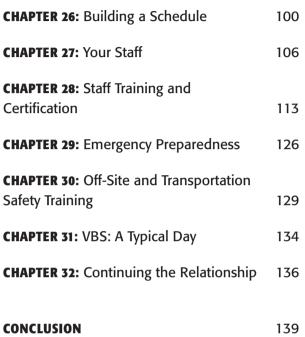
Lisa Brown



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Introduction

HETHER YOU CALL IT VACATION Bible School, Vacation Bible Camp, Summer Fun Day on Sunday, or something else, summer faith formation is an integral part of Christian education. It is an opportunity: not just to help your young congregants deepen their faith, but to connect your church with the wider community. Perhaps you want to enrich the faith formation that takes place in your Sunday school classrooms during the program year. Maybe you want to grow your congregation by attracting neighborhood children (and their parents). You may desire to serve your neighbors, providing safe, structured summer programming to those who might not have it otherwise. Or perhaps you never thought about why you do VBS. The responsibility for VBS could have fallen in your lap because it's simply what your church has always done and you're the one to do it. Whatever the motivation, VBS is a time-honored tradition of fun, faith, and fellowship. It's also a lot of work!

This workbook is a hands-on, practical guide to help you identify your goals for VBS and then develop and implement the best possible program to meet those goals. I hope you find the book equal parts inspirational (The Vision), informational (Executing the Vision), imaginative (Living Into the Vision), and empowering (The Vision Becomes a Reality). You'll also find a few personal experiences when I think they might serve to illustrate a point.

Whether you create your own curriculum or purchase a ready-made VBS kit, within these pages are ways to help you translate your thoughts, themes, and theories into a reality. Taking into account the needs and resources of your particular congregation, you will discover how to develop a safe and engaging program that builds on your strengths and won't overtax your budget. I hope Vacation Bible School can be a joyful and transformational experience for you, as it has been for me, and for the young people you serve.

PART ONE



The First Decision

in offering a ready-made VBS package, you send the message that your congregation is interchangeable with the one next door or down the block. More subtly, you send the message that children's theological questions can be satisfied with slick, superficial answers. And finally, you send the message that your denomi-

There is an alternative to purchasing a ready-made program. If you are uncertain about whether or not it's worth it to invest the time and energy into developing your own VBS curriculum, you might want to consider these three reasons to do so.

nation's theology is identical or interchangeable with

every other Christian understanding of God.

NE OF THE FIRST DECISIONS YOU will make about VBS is whether to buy a readymade program or create your own curriculum. In any case, there are a number of things to consider as you begin your planning.

When you chose a ready-made VBS program, what drives your decision? Cost? Theme? Theology? A quick Internet search will yield dozens of ready-made Vacation Bible School programs, each one more cleverly themed than the next. Professionally produced music, craft kits, colorful signage—they've got it all. Or do they?

In many communities, numerous churches line the main drag that runs through the literal and figurative heart of town. By the first of June, as you drive down that road you will pass Vacation Bible School banners in every churchyard, most reflecting the purchase of a commercially produced VBS program. Do you ever question why a church chose a particular theme? And after you've passed the third sign featuring the same bad Jesus-pun in the title, do you wonder if these churches even considered collaborating or at least making sure there was no duplication in the programs offered? But that's just it—none of these churches are offering anything that could be described as "their program." Each church merely puts its own spin on an out-of-the-box pre-packaged idea. Consider that

Reason #1: Your Congregation is Unique

Even within denominations, no two churches are exactly alike. Each church family—like each human family—is unique, with specific strengths, weaknesses, and talents.

Each church facility offers a particular physical space. And each congregation exists in a particular moment in time in the midst of a particular community, facing

challenges or sharing goals unlike those that have come before or will follow. Rather than choose from the existing offerings and try to adapt a package to fit your purposes, isn't it a better exercise to identify your congregation's overall goals and focus and build your VBS from that perspective?

In today's world, people "church shop," looking for that particular combination of worship, programming, personality, and vibe that appeals to their particular family. When a family sees your VBS banner, what message do you want to send? That you are one of many interchangeable churches or that you are a congregation with a strong sense of identity? You want to send the message that you are a church that plays a distinct role in the neighborhood, and that you are a church that is aware of the issues facing the broader community and is working to address them.

Reason #2: You Value and **Respect Children**

Developing a Vacation Bible School is a labor of love. It considers the unique perspectives of children and invests accordingly. It's a home-cooked meal compared to fast food. It sends a message to the parents in your congregation and in your wider community that you respect children enough to take the time and effort to identify and meet their specific needs.

In a world where children are inundated with commercial media largely designed to drive consumption, the church needs to provide another narrative. We need to take time to speak to children with respect, love, and patience, offering programs designed for authentic spiritual growth and reflection. It's not our calling to compete with Disney or Nickelodeon. How

we engage children says everything about who we are. If we take the easy way out, purchasing a slick, splashy package with little thought to the spiritual depth of the audience, indeed we are saying that we don't believe children capable of spiritual depth. We ignore the profound faith of which children are capable in favor of topical entertainment, doing both our audience and our congregations a disservice.

Reason #3: Reflect Your **Church's Theology**

Certainly among Christian denominations, there is a wide range of theology. As much as we have in common, there are dogmatic differences that separate us. Would your priest or pastor stand in the pulpit and preach verbatim a sermon coming from another member of the clergy, particularly someone with a completely different theological perspective? Nor should you offer your children something that contradicts your denomination's theology, the Gospel as we know and live it in the world. Although the theology of VBS programs might not be immediately obvious, make no mistake that children are highly attuned to nuance. They will pick up on the implicit (hidden) message in the curriculum. The way the Gospel is interpreted and directives about how we as Christians are to act differ greatly from one VBS curriculum to another. Differing theological perspectives can confuse even adults, who are at a more mature place in their faith journey. We need to make intentional theological choices in the stories we tell and in the lessons that we draw from them. Again, we owe our children no less.