



Vacation Bible School: What, Why, and How?

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This brief and friendly document will introduce you to Vacation Bible Schools to help you understand exactly what they are, if they are right for your community, and how to get started.

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What is a VBS?

What's in a Name?

A Vacation Bible School (or VBS) is a faith formation process for children, usually held during the summer months. It is usually a week-long event, with sessions lasting a few hours or more each day, but formats can vary.

However, Vacation Bible Schools are less like *school* and more like a *camp*, with fun and very interactive learning. They usually have a creative theme and include Bible stories, songs, crafts, games, snacks, and more. You may want to call it a "Vacation Bible Camp" (or something similar) in your community.

Origins and Publishers

Vacation Bible Schools have been around for decades, and have been quite popular in Protestant churches for a long time. They have become popular in Catholic parishes more recently.

Many publishers sell VBS kits, which generally include a curriculum, music, and supporting items to get you started. Catholic publishers have started selling VBS resources, often adapted from a Protestant VBS. While you can get a lot from these kits, they can become quite expensive.

Simple is Okay!

When some leaders look at the extensive kits from publishers, they immediately become intimidated and think that they could never plan a VBS at that level of complexity. But a VBS does not need to be complex, expensive, or a ton of work to be fun and successful. We saw one small church put on a simple VBS on a shoestring budget and the kids had a ball.

You also do not have to commit to five days, or any particular format. Start with something that is doable for you and have fun with your kids!

Some say the first VBS was held in Hopedale, Illinois in 1894! The first printed curriculum was published in 1923.

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Why VBS?

Fun Faith Formation

The most obvious reason for offering a VBS is that it is an effective way to form kids in faith. The interactive learning environment and fun factor not only offer kids a great experience, but they drive home core faith values and learnings. The catchy songs and daily themes stick in their heads, and everything they do during the day reinforces those themes.

Evangelizing Families

We may think the main purpose of a VBS is to serve kids and families already active in the parish, but what if you thought of them primarily as a way of bringing inactive Catholics or others to the Church? For many Protestant churches, reaching new families is just as important of a motivation.

The offer of summer childcare is practically irresistible to parents, who are often scrambling to book other day camps during those vacation months. Your active parishioner families will spread the word to other families they know, especially if you encourage them.

Don't underestimate the impact a VBS can have. Simply getting parents physically present at the parish and meeting friendly parishioners is a huge opportunity.

Some churches end each session of their VBS in the sanctuary singing songs with the kids. Parents arrive and can sit down to watch the enthusiasm before taking them home. It's a nice way to end, but it could have special significance to some parents. It may be the first time a parent has been in a church sanctuary in years, and it can be an important step in them returning to Mass. And end-of-the-week meal and/or "concert" can also work well.

We can also help the parents enter into the VBS learnings themselves, by making sure they know what their children are focusing on, and coaching them on how to have conversations with them afterwards.

As Marriage Support

If you happen to hold your VBS in the evening, this can open up some valuable time for couples. Having a big block of time every night for a week without kids is a rare chance for couples to focus on each other. Many couples defer their relationship while getting through the early parenting years, so the childcare itself can be a big ministry to parents. Encourage them to use the time well!

Our EarthKeepers VBS has the added advantage of introducing children and their parents to Pope Francis' encyclical *On Care for Our Common Home*, which can otherwise be difficult to fit into the regular faith formation curriculum.

Choose a Curriculum

There are many options to choose from when selecting a Vacation Bible School curriculum, and you can even develop your own. Here are some things to consider in making a selection:

- **Theology** - The VBS options span the theological spectrum, so take a close look at the content to be sure the core of what you will be teaching your kids is compatible with what your community and the broader Catholic Church teaches.
- **Engagement** - You want your VBS to not only be fun, but be engaging. Will it be interesting and start meaningful conversations? Will it stay with the children in the weeks and months afterwards?
- **Price** - VBSs can be pricey, but compared to the time and energy it would take to develop your own they can be a bargain. Be sure to factor in the cost of all the pieces you will need, as extra booklets, toys, and craft items can add up.
- **Ease of use** - Every VBS is going to say that it is easy to use, so you'll have to do your own evaluation. If you have leaders who are less experienced, be sure to look at the materials through their eyes (or have them help you evaluate).
- **Pray** - Bring this decision to God. What does God want to teach children (and their families and the leaders) in your community this year?

Recruit Your Team

Of course, don't pressure people into helping. If possible, start with their gifts to see where they might connect with this ministry. See a list of possible roles later in this document.

While a single person could run a small VBS, it wouldn't be all that pleasant. You will want to get some help. Finding volunteers is probably not one of the favorite parts of your job, whether you are a volunteer yourself or not.

But recruiting VBS helpers is a bit different—and in some ways easier—than your standard search. Here are selling points for pitching to potential volunteers:

- **One-time obligation** - Unlike many other parish ministry opportunities, this one has a very defined end-point. That makes it a safe commitment (and an excellent opportunity for a first-time volunteer).
- **Variety of jobs** - The VBS format makes it easy to split up obligations across different roles. That means there are many jobs to match the many gifts your volunteers will bring with them.
- **Fun and unique** - The bottom line is that helping at a VBS can be just as fun as being one of the kids.
- **Evangelization** - Remind your potential team members that this is not only to teach kids, but also to grow the church. If you have members of your community grumbling that families aren't coming to church any more, tell them this is how they can help!

You will want to reach out beyond the “usual suspects” (although some of them might be delighted to do something a little different). Here are some groups to consider tapping:

- **Teens** - This is a great way for them to get involved. They'll have a lot of fun and learn in the process.
- **Parents** - If you're just getting started or have a small team, don't hesitate to ask parents to help, even if it's for just a day or two.
- **Retired** - Members of your community who don't have young children of their own may be a great match.

Choose a Time

There are obviously pros and cons to different scheduling options. VBSs are usually held for a week at a time, but can be held during the day or in the evenings. Evening meetings have the advantage of not competing with other day camps or child care. Day-time meetings make them a day camp alternative.

Fees

The decision of whether to charge families to participate (and how much) is an interesting question, and there is not one correct answer. We encourage you to be prayerful and thoughtful about your decision.

Many parishes have a culture of charging fees for services, so that may be your starting assumption. But consider the alternative! If you look at VBS as a tool for evangelization, the cost can become a barrier. There are many ways you can keep down the financial costs down, if that would allow you to offer it for free. In our experience, we have found that Protestant churches are more likely to offer their VBS for free than Catholic ones, because they see it as an important part of their mission to evangelize.

On the other hand, some families (especially outsiders) will compare your VBS to other day camps. A free price tag could make them devalue it. Financial commitment could also help you get firm registrations. If you charge, we recommend a price much lower than other day camp alternatives.

Some parishes offer “scholarships” to those in financial need by request, but realize that some families may not feel comfortable asking for that accommodation.

Spread the Word

You will need a plan for publicity and invitations, even if it's a simple one. Print fliers and/or posters for use within your parish. Some parishes create outside advertising banners or advertise in local publications.

If you offer a decent VBS, your parish families will enthusiastically spread the word outside the parish. The more compelling the program (free, fun theme, strong precedent from the previous year, free dinner beforehand, etc.), the more motivation and chance of success you will give them. It's also a big opportunity for grandparents in your parish to get their grandkids to come. Be sure to encourage your congregation to get as many people in as possible.

Child care can get very pricey for families in which both parents work.

Remind your people that this isn't just about getting kids to the VBS. It's about introducing the parish to new families.

Team Up

Consider joining forces with one or more churches in your area to hold a joint VBS. We've seen this work well with multiple Catholic parishes and even across Christian denominations. Working together can get you a critical mass, both of attendees and leaders.

Get the Whole Parish Involved

Especially if you are getting a VBS started for the first time, enlist the support of your entire parish. Let them know that you are working on it and why. Ask them to pray for its success. Later on you can ask for volunteers and donated materials.

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Planning Calendar

Use the following calendar to pace your preparation. Note that the larger your VBS, the more organized you will need to be.

Three Months before the VBS

- Pray: for wisdom in your decisions and that God will send you the right people.
- Select a curriculum.
- Schedule the dates and times of the VBS and make any space reservations.
- Make decisions on fees.
- Start gathering your team.
- Develop a publicity plan.

Two Months before the VBS

- Continue to pray.
- Have your team selected, and schedule team meetings/trainings. Follow safe environment guidelines.
- Plan the daily schedule, including an early gathering time for leaders to pray and prepare.
- Select the activities, stories, crafts, etc. that you will use.
- Create a supply list and request donations from parish members.
- Order materials from the publisher.
- Start publicity.

One Month before the VBS

- Keep praying.
- Ramp up your publicity.
- Begin preregistration.
- Gather all remaining supplies.
- Train your team and have them prepare.

Weeks before the VBS

- Pray for the children and families who will be attending.
- Continue registration.
- Gather all remaining supplies.
- Begin decorating and preparing your space.

During the VBS

- Continue to pray for the children and families, as well as your leaders.
- Be welcoming, enthusiastic, and joyful!
- Get feedback from leaders each day and incorporate it as possible.
- Send home information with families.

After the VBS

- Pray in thanksgiving!
- Evaluate with your leaders and take notes for next year.
- Record any details (such as numbers of supplies used) for next year.
- Follow up with families, especially with those who do not regularly attend your parish. Invite them to another event at your parish.
- Be sure to thank your leaders.

Don't forget (or let your leaders forget) to be especially welcoming to outsiders and gently encourage them to return.

Hospitality

If families who are not active in your parish come to your VBS, hospitality is crucial. If you are inhospitable, they will not return.

Your first consideration should be that new families will not be familiar with your parish property. Be sure to have clear directions and/or signs. Imagine you were coming for the first time.

If possible, have one or more people specifically assigned as greeters, perhaps even meeting and directing people in the parking lot (especially on the first day).

Be careful not to come across as needy or clingy. Just be friendly! Hopefully your parishioners do this naturally, but it could be good to remind your leaders beforehand.

Welcoming Them Back

Don't be too pushy, but be sure to invite parents/families to come to Mass the following Sunday. Some people may just be waiting for an invitation.

Invite families to upcoming events that could be appealing to them. Consider intentionally scheduling an event in the month following the VBS for this purpose. For example:

- family dinner, with activities for kids afterwards
- movie night
- parenting or relationship workshops, with childcare

Invite them in written form on handouts sent home with the kids, but also make sure your leaders know to invite them personally. Follow up by email, phone, or letter.

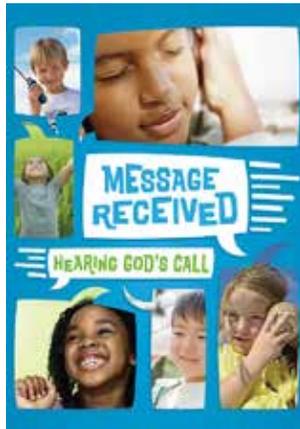
A short note about Baptism or First Communion availability also makes sense, as that is often in the back of the minds of inactive Catholics who have an ambivalence about their kids' Catholic identity and initiation.

If you are intentional about reaching out to these families, you may be surprised how many respond.



Try Our VBSs!

Our Growing Up Catholic Vacation Bible Schools are simple, flexible, and fun ways to learn about our Catholic faith. Learn more about them at GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com or give us a call at 1-844-727-8672.



Message Received Hearing God's Call

God has a message for you! Can you hear it? Samuel, Mary, and the disciples all heard God's special message just for them! Message Received is a Bible and activity-based learning experience in two parts: one designed for grades K-5 and the other for preschoolers ages 4-5.



EarthKeepers Adventures for Creation Care Kids

Our EarthKeepers VBS helps kids explore how to care for all of God's creation. It is based on Pope Francis' newest encyclical and it includes engaging Bible stories, catchy songs, fun games, creative activities, yummy snacks, compelling stories, and more.

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