



**tips & reviews
online**



www.vts.edu/vbs



Welcome to the Center for the Ministry of Teaching (CMT) Vacation Bible School Reviews for 2017, including both new programs and recaps of perennial resources. New programming features heroes, trips to Rome and Peru, buried treasure, gadgets and gizmos.

Be sure to check out the CMT's Top Picks, five 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 Living Waters for the World programs in English and in Spanish that help children learn about the role of water today and in our faith traditions. Many build on these for their own unique programming.

The review team this year included CMT staff, trusted Christian educators with experience in planning and leading VBS programs in different settings and denominations, and students at Virginia Theological Seminary.

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

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 at no extra cost.

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 that 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 how messages, both explicit and implicit, are presented to participants. 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 presence in the world!

Dorothy Linthicum
Center for the Ministry of Teaching
Virginia Theological Seminary

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Top Picks

Digging for Treasure: Parables Revealed

MennoMedia

<http://www.faithandliferesources.org/Curriculum/vbs/>

Cost: \$164.99

Digging for Treasure: Parables Revealed from MennoMedia explores the deep truths Jesus taught through parables. The program veers away from the more frenetic VBS resources that emphasize constant activity, emphasizing reflection and contemplation when appropriate.

The theological foundation for the curriculum comes from 1 John 4:7-9, "let us love one another, because love is from God." Parables of the Sower, the Mustard Seed, and the Lost Sheep help children explore how God works in their lives, guiding them to understand more fully God's love and care. The biblical interpretation is sound and the activities are age-appropriate. *Digging for Treasure* includes a mission project to collect money for Mennonite Missions Network projects taking place in Bolivia. It is not directly related to the program theme or content.

Age Levels:Preschool; Kindergarten – 5th grade; suggestions provided for middle schoolers

Includes:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| X Songbook | X Music CD or DVD |
| X Resource CD | X Early Childhood Leader Guide |
| X Two sets of activity guides | X Director Guide |
| X Set of children's storybooks | X Alternate schedule |

Strengths:

- Age range goes beyond elementary to include middle school
- Material is well organized, formatted, and easy to understand
- Each leadership role includes a job description
- Quality snack ideas
- Book suggestions corresponds to each lesson
- Creative drama skits
- Multiple options for each activity area

Weaknesses:

- Some use of close-ended questions, which often stifle imagination
- Occasional use of terms such as "sinner" without definition or explanation of meaning
- Snacks are not allergy conscious; include gluten, dairy, nuts on most days
- Programming for 6th-8th graders incomplete
- Very few resources for decorating
- Music is a collection of recognizable worship tunes, but performance on CD lacks enthusiasm

Sarah Bentley Allred

HERO Central: Discover Your Strength in God

Cokesbury

<https://2017.cokesburyvbs.com>

Cost: \$159.99

HERO Central's overall theme focuses on finding strength in God. The stories, which come from both the Old and New Testaments, reinforce character traits that God's heroes have in common: heart, courage, wisdom, hope, and power. The materials reflect 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, *Hero Central* emphasizes God's presence in our everyday lives and living in relationship with God. This VBS is centered in biblical narrative and includes a section on helping children make a commitment to Christ.

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. The mission suggestions are engaging with options that could be easily adapted to most faith communities. Every area (science, drama, missions, among others) has ideas to adapt activities to different learning styles, local VBS traditions, time limits and more.

Age Levels: Preschool and Elementary; Teen and 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 | X Access to free, online resources |

Strengths:

- An adaptable, well-rounded program that can operate with a large or minimal budget
- Crafts and science rotations are both easy to do with clear instructions—many crafts use donated materials
- All areas, including mission suggestions, can be adapted to fit your budget and church focus
- Sign language tutorials for daily verses and sayings (music includes ASL motions)
- Music is easily adaptable; leader book contains both sheet music and lyrics
- Assembly videos are engaging but not overly active
- Diverse cast used in videos
- Online registration form can be customized

Weaknesses:

- Some crafts will not appeal to older students
- Snack suggestions work best with a smaller sized VBS
- Music is good but not really great
- Online registration can be a bit overwhelming

*Anne Shelton, Director of Children's Ministry
Advent United Methodist Church, Simpsonville, SC*

Passport to Peru

Group Publishing

<https://www.group.com/vbs>

Cost: \$ 154.99, (With digital access: \$189.99)

Passport to Peru brings the beauty and appreciation of another country and culture into VBS week. Themes help children enjoy God's gifts of comfort, patience, peace, love, and joy. With age-appropriate rotating stations, each daily theme is experienced via food, play, Bible verses, and other activities. Numerous choices are provided to volunteers for each station, ranging from easily replicable and little advanced work to harder-to-find props and time-consuming preparation.

Passport to Peru provides an array of kid-friendly, attention-grabbing videos, songs, and activities. For each opening, videos of children who live in Peru connect their story and life to the daily theme. Quality multimedia resources provide many different ways for children to experience and learn about the gifts that God has given them.

During day four, there is a heavy emphasis on atonement followed by a quick jump to resurrection. This runs counter to a theological approach that emphasizes the baptismal covenant in forming disciples.

Age 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 leader guides and materials | X Daily videos of children from Peru |

Strengths:

- Scaled for small, medium, large groups
- Solid balance of stories, songs and sharing time
- Beautiful, well organized materials that are easy to use; clear guides for leaders
- Very respectful of different cultures and beliefs
- Sensitive to different learning styles
- Culture-specific games that are interactive and interesting
- Good combination of familiar and new songs created for *Passport for Peru*

Weaknesses:

- Rotation based curriculum could grow monotonous through the week
- Number of choices can overwhelm volunteer leaders
- Teams of helpers and leaders needed to streamline day, crafts, and other preparation,
- Could be very expensive if you order the additional crafts, books, decorations, and trinkets
- Requires technology support every day to fully access stories, videos, and music
- Mission project to collect money for clean water in Peru is related to the theme, but does not directly involve the children

Sarah Stonesifer

Rome: Paul and the Underground Church

Group Publishing

www.group.com/VBS

Cost: \$144.99 (With digital access: \$179.99)

Go back in time to the days of the early Christian church in Rome through an immersive and intergenerational program called *Rome: Paul and the Underground Church*. This “marketplace” VBS lets you create a multi-station space in which ‘Roman families’ (groups) meet shopkeepers, Roman soldiers, and even Paul himself.

The heart of the content is learning about life for Christians in 1st century Rome, including persecution of the underground church. Each day has a Bible verse, but not a full Bible story. The Bible verses are from the book of Romans, and the theology, therefore, reflects St. Paul’s emphasis on grace, sin, forgiveness, Jesus’ sacrifice, salvation, and new life in Christ. This VBS is designed to be intergenerational (although it does not have to be), with parents and adults journeying along with children.

Age Levels: Intergenerational

Includes:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| X Music CD/video DVD | X Registration and volunteer forms |
| X Alternate schedule suggestions | X Training videos and extensive training resources |
| X Decorating DVD and ideas | X Craft plans, game plans |
| X Promotion and Recruiting DVD | X Online Organizing/Registration Tool |
| X “Family time” teaching packet | |

Strengths:

- Music CD includes nice blend of original compositions and familiar worship songs; the songs are well-performed and easy to learn
- Diverse children and adults sing and perform songs on the DVD
- DVD video quality and production value is very good
- Emphasis on intergenerational learning
- A strong attempt to capture the look and feel of ancient Rome. For example, using Roman names and terms (pronunciation guide included!)
- Drama skits are well-written, short, and connect with the biblical theme of the day
- The theme of underground church is compelling, allowing participants to consider the reality of religious persecution
- A clear message of salvation and atonement is grounded in God’s love and not overbearing

Weaknesses:

- Schedule differs from traditional VBS—this is not a weakness, but leaders should take time to grasp the overall concept of this “marketplace” VBS
- Key Bible verses and early Christian life are emphasized rather than using whole Bible stories
- Theme of persecution – while well-done – may be too intense for young children
- The options for crafts and games relate well to the theme, but are limited in number

• *Matthew Kozlowski*

Other New VBS Programs

Camp Out: Getting S'More of Jesus

Group Publishing

<http://group.com/CampOut>

Cost: \$68.99

I reviewed *Camp Out* because of my passion for camping and conviction that immersive experiences in well-run Christian camps form faithful, lifelong disciples of Jesus. I was hopeful that *Camp Out* would offer both the publisher's promised streamlined, easy, weekend VBS and a taste of the power of sleep-away camp. Sadly, while the program demonstrates Group's signature attention to logistical detail, its heavy focus on atonement theology and the complete absence of real-time camping adventure compromise its value.

Camp Out is designed for user efficiency and convenience, requiring just two 2.5 hour blocks of program time with the children and recommending an optional 20 minute celebration during Sunday worship. Everything about the resource is upbeat and empowering to inspire confidence in smaller or reluctant congregations, but the effect feels contrived and manipulative.

The greatest strengths of *Camp Out* are its simple format and the intentional use of multi-age "crews" – teams of 6 that mix the ages of campers and put them with an adult or teenage counselor – to facilitate relationship building and minimize behavior problems.

While the program claims to focus on one appropriate Bible Point, "Jesus is the light," the sessions dive quickly into graphic explorations of darkness and sin. At one point children are shunned and denied a cake because they are covered in stickers (leprosy) and at another they witness light sticks being broken to simulate Jesus' bones breaking for our salvation. This 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 and not wonder – quite the opposite of most real camping trips.

Overall, I think children will be more disappointed that there are no actual s'mores to be eaten or tents to be entered than they will come away assured of God's love.

Age Levels: Preschool, Elementary

Includes:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| X Director/6 station leader manuals | X Craft samples |
| X Praise music CD with PowerPoint lyrics | X Sample student take-home materials |
| X Overview DVD with outreach project videos | X Promotional poster |

Strengths:

- Thorough integration of program logistics and developmental goals
- Clear program structure: Opening, small group rotations, campfire closing
- Format well-suited to small congregations and first-time VBS efforts
- Realistic expectations of volunteers
- Trail Tips – quality sidebar advice in the Director's Manual

Weaknesses:

- Theology and pedagogy inappropriate for most mainline Protestant congregations
- Heavy use of adventure metaphors and camping images, limited actual experience
- Expense of supplemental materials
- Mission project is unrelated to the theme with no direct connection to activities

Lisa Kimball

Gadgets & Gizmos

Orange

<http://orangevbs.com/>

Cost: \$209.00

The tagline of *Gadgets & Gizmos* is that we are “Uniquely Wired. Wonderfully Made.” I was optimistic that the themes of creation and being made in God’s image would help this VBS kit overcome the CMT’s usual reservations with this publisher. Sadly, it didn’t turn out that way.

Yes, the activities are flexible, well-constructed, and clearly explained. Yes, the media materials are gorgeous and impressive (the titular Gadget and Gizmo turn out to be interracial siblings who run an invention shop for their friends in a series of broadcast-quality animations that illustrate the day’s themes). Yes, a congregation could have a lot of fun participating in this program, and even make some cool stuff—if you want thematic decorating ideas, I highly recommend the [Gadgets & Gizmos VBS board on Pinterest](#).

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 in themselves objectionable, and a theologically savvy director with time to tinker could make it work. Still, I believe creedal churches will find it more trouble than it’s worth to try adapting 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.

Age Levels: Preschool, Elementary

Includes:

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| X Music CD or DVD | X Registration and volunteer forms |
| X Alternate schedule | X Training videos |
| X Decoration tips/support | X Family materials |
| X Animations and videos | X Promotional materials, social media |

Strengths:

- Thorough, well-produced materials
- Detailed guidance for less experienced organizers/coordinators
- Very flexible for use with different schedules, group sizes, age groups
- Attentive to the need to support and include parents in integrating lessons at home

Weaknesses:

- Theological emphases frequently inappropriate for mainline protestant congregations
- Music fairly indistinguishable from commercial evangelical praise music
- Makes some assumptions about megachurch-style infrastructure and congregational culture

Kyle Matthew Oliver

Galactic Starveyors: Discovering the God of the Universe

Lifeway Christian Resources

<https://vbs.lifeway.com/vbs2017/>

JumpStart Kit: \$35.49; Kid's Starter Kit: \$99.99

Galactic Starveyors focuses on salvation and the need for everyone to be convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit. Every aspect of the curriculum from the first welcome to the *Takin' It Home* CD has an underlying purpose of leading participants to a conversion experience. The scripture focus is Colossians 1:15-16, reminding learners that all things have been created by God and for God. The VBS begins with the Creation story in Genesis where God "had a plan to restore the relationship that God knew we would break." Throughout the week, participants are encouraged to search the skies to find God's truth in God's handiwork.

Galactic Starveyors is a comprehensive curriculum that includes a broad range of resources. The tone of the curriculum, both for the participants and the leaders is heavy-handed, with little emphasis on God's love or enjoying God's creation of the "visible and the invisible" (Colossians 1). The creation of a galaxy through the decorations however, adds lightness and joy. The central message, however, lacks the joy that the Christian life promises.

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

Includes:

- | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| X Music CD and DVD | X Administrative CD |
| X Alternate schedules | X Detailed decorating plans |
| X Promotional videos | X Preparation timelines |
| X Clip art CD | X Game cards |
| X Snack recipe cards | X Detailed leader guides |

Strengths:

- Detailed lists, charts, and timelines make planning easy
- Lifeway's VBS website is colorful and easy to navigate
- *Takin' It Home CD*, which provides an immediate follow-up to each day's content, is available for purchase or as free downloads
- Worship guides, DVDs, and CDs must be purchased separately
- The music for elementary children is inviting and easy to sing (CD is not reproducible)
- A leader's guide is available for children with special needs (\$11.99)
- Available in Spanish

Weaknesses:

- Some craft suggestions require purchasing kits (with limited creativity) or extensive prep time, a problem if a large number of children attend VBS. Creating your own would be time consuming
- The decorating tips and products to create a starry galaxy are complex
- The majority of the games (only available on cards) are competitive in nature
- The snack suggestions mostly include sugary or salty choices
- The Jump Start Kit provides an overview and administrative guide for all ages, but Starter Kits must be purchased for each age group (\$99.99 each)

Dorothy Linthicum

God's Garden, God's City

Published independently

<https://newearthwholestory.com/2016/07/15/vbs-godsgardengodscity/>

Cost: \$60 downloadable, additional cost for artwork

God's Garden, God's City is a five-day program specifically designed for churches interested in investigating the arc of the faith story from the Book of Genesis through Revelations to individuals today.

God's Garden, God's City uses female imagery and is unabashedly progressive. A goal is to present children "with the venerable symbols of the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Zion." Traditions of spirituality are emphasized to encourage children to use their imaginations to question both the old and the new. A detailed outline of daily theme and activities can be found on the website. The creators of *God's Garden, God's City* are hoping to build on this initial effort for future summer programming.

Age Levels: Ages 4 to 12

Includes:

- X Original music
- X Original artwork
- X Alternate schedules available on request

Strengths:

- Authentic, well-thought-out progressive theology that is clearly explained.
- Each day's "Conclusion" is focused on digging deep into theology presented through activities, identifying what has been learned that day and what will happen at the next gathering
- Traditional and new music is mixed with spirituals to help children make the connection between generations
- Each day includes ideas for "expansion," including field trips

Weaknesses:

- Rotation sections offer one activity; more options will most likely be needed to fit the gifts and skills of volunteers
- Program assumes a general knowledge of scripture as the story of God's plan for salvation

Charlotte Hand Greeson

Kids to Kids

God's Love Is Everywhere!

Global Ministries (United Church of Christ and the Christian Church – Disciples of Christ)

http://www.globalministries.org/gods_love_is_everywhere_vbs_resource

Cost: Free download

God's Love is Everywhere! can be used as a multi-year VBS program to help children visit a different mission site each day. On the last day of the program the children study their local congregation and its mission and outreach projects. The basic schedule and decorations can be reused each year and added to as needed.

The goal of the Global Ministries VBS is to encourage children to experience the presence of God through a variety of activities and stories. It is also designed for children to recognize church as a welcoming place and to understand that God is present in all places. They are encouraged to learn from the faith of their neighbors in the world.

Considerable work is necessary to plan and prepare each day's activities. Bible passages are provided for each day, but leaders will have to find a creative way to weave them into the other activities through storytelling or drama, for example. The theology of *God's Love is Everywhere!* is focused on God's presence throughout the world, which is based on the writers' missionary experiences.

The websites for Global Ministries as well as [Church World Service](#) have a variety of resources, including missionary letters and videos, which will be helpful in working with all ages.

Age Levels: All ages, but would work best with K-5 grade; preschool adaptations are included.

Includes:

- Scope and sequence for each year
- Timeline/schedule available
- Resources available to expand activities

Strengths:

- The flow of daily activities is flexible and taps into several multiple intelligences.
- Volunteers with no teaching experience will find lessons easy to use
- Emphasizing the value of neighbors throughout the world would be a positive antidote to negative images of immigrants and refugees

Weaknesses:

- This is not an easy to use program; congregation with experience running a VBS are more likely to be successful
- A rich variety of resources are available, but leaders will need to research and select the best for their situation
- Biblical foundation is weak
- Although guidelines for music selections are provided, someone with music experience is needed
- Little guidance is provided to plan the daily assembly/worship times

Dorothy Linthicum

Maker Fun Factory: Created by God, Built for a Purpose

Group Publishing

<https://www.group.com/vbs>

Cost: \$179.00 (With digital edition: \$219.99)

Maker Fun Factory is designed as a week-long rotation model with mixed-age groups of children (no more than 5) led by an adult or teenager and station leaders. It is designed for elementary and preschool children with age appropriate activities for each group. A Bible verse is taught each day and reinforced by the station activities.

The program uses a “kid friendly” version of the Bible so interpretations of the verses could differ. The music selections are appropriate to the Bible verses that focus on God’s creation of all things and God’s love of all creation, especially each person who is both unique and complex. The Bible Study on Day 4 focuses on sin and Jesus dying for our sins, consistent with Episcopalian beliefs but differing in Episcopal teaching that baptism provides entry into the Church as opposed to an individual decision. Teachers will need to use discretion based on the children attending.

Age Levels:Preschool, Elementary (Middle and High-school students included as leaders)

Includes:

- | | |
|--|---|
| X Music CD and DVD | X Registration and volunteer forms |
| X Alternante Schedule | X Training vidéos |
| X Decoration tips and support | X Clip art resources |
| X Directors guide for both levels | X Videos of children and their stories related to the daily theme. |

Strengths:

- Variety of learning experiences engage the children
- Small groups of mixed-age children help younger and older children to develop relationships; prevents children from always being with the same age group
- Positive focus on God’s love for each child
- Music is lively and used both in large group sessions and at the music station.
- Snack suggestions are relevant to the theme of the day (s’mores for God loves you more)

Weaknesses:

- Additional materials need to be purchased to provide the suggested station activities
- Stories of the children in the videos, with one exception, do not reflect average children; one child does acrobatics on horseback while another invents complicated scientific apparatus
- Mission project of collecting money to provide clean water in Peru is unrelated to the theme, with no direct connection to the activities
- While the ethnic diversity of children is represented in the videos, they seem to be middle or upper class children
- Churches with limited resources would not find this VBS affordable

Amy Dyer

Mighty Fortress: In Jesus, the Victory Is Won

Concordia Publishing House

<http://vbs.cph.org/2017/>

Cost: \$169.99; Digital version: @149.99

The theological foundation for Mighty Fortress is based on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Stories from the Old and New Testaments show that Jesus is the champion that won the victory over sin, death, and Satan. The interpretation of scripture focuses on human weakness and sin compared to the strength and power of God.

The theme was selected in anticipation of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, an important time in Church history. The selection of scripture passages and characters, however, are tied to this history only during an optional rotation learning center. The resources for this center stands alone and could be used at other times.

While the activities are age appropriate, the language is not; it assumes a mature theological vocabulary. Concepts such as sin, the devil, and resurrection are used frequently without being explained. The openings, closings, and storytelling guides are highly scripted, allowing leaders no leeway for their own words and little space for learners' own thoughts.

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

Includes:

- | | | | |
|---|---|---|---------------------------|
| X | Clip Art/Reproducible CD | X | Music Action Training DVD |
| X | Music CD | X | Decorating DVD & Posters |
| X | Online resources (photos, decorating video, registration) | | |

Strengths:

- Quality planning materials, including forms, job descriptions, schedules, and on-line resources
- Free online VBS registration tool
- Decoration supplies and ideas include huge posters that help set the tone
- Snack suggestions are fun and healthy overall, but almost all contain gluten and/or dairy
- Large variety of craft supplies, decorations, and keepsakes available on website (which will add significantly to VBS costs)
- Music is upbeat and memorable
- Opening and closing videos provided for each day

Weaknesses:

- Crafts do not allow for much creativity and require the purchase of a plastic trinket for each child; not enough bonus ideas are included to cover all five days
- Games are competitive rather than cooperative
- Questions are close-ended, leaving children little room to imagine or wonder
- The mission project doesn't offer any tangible activity for children other than raising money for the publishing house charity, "Sharing God's Might Word"

Sarah Bentley Allred

Super God! Super Me! Super Possibility!

Abingdon Press

<http://2017.abingdonpressvbs.com/>

Cost: \$84.99

Super God! uses both biblical narrative and African American culture and history to introduce children to the power God gives each person. While the underlying message and energy of the music could be enjoyed by all races and cultures, reflects the music, syntax, and visual representations of the African American community, its primary audience. The goal of the program is to help children choose the love of Jesus, which helps them imagine their own possibilities.

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 Harriet Tubman, LeVar Jones, Marley Dias, among others. Many of these leaders are working today to improve the lives of people of all ages. Dias, a teenager, has organized a “sisterhood of book clubs” committed to reading and uses her influence for social action in schools. Background information about these leaders is extensive and could be used for other programming.

Each day includes an opening worship skit with song and dance, structured Bible study time, and time for reflection through crafts, snacks, and music. The closing worship each day ends with an “invitation to discipleship,” which runs counter to a theology based on an entry into God’s family at baptism.

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

Includes:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Worship DVD with movement activities | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Music CD |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reproducible parent pages | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alternate schedules |

Strengths:

- Detailed community engagement for registration, including structure and ideas for working with multiple churches and free planning downloads
- Snack suggestions are healthy, diverse, related to the theme, and fun to eat
- Director’s guide includes pedagogical and developmental guides, alternative schedules, biographies of relevant leaders in the black community, websites, and movies
- Outreach component is designed to create programming during the year that relates to the VBS theme of “super possibility” and the African Americans it features
- Music features new songs by hip-hop artist Ricky B. and others that range from lively to quiet; music continues to be a major strength of Abingdon’s VBS.

Weaknesses:

- Starter kit does not include Teen or Adult program guides
- *Super God!* does not offer a physical activity or games rotation
- The program is word-heavy, without multiple activities for each rotation; leaders may wish to add activities, particularly for arts and crafts rotation

Dorothy Linthicum

YodaYada VBS

Self-published by the Rev. Lee Yates, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

yodayadavbs.com

Oh, The Places God Goes: Great Bible Journeys VBS preview [here](#)

Gifted By God: Creative Arts VBS preview [here](#)

Go Wild: Nature's Lessons preview [here](#)

1 God Many Games: Diversity and Play preview [here](#)

\$50 each, downloadable

Rev. Lee Yates, Disciples of Christ, has created four distinct VBS programs centered on biblical journeys, creative arts, lessons in nature, and diversity and play. Each is designed for a traditional five-day program, but all can be modified. The activities are designed to help children and leaders to engage in scripture in their daily lives. These resources would fit best in a smaller program with a seasoned group of leaders.

YodaYada VBS are at their strongest when integrating creativity—dance, sculpture, art, among others—into the lessons. The theology of each program is mainline Protestant, with a greater emphasis on living as Christians in the world than on repentance and atonement. Children are encouraged to discover and share the gifts God has given them.

Age Levels: No age specified, but would work best with Kindergarten through grade 5

Includes:

- X One-page descriptions of week's readings, themes, and desired outcomes
- X Schedules for evening and whole-day VBS with suggested modifications for other venues
- X Pictures and directions for crafts and games

Strengths:

- The author and a community of practitioners are available to answer questions ; materials are often updated as users report back on their experiences
- Free downloadable samples of scope and sequence for each VBS
- Daily scripture is reinforced in storytelling and activities that help children to integrate the Bible and Christian morals into daily living
- Each VBS has a balance of Old Testament and New Testament scripture

Weaknesses:

- There is no music associated with YodaYada VBS, although singing is on the suggested schedule.
- Congregations with VBS experience will be more successful in using these programs.
- Information is not available about running a VBS, training volunteers, or decorating rooms for an immersive experience
- Suggested story books and videos must be provided by the user
- Many of the "gathering time" activities are better suited for small group work and almost all rely on children who can write (or draw) to express themselves clearly; VBS leaders will have to modify these activities for younger children

Charlotte Hand Greeson

**2017 Español
Currículo
para la Escuela
Bíblica**

Encuentros con Jesús

Concordia Publishing House

<http://vbs.cph.org/spanish>

Precio: \$59.99 (español/English)

Encuentros con Jesús es un material diseñado haciendo énfasis en el amor de Dios y su poder transformador en todas las personas. Tanto niños como adultos sentirán la presencia y el cuidado de Dios en sus vidas a través de los personajes bíblicos que aparecen en cada lección.

El programa es coherente en su contenido, basado por completo en la palabra de Dios. Nos brinda la oportunidad de compartirla, sin importar el contexto cultural o religioso en que hayamos crecido. Además ofrece un método de aprendizaje amplio para que tanto niños, jóvenes y adultos lo encuentren atractivo y dinámico.

Este recurso en español es una maravillosa herramienta a usar en nuestras escuelas bíblicas de Vacaciones, independientemente de la tradición religiosa, por lo que recomiendo su uso.

Niveles:

Grupo 1: de 3 a 6 años aproximadamente

Grupo 2: de 7 a 10 años aproximadamente

Grupo 3: de 11 a 14 años aproximadamente

Adultos

Incluye:

Paquete del Líder

Música en CD

Horario alternativo

Paquete del Líder

Estudios bíblicos para adultos

Ventajas:

- Las historias bíblicas seleccionadas demuestran claramente que a través de Cristo se nos es dada la Salvación.
- La parte pedagógica está diseñada para niños, jóvenes y adultos.
- Los materiales para las manualidades son de fácil adquisición y bajo costo.
- La interpretación y Aplicación del tema, están excelentemente en concordancia con el objetivo y base bíblica de cada lección.

Desventajas:

- Debe haber más dinámica de grupo en el desarrollo de las lecciones.
- En algunas lecciones debe elegirse otro verso bíblico a memorizar.
- Sugiero que haya más dinámicas al aire libre y juegos interactivos.
- Algunos himnos no son tan comunes a todas las culturas.

*The Rev. Margarita Santana
Latino Missioner
The Diocese of Maryland*

Perennial VBS Programs

Abundance Orchard
Where Faith Grows and Hungry People Are Fed

Society of St Andrew

<http://endhunger.org/vbs/>

Cost: Free download

The theme of food is beautifully woven through the stories, activities, snacks and mission components of the *Abundance Orchard* VBS. Theological themes that run through the curriculum illustrate the abundance of God's love and presence in our lives. The curriculum encourages the development of empathy, and invites the children not only into the Bible stories, but also to reflect on the meaning of the stories in their own lives.

The program's strength is in its theological content, its detailed instructions, and its flexibility. With creative leadership, this program could be modified to fit a wide variety of situations, numbers, ages, and local circumstances and mission projects. For example, organizers could plant a few garden beds that would be ready to harvest at the time of the VBS, and children could harvest the food for the food bank, or take a field trip to a community garden or food bank.

Abundance Orchard contains two full sets of material, one Old Testament-based, the other New Testament-based. Since each day is self-contained, sessions could be selected from either set. Little in the resource is ready-made, but comprehensive instructions invite adult organizers to use their imagination and skills to build a fantastic learning environment. Although all children will enjoy the program, it especially speaks to visual and kinesthetic learners.

This curriculum encourages sustainable practices by enlisting the help of a variety of people and using re-purposed materials. The program could be simplified, but it would lose some of its appeal.

Ages Levels: Preschool and Elementary age

Includes:

- X Two full VBS curriculums
- X Music list with some links to words
- X Detailed instructions, checklists, and activities

Strengths:

- Ten-day curriculum is a free download
- Sustainable in its theme and its practices
- Very detailed leader instructions, including check lists, and links to music files
- Leader preparation for storytelling invites leaders to engage deeply with the material; reflection questions could be modified to create a program for an older audience.
- Variety of fun activities are engaging and instructive
- Food themes are cleverly inserted throughout the program
- Children are introduced to the programs of the Society of St. Andrew to reduce food waste and hunger, and also encouraged to connect with local food organizations

Weaknesses:

- Suggested music resources are outdated and difficult to find
- Detailed description of set up is provided, but few pictures or drawings are included
- Is not designed for large numbers, but could be modified into rotating stations

Robin Denney

The Abundant Life Garden Project: A Program for Children of the Episcopal Church

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.

Age 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

¡Agua! Currículo para la Escuela Bíblica (VBS) para Comunidades de Habla Hispana

Publicado por la organización presbiteriana Living Waters for the World, 2009

www.livingwatersfortheworld.org/vbs.php

Precio: \$42 (para comunidades de habla hispana)

¡Agua! es un programa de Escuela Bíblica de Vacaciones (VBS) de cinco días, creado para niños del kínder al quinto grado, con opción de ser adaptado para preescolares. La meta del programa es celebrar el agua como regalo de Dios para la creación y crear conciencia en los niños sobre la importancia de esa agua y el gran número de personas en el mundo que no tiene acceso al agua limpia.

Cada día el programa ofrece lecciones de tres horas diarias donde se incluye una historia bíblica, manualidades, música y tiempo para la recreación. Aunque el diseño gráfico de este recurso es muy sencillo, su contenido es sólido. Me gustaría que mis propios hijos pudieran participar de la experiencia que ofrece este programa.

Niveles: Del kínder a quinto grado (con opciones para preescolares)

Materiales Incluidos:

- X Paquete del Líder (disponible en forma digital)
- X Música en CD
- X Horario alternativo (para preescolares)

Ventajas:

- Crea conciencia sobre el gran número de personas en el mundo que no tiene acceso al agua limpia y les presenta un ejemplo de cómo podemos ayudar a los más necesitados
- Enseña la importancia de lavarse las manos con agua limpia para mantenerse saludable
- Educa a los niños en cuanto al valor del agua en sus comunidades y en el resto del mundo
- Las instrucciones generales están bien escritas en español (una buena traducción)
- Currículo que integra bien la lección con las actividades interactivas
- Buenas instrucciones para los instructores
- Los instructores enseñan la misma lección a grupos diferentes cada día
- Hay tiempo para reunir al grupo completo al comienzo y al final de cada día
- El programa se organiza para que los niños tengan la misma persona acompañándolos cada día del programa
- Precio muy razonable

Desventajas:

- La sección de reproducibles no está completamente en español
- Algunos de los materiales que se necesitan para las lecciones en algunos casos pueden ser difíciles de conseguir
- Los cantos en español en el CD de música necesitan revisión
- El recurso con la letra de los cantos está incompleto y no provee partituras ni acordes
- Hace falta una manera de proveer servicio al cliente en español

Eduardo Solomón Rivera

All God's Children: The Church Family Gathers for a Very Blessed Summer

GenOn Ministries

<http://www.genonministries.org/products/all-gods-children-the-church-family-gathers-for-a-very-blessed-summer>

\$45.00 (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

Arts Camp

Church Publishing, Inc.

www.churchpublishing.org/artscamp

Cost: \$29.95

Ready to go in a new direction for your VBS? Christina Clark created *Arts Camp* to explore Christian faith through art, music, and movement. Now published as a paperback book, you can create a program that taps into the creative hearts of children. *Arts Camp* is written in an Episcopal church context, but could be modified for other denominations. Five themes are offered: Praise, EcoJustice, Who is my Neighbor, Interfaith Peace, and Saints and Holy Helpers.

This program well integrates your VBS “camp” into the life of the worshipping community. Creating an “Arts Camp Sunday” is a key goal. The program also emphasizes peace, as well as God being revealed in the beauty around us.

Ages Levels: Grades 1 through 5, middle school.

Includes:

- X Overview and schedule for running an Arts Camp as a VBS program

Strengths:

- Includes detailed instructions for crafts and art projects that are tried and tested. These projects are well closely tied into each theme
- Provides planning schedules, charts, and checklists for running an arts camp
- Connects with Sunday worship. Each theme has a worship outline for community worship
- Offers suggestions for easy songs, activities, and prayers

Weaknesses:

- This program is not intended to have everything “in the box.” For example, a strong music leader should be recruited to make the music suggestions come alive
- In some sections, there is an explanation of how the program would work as a weekly VBS. But there is not a detailed lesson plan for day 1, day 2, etc.

Matthew Kozlowski

Aslan is on the Move!

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

Dare to be Different

Leader Resources

www.leaderresources.org/vbs

\$49.9 (download)

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

Age Levels: Kindergarten through 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; film rental is extra
- 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

Kids to Kids

Journey to Congo VBS available [here](#)

Journey to Colombia VBS available [here](#)

Journey to India VBS available [here](#)

Global Ministries (United Church of Christ and the Christian Church – Disciples of Christ)

http://www.globalministries.org/resources_youth_and_children

Cost: Free download

The three Global Ministries curricula – *Journey to Congo*, *Journey to Colombia*, and *Journey to India* – emphasize that we are all God’s people and interrelated despite differences in faith traditions, cultures, skin colors, and geography. Each VBS program is set-up as a learning center/rotation model that includes worship, small group scripture study, crafts, games, and snacks.

The United Church of Christ and the Christian Church have mission centers in each of the countries featured in VBS programs. Scripture, both Old Testament and New, will help North American children understand other culture. The programs are designed to help children explore cultural differences and similarities. Every service activity has two components, one in a church’s local community and one in the country of study. Leaders are encouraged to use the programs’ biblical themes in selecting local ministries. They may also want to adapt denominational mission programs for those outlined in the VBS curriculum.

Age Levels: All ages, but would work best with K-5 grade; preschool adaptations are included.

Includes:

- X** Scope and sequence for each program **X** Timeline/schedule available
- X** Detailed resources for creating an immersive experience.

Strengths:

- The flow of daily activities is well-thought out and flexible
- Volunteers with no teaching experience will find lessons easy to use
- Each curricula was designed by different people, which is reflected in the strengths of each:
 - Colombia has very strong scripture component and is mission-oriented
 - Congo has many details about daily life and very clear lesson plans
 - India makes strong connections between Christian and non-Christian faith communities

Weaknesses:

- These are not “open the box, it’s all ready for you” programs. Congregations with experience running a VBS are more likely to be successful
- A rich variety of resources are listed for each program, but leaders will need to select the best for their situation
- Game suggestions need to be strengthened
- Although there are no pre-recorded music CDs, guidelines for music selections are provided
- Group worship details are largely left to the director

Charlotte Greeson

Peaceable Kingdom

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.

Age 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 three major volunteers for recurring speaking parts each day

Weaknesses:

- The activities are geared for an older audience

Kellee Wattenbarger

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.

Age 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

Praying All the Time

Leader Resources

www.LeaderResources.org

Cost: \$49.95

Praying All the Time introduces prayer to children through literature. The program is theologically sound and uses attractive, classic children's book to introduce the concept of prayer and different ways to pray for younger children.

Five children's books are featured:

The Story of Francis, by Tomie de Paola

The Very Hungry Caterpillar, by Eric Carle

The Red Ribbon, by John Lasne

Old Turtle, by Douglas Wood

The Legend of the Bluebonnet, by Tomie de Paola

The guide directs the leader to begin by reading one book each day to the children. The children discuss its relevance to five methods of praying and complete a craft. The session ends by sending the children forth with a sending ritual.

Levels: Kindergarten through grade 5

Includes:

X Leaders Guide

X Activity CD (also contains guide)

Strengths:

- Crafts are engaging and relevant to the stories
- A half-day schedule for five days is provided
- Artwork and ideas to promote the program are also included

Weaknesses:

- Does not contain any biblical or theological references to prayer
- The guide provides very little support for the inexperienced teacher
- Additional costs are significant; copies of the five books must be purchased separately
- Books and activities are appropriate for kindergarten and early elementary; children beyond second grade might not find the program engaging

Amy Dyer

S.P.Y. Parables

Leader Resources

www.LeaderResources.org

Cost: \$49.95

S.P.Y. Parables is a three-session program designed to explore the meaning of the Kingdom of God. Children study three specific parables—the mustard seed, the pearl of great price, and the yeast or leaven—by following clues that unlock the lessons hidden within the multi-layered stories. The program is theologically sound and developmentally appropriate for elementary-aged children.

The program is low-key, providing a break from the fast pace many families keep. There is time for children and adults to reflect on the story and form relationships. *S.P.Y. Parables* might be a good program for a winter VBS offered between Christmas and New Year's Eve.

Age Levels: Elementary (through Grade 6)**Includes:**

- X Director's Guide

Strengths:

- Activities encourage creativity in visioning the Kingdom of God
- Service components are included for each session
- Snack suggestions are thematic and healthy overall

Weaknesses:

- Music is a weak component, relying on the purchase of CDs or using songs on YouTube; many of the url links did not work
- Crafts repeat the major theme, but are somewhat limited
- No game suggestions are included; leaders should introduce games of varying levels of movement
- Although the program includes instructions on making crafts, nametags, and other items, putting everything together would take significant effort

Dorothy Linthicum

Water All Around the World

Living Waters for the World 2006/Presbyterian Church USA

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

\$47.00 (download)

Water All Around the World is a thoughtful VBS program that gets at the heart of the Christian call to love and care for others in need. Through stories, art projects, music and pictures children learn about families in different parts of the world. They are reminded in the Bible stories and reflection times how Jesus cares for all children no matter where they live. The overall theme that links these different activities is a universal connection to water, both physically and spiritually.

The most amazing section of this VBS is the heartfelt case studies of children in different parts of the world. The pictures and stories are beautiful and authentic with a feeling of respect for the families and places that are represented. There is room to grow and expand these stories throughout the entire program.

While the current trend for many VBS programs is to entertain and provide fancy “bling” for the kids, *Water All Around The World* keeps the focus where it should be – on God’s call to care for others. However this curriculum fails to reach the fullness of the overall vision due to underdeveloped activities. Churches with creative and devoted facilitators could bring this curriculum to its full potential.

Age Levels: Preschool (separate program), Kindergarten and Elementary

Includes:

X Clip Art/Reproducible flash drive X Music CD

Strengths:

- Simple and clear layout with rotations that are easy to follow
- Thoughtful, important message for both children and adults to care for all people in the world
- Intentional reflection and prayer time that encourages children to share their ideas
- Encourages creativity and discussion – not overly structured
- Very respectful of different cultures and backgrounds
- Options to expand and modify age groups, activities and group size

Weaknesses:

- Some activities lack adequate explanation and details with step-by-step instructions, especially games, crafts and music sections
- Reflection section could be expanded to include more open-ended questions and guidance on facilitating a group
- Limited global representation in case studies which focus mainly on Latin America
- Over simplifies issues around water problems in other parts of the world
- Very little background support provided for leaders in some areas, such as links for appropriate décor and props and sources to learn about poverty and water issues in the world
- Opening and closing ceremonies could be more exciting, interactive and prayerful

Emily Sutterfield

Wild Willy's Candy Factory: a New Look at the Prodigal Son

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 Bucket, 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 about character traits from the negative characters and the contrasting traits of Charlie Bucket.
- Includes a craft each day which focuses on the character trait of each child in the story.

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

Wizards and Wonders: A Hero's Journey with Harry Potter

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, a 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