presented, but VBS offers a great way to build relationships and work together for God's kingdom.

Church staff – from clergy to office and support staff

While church staffs may not all be directly involved in leading VBS, they may be able to be a part of your adult-to-child ratio in the event of an emergency. (See *Staffing a VBS Program* box on this page.) Do not assume that clergy or staff will act in this capacity simply because they are in the building. Consult them about their availability and willingness to step in if there is an emergency situation. If they are included as part of the child-to-adult ratio, make sure they will be onsite during the program and not off campus responding to other responsibilities.

Staffing a VBS Program

Age of Children	Number of Adults per	Number of Children
Under 2	1	3
2 through 4	1	6
5 through 8	1	8
9 through 13	1	10
14 through 18	1	14

Notes

- In groups of children under the age of 5, always have two adults present with the group, regardless of ratio. This ensures that one adult is always available to supervise, even if a child needs undivided attention.
- These guidelines assume you are in a contained space. In a more public or open space that has greater access, additional adults are needed.
- Modify these guidelines depending on the activities. Water-based activities, for example, require additional supervision and staffing.
- A group of older children may not require two adults at all times, as long as other adults are in close proximity and within hearing and seeing distance. Using fewer adult leaders depends on your space and your situation.
- Remember, even older teen helpers are still minors. If they are required to respond to an emergency, they would still need an adult supervisor available.
- If possible, recruit additional adults to be available to fill in as a group leader in case of emergency.

Lisa Brown

A Final Caution

The importance of safety precautions and sufficient adult staffing cannot be stressed enough. Do not let anyone mislead you into understaffing the program or bending rules that affect the safety of the children and the volunteers. Well-meaning adult helpers may reassure you that they can handle extra children without additional assistance. Gently explain that staffing is about the safety of everyone in the program and the liability the church assumes when caring for children. Do not enroll more children than you can safely supervise. ♦

Lisa Brown is the Director of Digital Ministry with Membership Vision. Building on her earlier work in children's ministry and communications, she helps churches connect to people and to God. An active member of Forma and a Girl Scout leader, Lisa is passionate about enriching the spiritual lives of people. Her book The Best Do-It-Yourself VBS Workbook Ever (Church Publishing, Inc., 2017) includes ideas for all aspects of VBS.



TEENAGERS: THE SECRET TO VBS SUCCESS

Every year it seems to get harder to find adult volunteers for a full week of VBS. Very early on in my ministry, I decided that we would run VBS with the minimum number of adults required for safety, and then rely on teens and tweens to fill out the body of volunteers. It was the best VBS decision I ever made.

Start 'em Young

In children's ministry, it is easy to fall into the habit of focusing on programs for the very young. Yet it's the older elementary kids – the “tweens” – who are most at risk of drifting away from church. These are the children for whom sports and other activities require increasing amounts of time.

Developmentally, they begin to exhibit a sense of independence and a desire to spend free time with friends. If church programming seems too childish, they will stop participating. Our solution is to invite them to be VBS helpers at a very young age and empower them to be leaders in this ministry.

How young is too young? How old is old enough? Honestly, there are no hard and fast rules. Often at their request, we have fourth graders who help with snacks, and fifth graders who still wish to be campers. Each child decides (in advance) how they would like to participate.

Regardless of whether they attend as a helper or as a camper, they benefit spiritually from participation. Both teen and tween helpers learn the VBS lessons. Better yet, they teach those lessons to younger children. There is nothing better than a big kid as a buddy or a teacher.

Teen Volunteer Logistics and Details

For safety reasons, any minor helper – tween or teen – must still register for VBS in order to provide emergency contact information. Any registration fees are waived, but families are asked to make a small donation to cover the cost of providing snacks for helpers.

Before VBS begins, all helpers, no matter how young, are required to attend a training session where youth protection policies and safety practices are reviewed. A special permission form is signed by helpers' parents, to let them know that their child is receiving training and is expected to act in accordance with the guidelines. Youth who are middle school and older are required to fill out a standard church volunteer application.

Our VBS program runs every afternoon for a week. Helpers gather daily to eat lunch. I take advantage of that time to work with them. I explain how we are interpreting the theme of the day in our activities, and I emphasize the scriptural connections. This is a rather stealthy way of doing formation and Bible study with the teen and tween helpers.

Coaching and Training My Teen Volunteers

In addition to safety procedures they learned earlier, they are given directions about managing young children. I repeat these guidelines every single day. We also practice the songs children will be learning and block the daily skit.

After children arrive, older teens shepherd groups of campers from station to station. Tweens with adult supervision run craft activities, help with games, and prepare and serve snacks. For safety, an adult is always in charge of outside games, an activity where injuries are most likely to occur. There is also an adult who is the designated first aid responder. The VBS director oversees dropoffs and pickups to ensure the safety of our campers. Other adults in the building – clergy, for example – are on call in event of an emergency.

The Payoffs

By designing VBS to rely on teen and tween helpers (with adults present primarily for safety and oversight), we created a wonderful multi-age program that fosters a sense of ownership and connection. By using the gifts of our young people, our VBS program is more vibrant and fun. Through leadership roles, our youth encounter God and the stories of our faith in new and exciting ways. ♦

Lisa Brown

VBS Needs Teens, and Teens Need VBS

At many churches, teens and tweens are invited to help with Vacation Bible School to create wonderful multi-age programs that foster a sense of ownership and connection among young people. By placing teens in leadership roles, faith formation is deepened for everyone involved.

Basic Directions for Teen Volunteers

Safety is always the first priority, both for campers and volunteers. Plan to review safety policies and procedures for leaders of all ages. Each state has its own guidelines for background checks, and each diocese has guidelines for completing the Safeguarding God's Children program.

Here are some basic directions for teens and the adults that work with them.

- Leaders are never alone with a child**
If a child needs to leave the group for any reason, another child should accompany them as a buddy.
- Follow the schedule**
Everyone needs to stick to the schedule. If weather or another reason causes a change in activities, the director should be informed.
- Helping a child use the bathroom**
If children need supervision in the restroom, a helper stands in the hall doorway leading into the restroom (assuming a multi-stall restroom). They are not alone in the restroom with the child but can supervise. If more intimate assistance is needed, an adult should be called.
- Call for first aid**
Everyone needs to know how to contact the designated first aid responder at all times. Provide general first aid protocols, including instances where the injured person should not be moved or left alone while help is sought.
- No roughhouse play**
Horseplay, piggyback rides, and carrying younger children – all actions younger campers may request – are not acceptable.
- Setting boundaries**
If younger children become physically aggressive – climbing on teen helpers, for example – the teens need to give the child clear instructions to stop or get an adult to help redirect. Teens often need help learning to set boundaries – which is a good life skill.
- Give positive directions**
Directions to children should be given in the affirmative, not the negative. “Keep your feet on the sidewalk” is better than “Don't go in the street.”
- Use the phrase “I need you to...”**
To modify a child's behavior, “I need you to...” is a positive way to give direction.
- Calling a child**
To effectively communicate with a child, go to the child rather than yell from a distance.
- Allergy issues**
The best protocols for allergies are repetitive and layered – allergies should be clearly highlighted on rosters and attendance sheets, and subtly added to name tags. Snack schedule for kitchen helpers should flag groups that have children or leaders with food allergies.
- Respect the space, and clean up**
We show respect for each other and our work by cleaning after snacks and organizing craft materials and other items. Teens are not expected to pick up after children, but rather to direct children to pick up after themselves.
- Serve all the children**
Remind teens that although they may have favorites, they are to serve all children equally by being inclusive, inviting, and welcoming to all.
- Role models = Rock Stars**
Remind teens that they are role models, or even Rock Stars in the eyes of younger kids. Sarcasm, teasing and certain kinds of language are not to be used.
- Focus on the campers, not your friends**
The focus of leaders of all ages needs to be on campers rather than interactions with one another.
- Put cell phones away**
Helpers need to keep their cell phones out of sight, other than to keep track of the time.
- No drinks or snacks in front of campers**
Only eat or drink the same snacks campers are eating when you are with them.
- Rules for posting pictures**
Helpers do not have permission to post images of campers on personal social media. Permission to post images to social media is only given to churches. ♦

Lisa Brown



PUBLISHER REVIEWS

Over the years, the Center for the Ministry of Teaching's (CMT) Top Picks have consistently come from the same three or four publishing houses. The reviews on these pages are focused on publishers of VBS programs we have reviewed over the years. The CMT annual reviews that will continue to come out each spring will still have information about current programs, including costs, daily themes, and use of scripture.

We are recommending that in the future, users go directly to the publishing houses they prefer for their VBS programming. Leaders can start looking for programs earlier in the year that are consistent with their theology and pedagogical preferences. VBS programs will continue to have a range of themes and unique foci, but we expect underlying pedagogy and theological stances of publishers to remain the same.

Publisher reviews for VBS programs we have reviewed in the past are included below, listed alphabetically.

Abingdon Press

<http://www.abingdonpress.com>

Abingdon consistently uses both biblical narrative and African American culture and history to introduce children to each year's theme. While the underlying message and energy of the music could be enjoyed by all races and cultures, the supporting materials reflect the music, syntax, and visual representations of the African American community, its primary audience. Goals typically encourage children to embrace the love of Jesus and find strength within themselves.

Every day children are introduced to a biblical concept or character that illustrates the love of God along with people who empower the African American community, such as Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan who were recently featured in the motion picture *Hidden Figures*, among others. Many of the leaders featured in Abingdon's VBS programs are working today to improve the lives of people of all ages. Background information about these leaders is extensive and could be used for other programming.

Quality of music continues to be a major strength of Abingdon's VBS. The outreach component is designed to create programming throughout the year that relates to the VBS theme and the featured African American leaders. Activities each day include an opening worship skit with song and dance, structured Bible study time, and time for reflection through crafts, snacks, and music. While the Abingdon

programs include a music and movement rotation that is lively and fun, they do not have physical activities or a game rotation.

Cokesbury

<https://www.cokesbury.com>

Cokesbury Publishing reflects a mainline, Methodist interpretation of scripture that emphasizes God's deep love of humanity and the ability of people to be in relationship with God. Unlike many VBS programs that focus on the crucifixion or resurrection, Cokesbury consistently emphasizes God's presence in our everyday lives and living in relationship with God. The VBS resources are centered in biblical narrative and include a section on helping children make a commitment to Christ, which churches in the Episcopal tradition that emphasize baptism as the rite of initiation, may not use.

The materials are gender inclusive and include diverse cultures and races. While some of the stories obviously have male characters, these roles could easily be played by either gender in drama reenactments. The mission suggestions are engaging with options that could be easily adapted to most faith communities.

Music is easily adaptable; the leader book contains both sheet music and lyrics. Videos for gathering activities are engaging but not overly active. Every activity area (science, drama, missions, among others) has ideas to adapt activities to different learning styles, local VBS traditions, time limits and more. The craft and science rotations are

both easy to do with clear instructions, and often call for donated materials rather than purchased items.

All activity areas, including mission suggestions, can be adapted to fit a budget and local focus. Overall, Cokesbury offers adaptable, well-rounded VBS programs that can be offered with large or minimal budgets.

Concordia Publishing House

<https://www.cph.org>

Concordia Publishing House (CPH) is the publishing arm of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Its VBS programs in both English and español reflect its mission to provide "products and services that are faithful to the scriptures and the Lutheran confessions." CPH products are theologically more conservative than those produced by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), which is in full communion with the Episcopal Church.

While the activities in CPH VBS programs are age appropriate, the language is not. Scripts and teacher directions assume a mature theological vocabulary. Concepts such as sin, the devil, and resurrection are used frequently without being explained. Each day teachers are told to focus on sin, such as, "Our hearts are sinful, so we don't want to listen to or receive God's Word."

The openings, closings, and storytelling guides are highly scripted, allowing leaders no leeway for their own words and little space for learners' own thoughts. Learners are not encouraged to explore or discover their own experience of God. The overall themes and animated characters are often inviting and even whimsical, which is at odds with the heavy-handed theology.

At the same time, CPH provides quality planning materials, including job descriptions, schedules, and online resources. Starter kits provide supplies and ideas that include huge posters for decorations. Music is often upbeat and memorable, and snack suggestions are fun and healthy overall.

Group Publishing

<https://www.group.com>

- Marketplace Series
- Weekend Series
- Annual Program

Group Publishing has three primary VBS products each year. In its Marketplace series, Group takes VBS participants back in time to other places through immersive and intergenerational programs located in sites such as Rome, Babylon, Egypt, among others. Group's weekend series is designed for user efficiency and convenience, requiring just two 2.5-hour blocks of program time with the children combined with an optional 20-minute celebration during Sunday worship. Group's annual VBS programs are designed as week-long rotation models with mixed-age groups of children led by an adult or teenager along with station leaders. For its primary VBS product in 2018, Group offered for the first time an español/bilingual version.

All three programs demonstrate Group's signature attention to logistical detail, as well as its heavy focus on atonement theology. While the programs often focus on one positive Bible message, the sessions dive quickly into graphic explorations of darkness and sin. The emphasis on atonement theology prioritizes the death of Jesus over his life and teachings. The effect of such fear-based experiences on young children will likely be guilt rather than wonder – quite the opposite of the positive emphasis of most VBS programming.

Activities for each group are age-appropriate and easy to use. Materials are visually appealing and well-organized, although the cost of supplemental materials, especially for crafts, add significantly to overall costs. Upbeat music selections fit well with Bible verses and support daily themes. Video quality and production value are very good.

MennoMedia

<http://www.mennomedia.org>

MennoMedia typically veers away from more frenetic VBS resources that provide constant activity to emphasize reflection and contemplation when appropriate. Some VBS leaders prefer quieter, more reflective activities to counter a culture that is always plugged in and moving. Others find that MennoMedia's low-key, unplugged approach appeals to some volunteers, who are less interested in creating elaborate decorations and more drawn to identifying appropriate spiritual practices for children.

Session themes, which come from carefully selected biblical passages, reflect sound scholarship and interpretation. The Mennonite church has a long tradition of strong Christian formation practice, which is reflected in the learning activities and program structure. Theologically the materials focus on God's presence and embracing love for all people. Both the rhythm of the program and its primary messages encourage learners to a deeper relationship with God.

The activities and structure of the program are developmentally appropriate for the targeted age groups of the VBS program. Materials are well-organized and easy to understand. Teachers are given a range of options for each activity area to meet their interests and skill sets.

At the same time, the mission component for their programs seems to be an afterthought. VBS leaders may want to find a local outreach project that coincides with the annual theme. Music selections are often disappointing. Over the years music has been solid, but stodgy.

MennoMedia VBS programs are also easy to alter to meet programming needs at other times of the year, such as Lent.

Orange

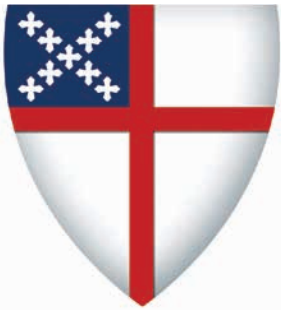
<http://orangevbs.com>

Descriptions by Orange publishing of their annual VBS programs made us optimistic in the past that positive themes would help these resources overcome the CMT's usual reservations with this publisher. It hasn't turned out that way.

The activities in the Orange programs are flexible, well-constructed, and clearly explained, and the media materials are beautifully created and impressive. A congregation could have a lot of fun participating in Orange VBS programs, and even make some interesting crafts. Detailed guidance is also provided for less experienced coordinators, and the program is attentive to including parents by integrating lessons at home.

All of the materials are provided through pdf and other downloads. For some, this delivery method makes the most sense for its portability. For others, printing out director and teacher guides is time consuming and costly. Orange also provides a network of support through its website and offers free graphics for general use or for social media.

But the bottom line is that these materials are intended for evangelical churches with sin- and salvation-oriented theologies—and with megachurch-type infrastructure and culture. The themes and Bible readings for the individual days are not by themselves objectionable, and a theologically savvy director with time to tinker could make it work. Still, creedal churches will probably find it more trouble than it's worth to adapt the recommended daily messages (which permeate all the materials) into a coherent, age-appropriate theological approach more in line with formation built on the baptismal covenant.



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Churches everywhere are actively engaging children through VBS programs by teaching them songs and Bible verses and sending them home each day with a taste of God's Love.

Churches leading VBS (and those with arts, nature, and fitness camps, too!) also form adults and teens who volunteer. Recognizing teen and adult leaders is an important aspect of VBS ministry. Send volunteers into the glittery fray, reminding them that they do important work on behalf of everyone in your congregation.

Blessing and Commissioning Vacation Bible School Teachers and Helpers

Prayer (said by all):

Loving God, you have entrusted us with the message of your power, grace, justice, and love. We ask for your guidance, that we may be teachers and learners together. Believing that you are in our midst, we set apart those who would serve in our Vacation Bible School. May they serve you in nurturing the spiritual growth of all who are entrusted in their care. Bless each one gathered here, enabling them to be channels of your grace. We pray all these things through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Pastor to VBS Teachers and Helpers:

You have recognized God's call in your lives.

Will you endeavor to develop your gifts for teaching so as to continue to pass on the Christian faith?

Will you be faithful to the task, taking seriously the commitment of time and talent?

Will you take seriously your role as learner, studying diligently the Scriptures and VBS lessons for each day?

VBS Teachers and Helpers:

We have heard God's call to teach and lead Vacation Bible School for our church.

We teach, trusting in God's support, sustaining grace and empowerment for this task.

We teach, relying on prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We teach, inviting others to recognize and respond to God's call in their lives.

We teach, depending on our church family to uphold us in prayer, love and support.

All say: Amen!

Centre Street United Methodist Church
Cumberland, Maryland