

## The Reviews Are In!

Each year Lifelong Learning at VTS compiles reviews on Vacation Bible School programs for the current year. We believe that VBS helps churches spread the Good News of God in Christ and that VBS is a powerful intergenerational program.

## How We Review

Instead of describing each new program, we discuss underlying pedagogy and theological stances of publishers that has remained constant. Essentially, **we're telling you about the publisher** and sharing details about their offering for this year.

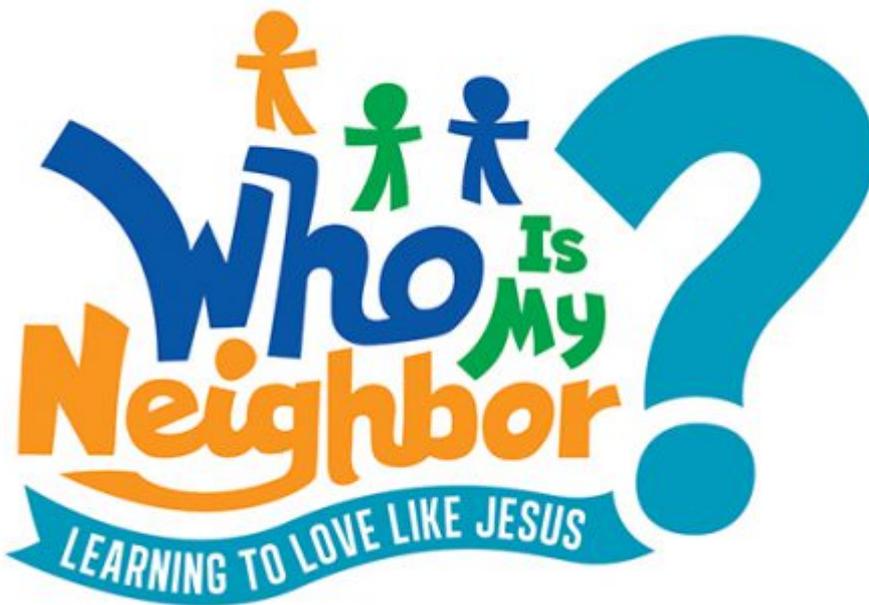


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## Lifelong Learning's Top 3 Picks for 2019

### [1. Who is my neighbor? Learning to love like Jesus](#) by Menno Media

Cost: \$164.99



**Publisher Program Description: Who is my neighbor?** Neighbors are more than people who live next door. Neighbors are more than people in our families or communities. Through five carefully chosen Bible stories, *Who Is My Neighbor* VBS leads children on a journey to discover more about God's great love. From looking at how to be a neighbor to diving into what it means to live out our faith, this interactive VBS series will lead children deeply into Bible stories focused on God's care and compassion for neighbors close at hand and around the world. Join us as we discover neighbors near and far!

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

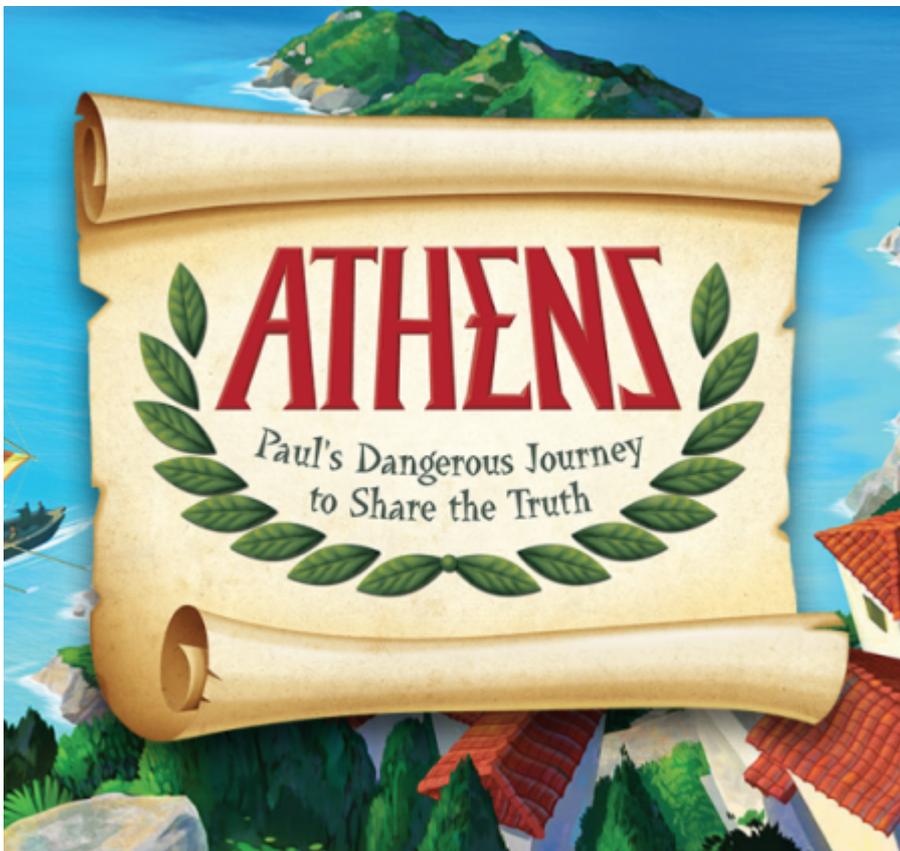
Session themes, which come from carefully selected biblical passages, reflect sound

scholarship and interpretation. Theologically the materials focus on God's presence and embracing love for all people. Both the rhythm of the program and its primary messages encourage learners to a deeper relationship with God. The Mennonite church has a long tradition of strong Christian formation practice, which is reflected in the learning activities and program structure. Both the activities and structure are developmentally appropriate for the targeted age groups of the VBS program.

At the same time, the mission component for their programs seems to be an afterthought. VBS leaders may want to find a local outreach project that coincides with the annual theme. MennoMedia VBS programs are also easy to alter to meet programming needs at other times of the year, such as Lent.

## **2. Athens: Paul's dangerous journey to share the truth by Group Publishing**

Cost: \$152.99 (standard starter kit) \$187.99 (digital starter kit)



**Publisher Program Description:** Imagine leaving a life of privilege and power to face angry mobs, painful imprisonment, and chain-breaking earthquakes—all to spread the **life-changing truth** of God’s love. Learn the **jaw-dropping story** of the Apostle Paul...straight from Paul himself! In an ancient “anything goes” culture, Paul will inspire kids to share the truth of **God’s immeasurable love** today!

**Our Review:** In its Marketplace series, Group takes VBS participants back in time to other places through immersive and intergenerational programs located in sites such as Rome, Babylon, Egypt, among others. Each year features a different location, although the sites are recycled every three to four years. called Rome: Paul and the Underground Church.

The “marketplace series” is based on the original Marketplace VBS curriculum. Each year churches are encouraged to create a multi-station space in which groups or “tribes” of children meet shopkeepers, palaces, storytellers, and a focus character—in 2019, Daniel. The marketplaces can range from elaborate villages to more simple learning sites. The heart of the content is learning about life for people who lived in these places long ago. Overall the theology of this program series has strong ties to the biblical accounts, although sometimes the link is tenuous between the place to a message about sin and salvation.

Group’s emphasis on atonement theology also can be heavy-handed at times. As with any curricula, leaders need to be aware of shifts they find inappropriate and adjust instructions and scripts accordingly. Group also designs this VBS series to be intergenerational (although it does not have to be), with parents and adults journeying along with children.

### **[3. To Mars and Beyond](#) by Cokesbury Publishing**

Cost: Cost: \$174.99 (standard starter kit) \$219.99 (plus digital starter kit)



**Publisher Description:** Explore Where God's Power Can Take You with Cokesbury's 2019 VBS: To Mars and Beyond. Galaxy voyagers journey from their galactic outpost on special missions to collect power sources. Along the way, they'll learn how God walked with heroes of the Bible, and that God is always with them, too. Everyone enjoys the amazing space theme, fantastic VBS music, daily appearances of the life-size robot 'Captain 2Beyond', and this year's puppet EP3-20

**Our Review:** Cokesbury Publishing reflects a mainline, Methodist interpretation of scripture that emphasizes God's deep love of humanity and the ability of people to be in relationship with God. Unlike many VBS programs that focus on the crucifixion or resurrection, Cokesbury consistently emphasizes God's presence in our everyday lives and living in relationship with God.

The VBS resources are centered in biblical narrative and include a section on helping children make a commitment to Christ, which churches in the Episcopal tradition that

emphasize baptism as the rite of initiation, may not use. The materials are gender inclusive and include diverse cultures and races. While some of the stories obviously have male characters, these roles could easily be played by either gender.

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.

## Looking for More?

For more details on our top picks, plus other publishers and perennial VBS programs, download the free full set of reviews by clicking the link below:

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