

2015 Seasonal and Perennial Vacation Bible School Reviews



**Center for the Ministry of Teaching
Virginia Theological Seminary**

www.vts.edu/cmt
www.keyhallonline.org/vbs

Welcome to the Center for the Ministry of Teaching (CMT) Vacation Bible School Reviews for 2015. Both new programs developed for 2015 and recaps of perennial resources are among the reviews. This year themes of new programming range from Bible study to climbing Mt. Everest.

Be sure to check out the CMT's Top Picks, four programs we found stood out from the rest. The criteria for our Top Picks are:

1. An emphasis on God's love and care for all people
2. The unity of a program around a distinctive theme supported by a cohesive program of stories and activities
3. Sound learning strategies based on developmental traits of the targeted audience

The Perennial section includes time-tested favorites, such as the two Pilgrimage programs that help children learn about the people that have molded their faith traditions.

The review team this year includes CMT staff, trusted Christian educators with experience in planning and leading VBS programs in different settings and denominations, and students at Virginia Theological Seminary who recently completed a course in curriculum evaluation.

We carefully examine starter kits for each program reviewed. The reviews include the name of the publisher, a website url, and basic content of the starter kit and its cost. We note if additional expenditures are needed to operate a program.

If you haven't looked at VBS materials in several years, you might be surprised by some of the changes and additions. Several publishers offer online support for registration and personalized VBS webpages—churches with large programs may want to look for these features. Others have decided to create slower-paced programs that require less infrastructure and expenditures.

Many VBS developers weave sound pedagogical research in their programs with sensitivity toward children with disabilities and developmental needs of children of all ages. A few offer programming for teens and adults, but these usually require additional expenditures. Most programming, thematically and from a design standpoint, is targeted to elementary-age children. Preschool adaptations are available for most programs at no extra cost.

In looking at VBS programs throughout the country, we have not seen many that target an intergenerational audience. The ones that do exist are usually "home-grown." If you want to reach a broader audience, consider looking at the downloadable program offered by GenOn Ministry in the section of 2015 program reviews.

Don't overlook tweens and teens for VBS, even if the program you select doesn't have specific materials for this age group. These young people may be strongest part of your volunteer staff. Pair youth with adult mentors who respect the leadership skills and vision of young people to create dynamic teams who build strong relationships with children and each other.

We believe VBS can be a powerful tool for evangelism for your church. Be sure to select a program that mirrors the mission and theology of your church and community. Look beyond a catchy theme to the way scripture is used and the messages, both explicitly and implicitly, the participants will receive. Often, VBS directors and leaders will need to adapt a program to insure it reflects their church's teaching and beliefs. These decisions and changes should be made before volunteer staff are given materials to use.

Finally, Vacation Bible School should be fun and engaging for everyone involved. This is a time to celebrate God's love and the goodness of creation!

Dorothy Linthicum
Center for the Ministry of Teaching
Virginia Theological Seminary

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CMT TOP PICKS

Bible Blast to the Past

2

Discover God's Everlasting Love

Standard Publishing

<http://www.vacationbibleschool.com>

\$179.00

Bible Blast to the Past is designed to bring children closer to God through Bible stories, relationships and service to others. Through stories from both the Old and New Testaments, participants explore characteristics of God's love. There is a strong emphasis throughout the program and in the instructional "cards" for leaders to "lead kids to Christ." Denominations like the Episcopal Church emphasize baptism as the entry point to the church and a relationship with Christ. VBS programs in these churches will need to instruct leaders about differences in language and theology in talking about relationships with Jesus. The developmental tips provided to teachers for children of different age groups are sound and useful. The teaching methodology overall is clear and straightforward.

Age Levels: Preschool, Elementary (younger & older), Teen, Adult (separate purchase)

Includes:

X	Clip Art/Reproducible CD	X	Music Action Training DVD
X	Reproducible music CD/split track audio	X	Skits/Drama DVD
X	Age-level resource CDs	X	Decorating/publicity CD
X	Media disc with MP3 and MP4 files for music/videos		

Strengths:

- Standard produces the most complete starter kit among the major publishers, with decorating panels, downloadable art, worship intros, poster packs for each center, among other useful materials.
- Bible story presentations are interactive resulting in full participation of the children.
- Clear and complete instructions for including children with special needs ensure that they are fully integrated in the program.
- All-new songs and music videos were created by Yancy, a Christian rock artist, who gives new life to traditional songs like "Jesus Loves Me."
- Strong emphasis is given throughout the program to mission and service; projects are focused on community needs and issues.

Weaknesses:

- Leader "cards" are downloadable and can be sent electronically to staff. Printed leader guides are not available; the cards that replace them are not as complete as traditional guides. Some teachers will need more help in navigating the children through their centers.
- Some of the crafts are too complicated for some age groups.
- Snack menus are creative and fun, but tend to be more on the sugary side than healthy.

Dorothy Linthicum

G Force Adventure Park: God's Love in Action

3

Cokesbury

<http://2015.cokesburyvbs.com/>

\$ 159.99

G- Force Adventure Park focuses on putting faith into action through missions. The theme is emphasized in the focal scripture verse in Acts 17:28a: "In God we live, move and exist." Overall, the program theologically sound, following the same format as years past with alternative scheduling options and increased online presence. Churches can access an online registration system, download clip art and other items, and view and use Pinterest and Facebook pages.

While there are many parts to this VBS, all activities focus on Bible storytelling. Children are encouraged to learn the heart of the Bible story and apply it to their own lives. After each activity, there are discussion or reflection times designed to help the children connect the story, activity and their own lives. The program reflects the United Methodist beliefs of the publisher, but could be used by most denominations with minor adaptations.

Age Levels: Preschool, Elementary (primary emphasis), Teen, Adult (separate purchase)

Includes:

X	Clip Art/Reproducible CD	X	Music Action Training DVD
X	Music CD	X	Skits/Drama DVD (opening & closing)
X	Decorating/publicity guide		

Strengths:

- Leader guides provide alternative activities. The science center was developed in connection with Steve Spangler, known for kid-friendly science learning. Experiments designed for both elementary and preschool ages
- Multiple scheduling options are provided, including weekend and day camp models.
- Drama allows for a full cast or a single storyteller.
- Recreation center has multiple activities each day with high, medium and lower energy games.
- Music DVD has a good range of diversity and ages in various locations.

Weaknesses:

- Some of the crafts require purchasing kits (with limited creativity) or extensive prep time, a problem if a large number of children attend VBS. Many crafts require painting and gluing, which might be hard if session times are short.
- Science experiments are interesting, although mostly are demonstrations. Some experiments could be done by students working in pairs to increase participation and reduce prep time.
- Music is not as engaging as in years past; some dance moves too energetic for confined spaces.
- While the theme is repeated often, it is difficult to tie it to the term "G Force." Some younger children may have trouble relating a skate park theme to God and God's stories.
- Missions center had a different mission each day, which could be confusing. Choose one mission to connect everything together from the program or your own community.

Anne Shelton

Message Received - Hearing God's Call

4

MennoMedia

faithandliferesources.org/Curriculum/vbs/

\$159.99

Listen up everyone! From Samuel to Mary; Esther to Lydia; Jesus and the disciples, *Message Received - Hearing God's Call* is all about people who heard God calling and were ready to follow. These powerful Bible stories, spanning the Old and New Testaments, show children that God chooses ordinary folks to do extraordinary acts. We too can listen for God's voice, follow Jesus, and open ourselves to do God's will in the world. The emphasis of this program is that God speaks to us today so that we can embark on a lived faith.

Age Levels: Preschool, Elementary

Includes:

X	Music CD	X	Registration and volunteer forms included
X	Alternate schedule		

Strengths:

- Extremely well organized, beautifully designed, easy to read, navigate, and follow.
- Excellent focus on the biblical stories, emphasizing the theme of calling. Bible stories include men, women, and children.
- Scripts for Bible story presentations are very well written, nicely laid out, and true to the story.
- Each "response" guide (Bible, Creative, and Active) includes several options from which the leader can choose. For example, four game options for each day.
- The Directors Guide includes excellent tips, instructions, and even suggestions for prayer. Overall, the publisher has thought of everything when it comes to running a simple VBS.
- Bible Story Book for ages 4-5 is excellent, with full stories and color pictures.
- The songs are a nice mix of old and new, including several world music selections. Music leader's guide includes sheet music with chords for each song.
- Flexible schedule options, including modified daily schedules, plus a ten-week program or weekend retreat option.

Weaknesses:

- Significant reading is required for each guide. Leaders and volunteers will need to study the materials well in advance.
- Drama segments require considerable memorization and several actors.
- No programming for tweens and adults.
- Song CD is somewhat bland, despite the good quality of the songs themselves.
- Production value of Bible Memory Verse DVD is weak and bland.
- No extra frills, such as decorations, t-shirts, etc.
- No online help with registration or social media component.

Matthew Kozlowski

Group Publishing
group.com/vbs
\$149.99

Thailand Trek introduces children to life in Thailand through games, snacks, and learning stations. The material stresses that God loves the whole world and speaks every language. By learning about daily life, children can discover for themselves what is similar and what is different from their own lives. They may even come across new games and food they love. The approach is respectful, positive, and detailed.

The theology reflects a conservative, evangelical perspective. Churches from different theological backgrounds may want to modify the opening celebration and Bible experiences, especially on Day 3, which has a heavy focus on atonement. The daily themes and Bible readings can guide modifications to keep the unity and theme of the curriculum.

The program encourages the children to engage in mission by saving money to purchase Bibles for kids in Thailand. The mission component of the program could be improved by having children talk a video segment showing how parents, teachers, churches, and an orphanage in Thailand came together to repair a house that burned down. Afterward the conversation could then turn to how they might help other children in their local communities. *Thailand Trek* is engaging and imaginative. Children and adult volunteers alike will learn and grow from the experience; it will be a very memorable VBS!

Ages Levels: Preschool and Elementary

Includes:

- | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| X | Clip Art/Reproducible CD | X | Music, Action, Training DVD |
| X | Music and Lyric CD | X | Decorating DVD |
| X | Detailed curriculum and materials | | |

Strengths:

- High quality, well researched, materials and activities that will engage children.
- Culture is favorably and respectfully portrayed. Videos introduce several children of different socio-economic experience in Thailand, and activities/games immerse them in aspects of culture.
- Materials favor cooperation rather than competition, and mentoring/modeling by older students.
- Electronic copies of clip art, logo, and song lyric power points make it easy to modify materials or to create more materials.
- Video and apps tell the cultural story and teach how to pronounce names.

Weaknesses:

- Except for theme song, most music is standard VBS music with no Thai words.
- Several songs are heavy on salvation and atonement theology, but they can be replaced.
- The suggested decorations are very elaborate (and beautiful) but would be expensive and time consuming to construct.
- The curriculum is expensive, and extra materials are needed for the snack and craft stations.
- The program requires a lot of volunteers to staff the centers and lead the groups.

Robin Denney

**Other
Reviewed
2015
Programs**

The Church Family Gathers for a Very Blessed Summer

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GenOn Ministries

www.genonministries.org

\$95.00 (download)

GenOn Ministries' intergenerational program allows the entire church family to grow and celebrate their faith together. Using psalms and Gospel readings, this VBS explores what it means to be a follower of Jesus, from the very young to the very old, and everyone in between. Each of the 5 sessions includes time for all ages to share a meal, listen and respond to scripture, play games, work on a craft, and sing together. In addition, each day has "at home" conversation starters that allow families to extend and remember the topic.

This VBS is not intended to replace age-specific events or programs, but is intended to broaden your congregation's opportunities to build relationships, carry one another's burdens, and celebrate joys.

Age Levels: Specifically intergenerational

Includes:

X Director's Guide X Fully resourced Pinterest pages

Strengths:

- Perfect for a small congregation, with little set-up or significant volunteer time.
- Excellent use of Pinterest to offer ideas for decorating, crafts, food, and mission/outreach.
- Take-It-Home Blessings keep the topic relevant for more than the 2 hours of VBS time.
- Each session stands alone so those who attend will be fully included and not feel they have missed content. "Blessing Others" outreach component can extend the entire set of lessons.
- Strong explanation of purpose of intergenerational faith programming

Weaknesses:

- Planning details are inadequate. VBS leader needs a good grasp of group planning as there are no specific supply lists or volunteer responsibilities.
- Safe practices guidelines need to be addressed for such a multi-age gathering.
- Scripture readings are designed for short attention spans. Leader will need to decide how to present Bible stories to capture wide-range of comprehension levels.
- Scripture responses are all verbal. Mixed-media responses, not all words, would be welcome, i.e. respond with Legos, with painting, with poetry, with movement.
- Without specific guidelines for time, VBS director will have to test out each activity

Charlotte Greeson

Camp Discovery: Jesus at Work through Us

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Concordia Publishing House

vbs.cph.org

\$149.99

Camp Discovery: Jesus at Work through Us emphasizes God’s message of saving grace through Bible stories and scripted messages about salvation in each of the rotation centers. The concept of sin and Jesus’ saving grace is discussed in relation to biblical stories each day. After hearing the story of Deborah from the Book of Judges, for example, everyone repeats together the weekly take-home point: “Jesus is at work through us.” There is no attempt to help young learners, who developmentally think in literal terms, make the leap from the story of Deborah to Jesus. While the theme of discovery and camp is appealing, the overall message seems heavy handed. Perhaps having children learn that God loves them is as important as being told repeatedly about their need for a savior.

Age Levels: Preschool, Elementary; Teens and Adults (separate purchases)

Includes:

X	Clip Art/Reproducible CD	X	Music Action Training DVD
X	Music CD	X	Skits/Drama DVD
X	Alternative/weekend schedule	X	Decorating DVD & Posters
X	Online resources (photos, decorating video, registration)		

Strengths:

- Snack suggestions are creative, healthy and fun.
- Using the posters and DVD that are provided along with online resources make decorating easy.
- The starter kit is very complete, with posters, files, clip art, sample crafts, among other items.
- Music resources include reproducible sheet music and an action DVD.
- Online tools personalize registration and follow-up for churches and are easy to use.

Weaknesses:

- The music is somewhat flat with similar and repetitive melodies. Alternate hymns from the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, hymnal are also suggested for each day.
- The mission project doesn’t offer any tangible activity for children other than raising money for the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) project in urban settings. Children can “purchase,” for example, a lunch for \$5 for a child somewhere at some time. Look for a hands-on mission project affiliated with your church or in your community.
- The craft center depends on purchasing a daily plastic trinket for each child. A few bonus craft ideas are included, but not enough to cover a five-day program.

Dorothy Linthicum

Everest: Conquering Challenges with God's Mighty Power

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Group Publishing
group.com/vbs/everest
Starter kit: \$175

God's almighty power is the focus of the *Everest* VBS. This is an ambitious, well-organized, and potentially pricey curriculum. Each day is tightly focused on a Bible verse and a corresponding attribute of God: the power to provide, to comfort, to heal, to forgive, and to love us forever. Crafts, games, Bible story lessons, skits, snacks, and songs all reinforce the day's theme. The activities for the fourth day about God's power to forgive include some rather heavy-handed emphasis on wrong-doing and rely on a fairly narrow understanding of atonement. The preschool curriculum makes good accommodations for its 3- and 4-year-old audience, although the Day Four activities may require some adjustment. Overall, however, the activities and lessons are age-appropriate well-designed.

Ages Levels: Preschool, Elementary, Pre-Teen

Includes:

X	Clip Art/Reproducible CD	X	Music Action Training DVD
X	Music CD	X	Skits/Drama DVD
X	Decorating/publicity resources		

Strengths:

- The starter kit contains examples of all the essential materials, very thorough manuals for activity leaders and directors, well-produced CDs and DVDs of music and training materials, software support, and clip-art. While many activities presuppose purchase of other materials, the starter kit is adequate to allow creative leaders to run a VBS.
- Instructions for an elaborate decorating and set-construction scheme are included and could draw in adult and teen participants, opening the experience to a wider segment of the congregation.
- Software for a VBS website and registration support is included, with paid upgrade if desired.

Weaknesses:

- The cost of materials for crafts, decorations, and props for drama could be considerable if all the suggested items are purchased.
- Scripts for stories and other materials may need to be adjusted to reflect the theology of the sponsoring congregation, but since the activities are tightly integrated and scripted, adjusting one activity may have an impact on another part of the program.
- The mission component is asks children to bring in money to buy pay for Bibles for children in Thailand. It lacks creativity and connection to the theme. A local initiative should be considered.
- God is consistently referred to with the male pronoun, and the Bible stories do not include any female characters.

Catherine Gibson

Fun Run

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Brentwood VBS KidZ

brentwoodbenson.com/vbs

\$69.99

Fun Run focuses on running the race and keeping the faith from Paul's second letter to Timothy (4:7-8). Through activity centers, children explore different characteristics of Jesus as light, shepherd, bread, living water, and vine. In scripted dramas these characteristics are introduced each day by a group of young people preparing for a race. Sometimes the connections are contrived to maintain the program theme and daily scripture verse. The theology about salvation throughout the curriculum is somewhat heavy-handed as the children are told that "God sees them as covered by the blood of Jesus." Children are pressured throughout the week to accept Jesus as their Lord.

The music, created by Jeff Slaughter, is a cut above most VBS programs. It is the strongest part of the program. *Fun Zone* has one of the best approaches to mission among all the programs. Users are encouraged to select a community organization or event. Directions are provided to incorporate projects into the *Fun Run* theme through collections, races, and other activities.

Age Levels: Preschool, Elementary

Includes:

X Music Action Training DVD X Drama DVD
X Music CD (English and español).

Strengths:

- *Fun Run* curriculum is available in español as a download (separate purchase required). The español music CD is in the starter kit.
- Clear directions provided for using materials with small and large groups.
- Snack suggestions are healthy for the most part.
- Music is lively and creative.

Weaknesses:

- Music seems to be the major focus of the program, with less emphasis on creating a well-rounded curriculum.
- The heavy-handed salvation message permeates every part of the program.
- Craft ideas are not creative and or engaging.
- Games are all competitive and don't encourage children to work together.

Dorothy Linthicum

Group Publishing

<http://www.group.com/vbs/hometown-nazareth>

\$139.99

Hometown Nazareth comes from the Marketplace curricula used in VBS programs for a number of years. Daily small group experiences are centered on a scripture passages and take place in the marketplace, which reflects life in Nazareth as it might have looked during Jesus’ childhood. Activities for each day include group time, a trip to Mary’s house for stories about Jesus as a child, games, the making of crafts in marketplace shops, and snack time.

The narrative for the week begins with Mary being chosen to be the mother of Jesus and end with the first miracle at the wedding in Cana. Stories are told through drama at “Mary’s house.” The scripts take some liberties with the biblical account; leaders may want to write their own scripts. While sometimes the recurring character Eunice seems a big heavy-handed, her questions and responses might reflect the thoughts and disbelief of the children watching the drama unfold. Overall the theology of the program has strong ties to the biblical account, although it jumps on Day 4 from Jesus’ visit to the temple with his parents to a tenuous message about sin and salvation. As with any curricula, leaders need to be aware of shifts they find inappropriate and adjust instructions and scripts accordingly.

Ages Levels: Preschool, Middle School, High School, and Adults

Includes:

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| X | Clip Art/Reproducible CD | X | Music Action Training DVD |
| X | Music CD plus instrumental version | X | Director’s DVD |
| X | PowerPoint with song lyrics | X | Decorating space DVD |

Strengths:

- Jesus’ childhood is topic that will engage most children.
- Materials are user friendly, especially for first time directors.
- Registration and evaluation tools are helpful and easy to use.
- The program is interdenominational which maximizes participation in this program.
- The music is catchy and fun to sing, though not memorable.
- An authentic connection between the title/theme and the various activities distinguishes this from many VBS curricula.
- Starter kit includes everything needed for program, except craft and decorating items.

Weaknesses:

- The program is expensive when suggested materials for crafts and decorations are purchased. The craft resources are flimsy and poorly constructed. Alternative ideas are included, but a creative craft leader is essential.
- The mission project that raises money for a Group initiative to provide Bibles in Thailand lacks creativity and connection to the theme. A local initiative should be considered.

Dorothy Linthicum

Journey Off the Map**Unknown to Us. Known to Him.**

LifeWay Christian Resources

www.lifeway.com/vbs

Jump Start Kit: \$34.95

Español Starter Kit: \$69.99

The main focus of LifeWay's VBS program *Journey Off the Map* is salvation for every volunteer, child and parent involved. Teacher training, for example, is primarily about presenting a four-step approach to salvation instead of promoting sound teaching methodology or helping volunteers understand developmental aspects of children of different ages. Questionable statistics are cited to support the program's focus, such as "for every leader trained, 1.1 professions of faith are reported." (Source: Lifeway's VBS Specialist)

The theme of a journey is inviting and the program includes the items we've come to expect for VBS with decorating ideas, music, activity centers, flashy promotions, registration support, glitzy souvenirs and crafts, and t-shirts. However, the heavy-handed message of salvation—God rules, we sin, God gave us Jesus, and Jesus saves us from our sins—trumps any other message presented through Bible stories and activities. While leader and training materials rarely refer to God's love for all people, the song lyrics mention God's love amid messages that some may find objectionable.

Other programs that have salvation messages, such as Standard's *Bible Blast to the Past*, stress God's love more than humanity's sin. If you want to present a positive message of hope that stems from God's abundant love for all people, you should not take a *Journey Off the Map*.

Age Levels: Preschool, Elementary (both require separate purchase)

Includes:

X	Reproducible music CD	X	Promotional DVD
X	Publicity posters	X	Decorating CD
X	Reusable ink stamp		

Strengths:

- VBS Family App with games, devotions, songs, videos available for easy upload (\$2.99).
- Administrative Guide provides clear, helpful information for setting up a VBS program.
- Spanish version is available.

Weaknesses:

- The Jump Start Kit will get you started, but to provide programs for preschoolers and children in grades 1-6, two additional kits must be purchased that cost \$99.99 each.
- Jump Start kit provides little or no information about crafts and snacks centers.

Dorothy Linthicum

Outback Rock**Where Kids Venture into Solid Faith**

Group Publishing, Inc.

<http://www.group.com/vbs/outback-rock>

\$67.99

Outback Rock is a weekend program with two 2½-hour sessions and one Sunday Celebration. Children of all ages are divided into groups or crews with an adult or teenage leader for each day's activities. Every session of the program has the same focus: God is always with us; only two Bible stories covered in the weekend program. With the abbreviated time, a significant amount of time is still spent on sin and a salvation experience. This runs counter to some faiths that believe a relationship with God and Jesus begins at baptism. Although the designers of *Outback Rock* are responding to the needs of churches that don't have the time or resources to create a week-long program, *Outback Rock* is VBS lite. If the idea of a weekend program appeals to you, consider adapting one of the week-long VBS programs to a weekend schedule.

Age Levels: Preschool, Elementary (children 10 and older serve as assistant crew leaders)

Includes:

X	Program resource DVD	X	Station Leader Guides
X	Music CD plus instrumental version	X	PowerPoint with song lyrics

Strengths:

- Decorating tips with free downloadable clips and publicity materials available online
- The Sunday service is for the whole congregation to let children and volunteers share what they learned at VBS.

Weaknesses:

- Craft activities all center on missions, two of which require individual purchases for each child. One of these purchases is a prefabricated cardboard bank, which children decorate in order to save money for a Group project Thailand. A weekend does not provide adequate time to even use the bank. Consider designing your own projects for community outreach programs.
- The schedule does not include snacks. It could be argued that snacks are unnecessary for a short program. But after playing games and rotating through several centers, children would probably welcome a healthy snack with cold water or lemonade.

Dorothy Linthicum

Shining Star: See the Jesus in Me!

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Abingdon Press

<http://www.abingdonpress.com/product/9781426792502>

\$79.99

Shining Star aims to help all of God's children shine with the light of God. With a distinct slant towards those typically seen as "less than"—children, people of color, women, immigrants, the poor—this program insists that we should not let our star get tarnished, nor fear get the best of us. Using Old and New Testament scripture, as well as African Americans from history and today, *Shining Star* demonstrates that when we hear God's call and keep to God's path, we live as God intends for us. In doing so, we share God's light with our communities.

Each day includes an opening worship skit with song and dance, structured Bible study time, and time for reflection through crafts, snacks, and music. This VBS is insistent that God loves us, and that we are responsible for being love and light in the world around us.

Ages Levels: Preschool/Kindergarten and Elementary, Teens and Adults (separate purchase)

Includes:

- X Worship DVD with movement activities
- X Music CD with teaching versions of songs

Strengths:

- Very detailed community engagement for registration, including structure and ideas for working with multiple churches.
- Each area (drama, outreach, food, etc) guide includes an explanation of why and how *Shining Star* VBS component complements the whole. Each opening session concludes with an Invitation to discipleship that reframes the session's scripture and goal.
- Director's guide is very instructive. It includes pedagogical and developmental guides, along with information on school-to-prison pipeline, biographies, websites, and movies.
- Outreach component can be used as a teen/young adult component during or after VBS.
- Lots of flexibility in length of VBS, from one-day camps throughout the summer to an after-school program that dovetails the topics with academic enrichment.
- Music is a mix of traditional hymns and hip-hop style, topic-related songs. It is great.

Weaknesses:

- Starter Kit does not include Teen or Adult program guides.
- *Shining Star* does not offer a physical activity or games rotation.
- The program is word-heavy, without multiple activities for each rotation. VBS director might need to include additional activities, particularly for arts and crafts rotation.
- *Shining Star* predominantly reflects the music, syntax, and visual representations of the African American community, its primary audience.

Charlotte Greeson

Gospel Light

<http://www.gospellightvbs.com/sonspark/>

\$199 – Deluxe Kit

Son Spark Labs stresses, unflinchingly, that God’s plan for everyone’s life is Jesus. All aspects—lessons, stories, activities, crafts, drama—stress the need for and importance of having a saving, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Theologically, *Son Spark Labs* assumes biblical literalism, the sinful nature of all people, and a narrow vision of atonement focusing on the suffering of Christ. The materials from drama scripts to joint gatherings almost always refer to God with masculine pronouns. They also promote Christian exclusivity, emphasizing that Christ is the only way to salvation.

Although the materials include images of diverse people and cultures, the leader in classroom situations is assumed male, and the star of the drama segments is always male. While the material is age appropriate, adaptable, and straightforward; the teaching strategies are prescriptive, heavy handed, and leave little (if any) room for questions, disagreements, or challenges that are off-script. An opportunity for making a decision for Christ is offered at the end of every class. To fit into certain contexts, *Son Spark Labs* would need to be adapted for denominational use.

Ages Levels: Preschool, Elementary (younger & older), Tweens

Includes:

X	Clip Art/Reproducible CD	X	Music Action Training DVD
X	Music CD	X	Skits/Drama DVD

Strengths:

- Materials are reproducible and high quality.
- The Bible stories used are appropriate for all ages, and generally accessible.
- Training materials are complete for aspects of the curriculum.
- The activities and lessons are age appropriate in content and expectations.
- Additional ideas, resources, and communities are available online to improve VBS experience.
- The downloadable resources are accessible and easy to use.
- The quality of most of the products is excellent, attractive, and well produced.

Weaknesses:

- All of the material is very prescriptive, leaving almost no room for teacher creativity or freedom in instruction; all responses are scripted, even during snack time.
- If all extra materials are purchased for each child, the program is very expensive
- The music is well produced, catchy, but theologically loaded.
- Adapting the theology of the program would be very difficult.
- The theology of mission is disconcerting and paternalistic, framed as something done by the church for poor people unable to care for themselves.

Benjamin B Maddison

Perennial Programs

Episcopal Relief & Development (ERD)

<http://www.er-d.org/children>

Free (download)

The Abundant Life Garden Project is a five-session curriculum that focuses on the importance of *Water, Seeds, Soil, Animals, and Harvest*. Although each session is designed for a one-hour time period, additional activities are available in the appendices. Through this program children will learn Bible stories and participate in activities that reinforce each day's theme. Children will also explore stories from the Episcopal Relief and Development (ERD) website that show the needs of people throughout the world

Ages Levels: Preschool - Elementary

Includes:

X Director's Guide

Strengths:

- Emphasizes a loving God.
- Curriculum is free.
- Heavy emphasis on environmental concerns and encourages being good stewards of the world's resources.
- Calls attention to the suffering of those around the world and highlights ways that children can make a difference.
- Daily themes connect well with Biblical stories.
- Incorporates using a Litany of Thanks and meditation into daily activities.
- Includes alternative schedules.

Weaknesses:

- Lacks variety in daily activities
- Heavy emphasis on drawing and writing with no alternative options for children who learn through physical activities.
- Curriculum is difficult to find on the ERD website.
- Options for Extended Time Periods in Appendix A do not include any theme-related snack or play time activities.
- Stories from the field available on the ERD website are geared towards an adult audience and may not hold the attention of children.
- Music must be purchased and added by the user.

Lori Daniels

Aslan is on the Move!

18

Leader Resources

www.LeaderResources.org/vbs

\$59.95 (download)

This creative intergenerational curriculum uses C.S. Lewis' beloved fantasy *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* to explore theology. While it does not contain any direct references to Scripture or Church history, this VBS explores Christian theology on a broad scale.

C.S. Lewis wrote the Narnia series "as an unconscious preparation of the imagination" to explore the deep power of faith and belief. Acting in the imagination prepares us to respond in faithful ways when we are confronted with meanness and treachery.

Themes of the five days are:

Day 1: Discovery of Narnia: how ideas color behavior.

Day 2: Discovery of the Beavers and the abiding hope that Aslan will return: how values lead to action.

Day 3: Father Christmas and Spring return, Aslan greets the group at the Stone Table, and Peter wins his first battle: how fear and love affect actions, and the power of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Day 4: Aslan and the Witch strike a bargain: the meaning of a willing sacrifice, abiding belief, grief and joy.

Day 5: Joy of Coronation: how this adventure expresses truth and reality for us and connects to familiar celebrations.

Age Levels: Intergenerational

Includes:

X Director's Guide

Strengths:

- Offers opportunity for profound new understandings about life for all ages.
- Creates a magical VBS with the lamppost, the wardrobe door, Turkish Delight, and all the other fantasy elements from the story.
- Includes interactive activities plus discussion questions.

Weaknesses:

- Does not include scriptural references.
- Constructing props calls for creative use of materials and space.
- Does not have a traditional VBS flow; if space or time are limitations, it can be challenging to adapt.
- Does not include fully-developed large motor games.

Lori Daniels

Clean Water for All God's Children

19

Living Waters for the World 2006/Presbyterian Church USA

<http://www.livingwatersfortheworld.org/vbs.php>

\$47.00 (download)

A mission project of the Presbyterian Synod of Living Waters, *Clean Water for All God's Children* is designed to enable children to understand the importance of clean water for health, and to show them ways to share in the mission of taking clean water to all the children of the world. The material can be used to raise awareness of the world's great need for clean water, or promoting understanding in a church that is preparing to send a team on an international mission trip. Each of the five days includes an opening time (with skit or puppet show and water conservation emphasis), a Bible story, a mission focus, activities/crafts, recreation and snacks, music and drama, and a closing time. Designed as a low-cost, thoughtful curriculum, all material in the basic notebook may be duplicated for use in the congregation's VBS program. A separate outline is provided for a preschool section, though younger children may join others during music time.

Ages Levels: Preschool (separate program), Kindergarten - Elementary

Includes:

- X Clip Art/Reproducible CD
- X Music CD

Strengths:

- One low-cost notebook contains all needed materials, including CDs.
- A single, mission-centered focus makes planning simpler.
- The daily reflection time allows just that: reflection, with time to slow down and listen to the children. It is an element rare in active summer programs.
- Music is simple, with several songs in both English and Spanish.

Weaknesses:

- Requires somewhat more creativity on the part of volunteers (this might be a strength)
- Growing germs from student hands on blood agar culture plates might give some teachers pause.
- No recommendations on snacks are provided.
- Few photos or graphics provided; photos show only children from Latin American countries.

Joyce Walker

Dare to be Different

20

Leader Resources

www.leaderresources.org/vbs

\$49.9 (download)

Film rental is extra; churches may also incur costs for public performance rights to show the film.

Dare to be Different is a one-week journey into Madeleine L'Engle's book, *A Wrinkle in Time*. Portions of the 2003 Disney film by the same name are shown each morning. Through games, activities and crafts, children learn about spiritual gifts, differences among people and the power of love. Characters from the novel act as guides for the 5-day program including Meg Murry, her brother Charles and a friend, Calvin O'Keefe, along with a number of out-of-this-world beings. Themes for each day:

Our Special Gifts

Following the Footsteps of Saints

Daring to be Different

Foolishness, Faith, and Free Will

The Power of Love

Ages Levels: K - Elementary

Includes:

X Director's Guide

Strengths:

- Primary expense is the downloadable curriculum.
- L'Engle's book, a best-seller for more than 50 years, is grounded in Christian tradition and theology, mixing faith and science, religion and fiction
- Staffing may be easier when using a beloved children's book as the VBS theme.
- There is room for great creativity.
- Children are introduced to yoga, a valuable resource.

Weaknesses:

- No information is provided about securing public performance rights for showing a feature-length film, or how to acquire the film.
- Instructions for crafts and snacks are minimal, as is information on organizing the week.
- Many adults (or youth) with acting talents are required.
- There is no suggested mission/outreach focus.
- Music consists of a simple list of titles, without reference to specific hymnals or songbooks.

Joyce Walker

Pilgrimage: Seeking the Kingdom of God

Leader Resources

www.LeaderResources.org/vbs

\$74.95 (download)

A Second Pilgrimage: Still Seeking the Kingdom of God

www.LeaderResources.org/vbs

\$74.95 (download)

Using the same program structure, this curriculum journeys with Teresa of Avila, Mary the mother of Jesus, Francis of Assisi, the Apostle Paul, and Hildegard of Bingen.

Pilgrimage transports students into the Middle Ages to journey as pilgrims to sites where they learn from the lives of people of faith. During the Middle Ages, Christians began the practice of journeying to distant locations, as a way to deepen their experience of God and others.

On this pilgrimage, participants travel to the ultimate destination for God's faithful people: the Kingdom of God. Over five sessions, children find a road map that helps them to know themselves and others in new ways as they seek to know God as Creator, Savior and Holy Spirit.

Participants travel to five sites that were common destinations for medieval pilgrims: Rome, Italy; Canterbury, England; Santiago de Compostela, Spain; Dumfermline, Scotland; and Croagh Patrick, Ireland. Each day features not only a different destination but a different saint: St. Peter, Thomas Becket, James the Greater, Margaret of Scotland, and St. Patrick.

The heart of the daily experience is the Street Fair. Children become bakers, bookbinders, clothiers, painters, needle workers, stonemasons, woodworkers, and storytellers. Guilds of students then meet to discuss their experiences in the Street Fair. The day closes with community singing, prayer, and worship.

Ages Levels: Intergenerational (Preschool needs separate program)

Includes:

X Director's Guide

Strengths:

- Children learn about medieval and church history as well as the lives of saints.
- Exciting medieval setting, with shields, street fairs, and crafts from woodworking to bookbinding.
- Important daily themes – such as “The Kingdom of God is within you” -- and memory verses.
- Clear and complete instructions.

Weaknesses:

- Requires considerable advance preparation for street fair activities.

Lori Daniels

Wild Willy and the Prodigal Son

22

Leader Resources

www.Leaderresources.org/vbs

\$49.95 (download)

This Vacation Bible School experience is based on the children's story book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and the 1971 version of the movie, *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. The curriculum examines the five children who are characters in the story and their character traits, which are then related to the sins of Greed, Pride, Envy, and Sloth. The story of the Prodigal Son (*Luke 15:11-24*) is the biblical basis for the program. Charlie, the main character who exhibits the traits of hard work, caring, sharing, honesty, and repentance, is compared to the prodigal son at the end of the story when he asks for forgiveness from his grandfather.

Age Levels: Elementary

Includes:

X Director's Guide

Strengths:

- Provides opportunity for children to learn character traits from the negative characters and the contrasting character of Charlie Bucket.
- Includes a craft each day which focuses on the character trait of each child.

Weaknesses:

- Biblical connections are tenuous.
- Requires materials to be purchased from specific distributors.
- Candy was given out each day; the "grand prize" was a lunchbox full of candy.
- The movie must be rented or purchased separately.

Amy Dyer

Leader Resources

www.leaderresources.org/vbs

\$59.95 (download)

This Vacation Bible Experience uses the popular Harry Potter character to explore theologically life's journey as a path to the inner self and to the Creator. The curriculum connects Harry Potter's experiences with Biblical teachings. For example, the New Testament teaches that the Kingdom of Heaven is all around us and in us, and Jesus advises: "Let he who has ears hear and he who has eyes see." Likewise, in the Harry Potter books, the Wizarding World – representing magic with its possibilities for transformation – is all around and in the midst of the Muggles, but they do not see it.

The five sessions and the daily Bible stories are:

Day 1: Platform 9-3/4; Moses is called by God (*Exodus 2-4*)

Day 2: Quidditch; Jesus calls his disciples (*Matthew 4, 9, 10; Mark 1,2,3; Luke 5,6*); and One body, many parts (Paul's letter to the Corinthians)

Day 3: A Night in the Forbidden Forest; Elijah and the still, small voice (*1 Kings 19:9-15*)

Day 4: Snares, Dares and Potions; Temptations in the wilderness (*Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 4*)

Day 5: The Mirror of Erised; The Resurrection (The Baptismal Covenant)

Age Levels: Intergenerational

Includes:

X Director's Guide

Strengths:

- Inclusion of resources with direct connection to the Harry Potter books, including a Hogwarts Acceptance Letter for each child, the Sorting Hat, Invisibility Cloak, Owl Mail Delivery and other wonders from the imaginary world of Harry and Hermione.
- Opportunity for children to learn a lot about themselves (in "identity" exercises) and to gain confidence for the life journey ahead of them.
- Theological background for each day is provided for the leaders.
- Includes lots of active games and the Hogwart Song.

Weaknesses:

- Requires free-spirited leaders.
- Requires advance preparation of space and materials.

Lori Daniels

Peaceable Kingdom

24

Leader Resources

www.LeaderResources.org/vbs

\$69.95 (download)

Peaceable Kingdom explores anti-bullying themes through the use of favorite children's literature characters such as Horton the elephant, Yertle the turtle, Gertrude McFuzz, Mama and Papa Bear, Old Turtle, and Gerald the giraffe. Through the Biblical experience of Shalom, and our Baptismal mandate to "see the face of Jesus in those around us," participants spend time together learning how to be respectful to everyone, to identify what bullying looks like in their worlds, and to find the strength to stand up to bullies. The themes for the 5 days include Be Your Best Self, A Place for Everyone, Turn the Other Cheek, Made in God's Image, and Be Courageous – all done through Bible stories and children's literature. The curriculum also includes major bullying research results that are incorporated into each day's presentation.

Ages Levels: Elementary

Includes:

X Director's Guide

Strengths:

- The theme is a timely one and the program could be used at any time, in any venue.
- Set-up is minimal.
- No set snack ideas so you can do whatever you please AND they do recommend a lunch component to end the time together.
- Activities such as games and gathering time are based on cooperation instead of competition.
- Only need 3 major volunteers for recurring speaking parts each day.

Weaknesses:

- The activities are geared for an older audience.

Kellee Wattenbarger