



VBS!

# 2019 reviews

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Presented by Christian Formation and Discipleship,  
Lifelong Learning at Virginia Theological Seminary  
For more about VBS and Summer Programming in  
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Welcome to the 2019 Vacation Bible School Reviews from Lifelong Learning at Virginia Theological Seminary. This review provides information about contents of new and perennial Bible-based camp programs. Please be aware that while we review new releases each year, our priority is to focus on publishers we trust. As such, we apply intentional pedagogical and theological lenses in the choices of material we review and recommend. While each year brings new themes, pedagogy and theological lenses remain consistent. We recommend that users consider the programs offered by the publishers that most closely reflect their own theology.

### **Our Top Picks for Publishers**

We have found that we tend to gravitate toward these publishers: Cokesbury, Group Publishing – Marketplace Series, and MennoMedia. They include these attributes:

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 reviews for new programs include a publisher review, website URL, cost of a starter kit, theme and daily content, along with strengths and weaknesses of programs from each publishing house.

If you look at catalogues for VBS programs, you will find publishers that we do not include in our reviews. Our primary audience for these reviews are creedal churches with theological approaches that reflect formation built on the baptismal covenant. We have not included resources intended for evangelical churches with sin and salvation-oriented theologies which often have a megachurch infrastructure. Group Publishing straddles both worlds, but users tell us that their programs, especially those in the Marketplace Series, can be easily adapted. We also included Lifeway Christian Resources, since it is a primary source of VBS programs that churches in your community may be using.

### **Perennial Programs**

The Perennial section continues to feature time-tested favorites, along with newer additions, including *This Changes Everything*, a Bible study curriculum for day camps. The perennial reviews provide a description of each program, website URL, cost, strengths and weaknesses.

We believe Vacation Bible School can be a powerful tool for evangelism for your church. At the same time, VBS should be fun and engaging for everyone involved. This is a time to celebrate God’s love and presence in the world!

Sarah Bentley Allred, Dorothy Linthicum, and Katherine Malloy  
Christian Formation and Discipleship  
Lifelong Learning at Virginia Theological Seminary

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**2019 Programs  
from  
Top  
Publishers**

## ***To Mars and Beyond***

Cokesbury

<https://www.cokesbury.com/forms/DynamicContent.aspx?id=296&pageid=3125>

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

**About the publisher:** 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.

**Overall theme:** "Glory to God, who is able to do far beyond all that we could ask or imagine by his power at work within us." (Ephesians 3:20, CEB)

Session 1 - Go Beyond with Faith! Daniel Trusts God in the Lions' Den (Daniel 6)

Session 2 - Go Beyond with Boldness! Queen Ester Takes a Stand (Esther 4-9)

Session 3 - Go Beyond with Kindness! The Good Samaritan Helps a Fellow Traveler (Luke 10:25-37)

Session 4 - Go Beyond with Thankfulness! Jesus Heals 10 Lepers (Luke 17:11-19)

Session 5 - Go Beyond with Hope! Jesus Comforts Friends on the Way to Emmaus (Matthew 24:13-35)

**Age Levels:** Preschool/Kindergarten, Younger Elementary, Older Elementary

### **Includes (among others):**

- X Music CD
- X Online Registration and volunteer forms
- X Decoration tips/support

### **Strengths:**

- Adaptable, well-rounded programs 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 a budget and church focus.
- 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.

### **Weaknesses:**

- Some crafts will not appeal to older students.
- Snack suggestions work best with a smaller sized VBS.
- Music over the years has been adequate but lacking in creativity.
- Online registration can be a bit overwhelming.

## **Athens: Holy Land Adventure**

Group Publishing—Marketplace Series

<https://www.group.com/category/ministry-resources/childrens-ministry/vbs/athens.do>

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

**About the publisher:** 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. 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, Paul. 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.

**2019 Theme:** Paul’s dangerous journey to share the truth.

Session 1 – God loves us all. (Paul begins his second missionary journey. Acts 15:36-16:5)

Session 2 – God loves us and takes care of us. (Paul and Silas are put in prison. Acts 16:16-40)

Session 3 – God loves us when others don’t. (An angry mob searches for Paul and Silas. Acts 17:1-9)

Session 4 – God loves us and sent his son Jesus. (Paul preaches about Jesus. Acts 17: 16-34)

Session 5 – God loves us and wants us to share his love. (Paul continues his journey. Acts 18: 1-5)

**Age Levels:** Preschool, Elementary

**Includes (among others):**

- |                                   |                |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| X Music CD and DVD                | X Clip art CD  |
| X Decorating DVD                  | X Training DVD |
| X Online registration and support |                |

**Strengths:**

- Scaled for small, medium, large groups, with strong online support.
- Beautiful, well organized materials that are easy to use; clear guides for leaders.
- Sensitive to different learning styles.
- Music CD includes nice blend of original compositions and familiar worship songs; 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 are very good.
- Drama skits are well-written, short, and connect with the biblical theme of the day.

**Weaknesses:**

- Options for games and crafts that are not pre-packaged relate to the theme but are limited in number.
- Additional materials need to be purchased to provide the suggested station activities.
- Churches with limited resources or volunteers would have difficulty using this VBS.

## **Who Is My Neighbor?**

MennoMedia

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

Cost: \$164.99

**About the publisher:** 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.

**2019 Theme:** Learning to love like Jesus.

Session 1 – Love God and your neighbor (Jesus speaks of the importance of loving God and loving neighbors. Mark 12:28-34).

Session 2 – Who is my neighbor? (Jesus tells the story of a traveler who is wounded by robbers. Luke 10:25-37)

Session 3 – Live Peacefully (Isaac's neighbors become jealous of his prosperity. Genesis 26:12-33)

Session 4 – Everyone is invited! (Jesus tells a story about a banquet to which those who are invited do not attend. Luke 14:15-24)

Session 5 - Share with Others (The early church worships and prays together. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37)

**Age Levels:** Preschool, Elementary

**Includes (among others):**

- X Music CD
- X Leader Resource CD
- X Decoration tips/support

**Strengths:**

- Material is well organized, formatted, and easy to understand.
- Each leadership role includes a job description.
- Book suggestions correspond 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.
- Very few resources for decorating.
- Music is solid, but stodgy.
- Mission projects are usually not related to the program theme or content.

**Other  
2019**

**Program &  
Publisher  
Reviews**

## **WHOOOSH: Take Flight to Where God Leads You**

Abingdon Press

<https://2019.abingdonpressvbs.com/>

Cost: \$84.99

**About the publisher:** Abingdon consistently uses both biblical narrative and African American culture and history to introduce children to each year's theme. While the underlying message and energy of the music could be enjoyed by all races and cultures, the supporting materials reflect the music, syntax, and visual representations of the African American community, its primary audience. Goals typically encourage children to embrace the love of Jesus and find strength within themselves.

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 Katherine Johnson, Mary Jackson, and Dorothy Vaughan who were recently featured in the motion picture *Hidden Figures*, among others. Many of the leaders featured in Abingdon's VBS programs are working today to improve the lives of people of all ages. 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.

**2019 Theme:** Allow God to lead you as you journey to places of freedom, fun, and opportunity, remembering God's miracles as you go.

Session 1 - Remembering a Dream! (After a dream, Jacob sets a stone as a reminder of where he met God. Genesis 28:10-22)

Session 2 - Crossing the River! (After crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the Hebrew children build a memorial of stones. Joshua 4:20-24)

Session 3 - A New Song! (The psalmist encourages new music to praise God. Psalm 149; Hebrews 4:12)

Session 4 - For All People! (Jesus declares that God's house is a place of prayer for all people. Mark 11:15-19)

Session 5 - Living Monuments! (Peter writes about the building blocks of Christian character. 1 Peter 2:4-6; 2 Peter 1:5-8)

**Age Levels:** Preschool/Kindergarten, Younger Elementary, Older Elementary, Teen

### **Includes (among others):**

X Music CD	X Decoration tips/support
X Worship DVD	X Parent Empowerment Pages

### **Strengths:**

- Detailed community engagement for registration, including structure and ideas for working with multiple churches and free planning downloads.
- Snack suggestions are usually 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 throughout the year that relates to the VBS theme and the African Americans leaders featured.
- Quality of music continues to be a major strength of Abingdon's VBS.

### **Weaknesses:**

- Offers "Music & Movement" rotation, but not 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.

## ***Miraculous Mission***

Concordia

<https://www.concordiasupply.com/Vacation-Bible-School/VBS-2019-Themes/Miraculous-Mission-VBS-2019-Concordia>

Cost: \$169.99

**About the publisher:** 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. Each day teachers are told to focus on sin, such as, "Our hearts are sinful, so we don't want to listen to or receive God's Word." The openings, closings, and storytelling guides are highly scripted, allowing leaders no leeway for their own words and little space for learners' own thoughts. The overall themes and animated characters are often inviting and even whimsical, which is at odds with the heavy-handed theology. In addition, as with many biblical texts of the Hebrew scriptures, the connections or inferences to the life and work of Jesus or theological perspective of the New Testament are tenuous at best.

**2019 Theme:** "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16

Session 1 - God made the universe. (Genesis 1-2:2)

Session 2 – God promises a savior. (Genesis 12:1-7 and 15:1-6)

Session 3 - Jesus the Savior is born. (Matthew 2:1-12)

Session 4 - Jesus the Savior is risen. (Matthew 27:27–28:10)

Session 5 - Jesus the Savior reigns. (Acts 1:1–11; Luke 24:44–53)

**Age Levels:** Preschool, Elementary

### **Includes (among others):**

X	Music DVD	X	Online Registration
X	Program overview DVD	X	Decoration tips/support

### **Strengths:**

- Quality planning materials, including job descriptions, schedules, and online resources.
- Decoration supplies and ideas include huge posters that help set the tone.
- Snack suggestions are fun and healthy overall but are not necessarily allergy friendly.
- Craft supplies, decorations, and keepsakes available on website, but costly.
- Music is upbeat and memorable.
- Opening and closing videos provided for each day.

### **Weaknesses:**

- Crafts do not allow for much creativity and often require the purchase of material from website.
- Games are competitive rather than cooperative.
- Questions are close-ended, leaving children little room to imagine or wonder.
- Mission projects are usually money raisers for the publishing house charity.

## **Yee-Haw**

Group Publishing—Weekend Series

<https://www.group.com/category/ministry-resources/childrens-ministry/vbs/yee-haw.do>

Cost: \$82.99

**About the publisher:** Group Publishing’s weekend series 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 resources are upbeat and empowering to inspire confidence in smaller or reluctant congregations, but the effect feels contrived and manipulative.

The programs demonstrate Group’s signature attention to logistical detail, as well as its heavy focus on atonement theology. While the programs often focus on one positive Bible Point, the sessions dive quickly into graphic explorations of darkness and sin. The 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 the positive emphasis of most VBS programming.

**2019 Theme:** God gives good gifts.

Session 1: God sends Jesus to earth. (Luke 2:1-20)

Session 2: Jesus dies and comes back to life. (John 16–21)

**Age Levels:**    Preschool, Elementary

### **Includes (among others):**

- X** Praise music CD with PowerPoint lyrics
- X** Program resources DVD
- X** Decoration tips/support

### **Strengths:**

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

### **Weaknesses:**

- Theology and pedagogy inappropriate for most mainline Protestant congregations.
- Heavy use of snow/polar metaphors and images, limited actual experience.
- Expense of supplemental materials.
- Mission projects are often unrelated to the theme with no direct connection to activities.

## **Roar**

Group Publishing

<https://www.group.com/category/ministry-resources/childrens-ministry/vbs/roar/products.do>

Cost: \$184.99 (standard starter kit) \$224.99 Digital Starter Kit

**About the publisher:** Group Publishing consistently offers creative, colorful programs with excellent support that smooths the rough edges of VBS programs in churches of all sizes. For its primary VBS product in 2019, Group is offering for the first time a Spanish bilingual version.

Group's primary VBS programs are designed as week-long rotation models with mixed-age groups of children led by an adult or teenager along with station leaders. Activities for each group are age appropriate and easy to use. Upbeat music selections fit well with Bible verses and support the daily themes. Group's emphasis on atonement theology, apparent in all of their VBS programs, 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. In the 2019 materials, negative stereotypes of women appear in session 2. Martha not only worries, but also complains. Rarely are men portrayed in this negative light. Users should be aware of unintended sexism or ageism in all VBS programs.

**2019 Theme:** Exploring God's goodness and celebrating a ferocious faith that powers us through this wild life.

Session 1 – When life is unfair... God is good! (The Israelites are slaves for the Egyptians. Exodus 1; 5; 6)

Session 2 – When life is scary... God is good! (God sends plagues on Egypt. Exodus 7:14-12:32)

Session 3 – When life changes... God is good! (The Israelites enter the wilderness. Exodus 14-17)

Session 4 – When life is sad... God is good! (Jesus dies and comes back to life. John 16-21)

Session 5 – When life is good... God is good! (The Israelites build a memorial to remember God's goodness. Joshua 3-4)

\*\*\*Note that the 2019 curriculum was found to be culturally insensitive, particularly with regard to race, ethnicity, and the diverse cultures on the continent of Africa. Group did publish a document with updates to address some of the identified issues, which can be accessed here: <http://bit.ly/2FOUAQI>

**Age Levels:** Preschool, Elementary

### **Includes (among others):**

X Music CD and DVD	X Clip art CD	X Decorating DVD
X Story DVD	X Training DVD	X Spanish Bilingual Edition available

### **Strengths:**

- Scaled for small, medium, large groups.
- Beautiful, well organized materials that are easy to use; clear guides for leaders.
- Sensitive to different learning styles.
- Music CD includes nice blend of original compositions and familiar worship songs
- DVD video quality and production value are very good.
- Drama skits are well-written, short, and connect with the biblical theme of the day.
- Snack suggestions are relevant to the theme of the day.

### **Weaknesses:**

- Expense of supplemental materials, including prepared crafts.
- Mission projects are often unrelated to the theme and have no direct connection to activities.
- Be aware of cultural insensitivity and adjust accordingly.

## ***Into The Wild***

LifeWay Christian Resources

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

JumpStart Kit: \$35.99; Babies-Kindergarten Starter Kit: \$99.99; Grades 1-6 Starter Kit: \$99.99

**About the publisher:** Lifeway Christian Resources VBS is a comprehensive curriculum that includes a broad range of resources and activities for all ages. Lifeway is a major provider of Christian resources primarily for the Southern Baptist Convention. Its materials are intended for evangelical churches with sin and salvation-oriented theologies and with megachurch-type infrastructure and culture.

Lifeway VBS programs primarily focus on salvation and the need for everyone to be converted of sin by the Holy Spirit. Every aspect of its VBS curriculum from the first welcome to the take-home CD has an underlying purpose of leading participants to a conversion experience. The tone of the curriculum, both for the participants and the leaders is heavy-handed, with little emphasis on God's love. Despite themes that sound uplifting, the central message lacks the joy that the Christian life promises. Creedal churches will find it difficult to adapt 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.

### **2019 Theme:** Zoom in! Focus on Jesus!

Session 1 –Encounter in the temple. (Jesus knew why He came. Luke 2:41-52)

Session 2 – Encounter at the river. (Jesus is the Son of God. Matthew 3:1-17)

Session 3 – Encounter on the water. (Jesus proved He is God's Son. Matthew 14:22-33)

Session 4 – Encounter at the tomb. (Jesus rose from the dead. John 20:1-18)

Session 5 – Encounter on the Road. (The Bible was written so I can believe. Luke 24:13-35)

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

### **Includes:**

- |                             |                          |                             |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| X Music CD and DVD          | X Detailed leader guides | X Also available in Spanish |
| X Detailed decorating plans | X Snack recipe cards     |                             |
| X Promotional videos        | X Preparation timelines  |                             |

### **Strengths:**

- Detailed lists, charts, and timelines make planning easy.
- Lifeway's VBS website is colorful and easy to navigate.
- A take-home resource, which follows up each day's content, can be purchased or downloaded free.
- 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 many children attend VBS. Creating your own would be time consuming.
- The decorating tips and products to create the setting are complex.
- The majority of the games (only available on cards) are competitive in nature.
- The snack suggestions mostly include sugary or salty choices.

## **Power Up: Raise Your Game**

Orange

<http://orangevbs.com/>

Cost: \$209.00

**About the publisher:** The descriptions by Orange publishing of their VBS programs made us optimistic that the positive themes would help these resources overcome the CMT's usual reservations with this publisher. It hasn't turned out that way.

The activities are flexible, well-constructed, and clearly explained, and the media materials are beautifully created and impressive. A congregation could have a lot of fun participating in Orange VBS programs, and even make some interesting crafts.

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, credal churches will probably 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.

**2019 Theme:** "God's power has given us everything we need to live a godly life." 2 Peter 1:3a, NIRV

Session 1 – God wants you to know Him. (God calls Abram, Genesis 12:1-4, 15:1-7)

Session 2 – We can know God through His Word. (The life of Josiah, 2 Kings 22-23)

Session 3 – God sent Jesus to save us. (Jesus' Baptism, John 1:29-34, Matthew 3:1-17, Easter story)

Session 4 – God sent His Spirit to help you. (Pentecost, Acts 1-2)

Session 5 – You can help others know God. (Fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22-23)

**Age Levels:**     Preschool, Elementary

### **Includes:**

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <b>X</b> Music CD or DVD         | <b>X</b> Registration and volunteer forms    |
| <b>X</b> Alternate schedule      | <b>X</b> Training videos                     |
| <b>X</b> Decoration tips/support | <b>X</b> Family materials                    |
| <b>X</b> Animations and videos   | <b>X</b> 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 assumptions about megachurch-style infrastructure and congregational culture.

# **Español**

# **Currículo**

**para la escuela**  
**bíblica**

## ***El tren de las Buenas Noticias (The Good News Train)***

Concordia

<https://www.concordiasupply.com/Vacation-Bible-School/VBS-2019-Themes/The-Good-News-Train-Spanish-VBS-2019>

Cost: \$54.99 (español) \$100.00 (bilingual)

**About the publisher:** Si bien las actividades son apropiadas para su edad, el idioma no lo es; asume un vocabulario teológico maduro. Conceptos tales como el pecado, el diablo y la resurrección se usan con frecuencia sin explicación. Cada día se les dice a los maestros que se concentren en el pecado, como: "Nuestros corazones son pecaminosos, así que no queremos escuchar o recibir la Palabra de Dios". Las aperturas, cierres y guías de historias están muy escritas, lo que permite a los líderes por sus propias palabras y poco espacio para los propios pensamientos de los alumnos.

Los temas generales y los personajes animados a menudo son atractivos e incluso caprichosos, lo cual está en desacuerdo con la teología de mano dura. Además, como ocurre con muchos textos bíblicos de las escrituras hebreas, las conexiones o inferencias a la vida y el trabajo de Jesús o la perspectiva teológica del Nuevo Testamento son, en el mejor de los casos, tenues.

### **2019 Theme: El tren de las Buenas Noticias (The Good News Train)**

Session 1 – Jesus Frees Me and Sends Me (Mark 5:1-20) The demon-possessed man from the Gerasenes

Session 2 – Jesus Quenches Our Thirst (Exodus 17:1-7) Water from the rock

Session 3 – Jesus Picks Me Up and Holds Me Close (Matthew 8:1-4) Jesus heals a man with leprosy

Session 4 – Jesus Gives Me Health (Luke 8:40-56) The healing of Jairus' daughter and of the woman with bleeding

Session 5 – Jesus Satisfies Me (1 Kings 17:8-16) The widow of Zarephath

**Age Levels:**    Preschool, Elementary, Adult Study

### **Includes:**

**X** Music CD or DVD                                   **X** Adult Bible Studies

### **Strengths:**

- The curriculum was originally written in Spanish.
- Quality planning materials, including forms, job descriptions, schedules, and online resources.
- Decoration supplies and ideas include huge posters that help set the tone.
- Craft supplies, decorations, and keepsakes available on website, but costly.
- Music is upbeat and memorable.

### **Weaknesses:**

- Crafts do not allow for much creativity and often require the purchase of material from website.
- Games are competitive rather than cooperative.
- Questions are close-ended, leaving children little room to imagine or wonder.

## **Roar (Roar Bilingual Spanish Edition)**

Group Publishing

<https://www.group.com/product/1210000309310-roar-vbs-ultimate-starter-kit-bilingual.do?sortby=ourPicks&refType=&from=fn>

\$224.99 Spanish Bilingual Digital Starter Kit

**About the publisher:** Group Publishing consistently offers creative, colorful programs with excellent support that smooths the rough edges of VBS programs in churches of all sizes. For its primary VBS product in 2019, Group is offering for the first time a Spanish bilingual version.

Group's primary VBS programs are designed as week-long rotation models with mixed-age groups of children led by an adult or teenager along with station leaders. Activities for each group are age appropriate and easy to use. Upbeat music selections fit well with Bible verses and support the daily themes. Group's emphasis on atonement theology, apparent in all of their VBS programs, 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. In the 2019 materials, negative stereotypes of women appear in session 2. Martha not only worries, but also complains. Rarely are men portrayed in this negative light. Users should be aware of unintended sexism or ageism in all VBS programs.

**2019 Theme:** Exploring God's goodness and celebrating a ferocious faith that powers us through this wild life.

Session 1 – When life is unfair... God is good! (The Israelites are slaves for the Egyptians. Exodus 1; 5; 6)

Session 2 – When life is scary... God is good! (God sends plagues on Egypt. Exodus 7:14-12:32)

Session 3 – When life changes... God is good! (The Israelites enter the wilderness. Exodus 14-17)

Session 4 – When life is sad... God is good! (Jesus dies and comes back to life. John 16-21)

Session 5 – When life is good... God is good! (The Israelites build a memorial to remember God's goodness. Joshua 3-4)

**Age Levels:** Preschool, Elementary

### **Includes (among others):**

X Music CD and DVD      X Clip art CD      X Decorating DVD  
X Story DVD              X Training DVD

### **Strengths:**

- Scaled for small, medium, large groups.
- Beautiful, well organized materials that are easy to use; clear guides for leaders.
- Sensitive to different learning styles.
- Music CD includes nice blend of original compositions and familiar worship songs
- DVD video quality and production value are very good.
- Drama skits are well-written, short, and connect with the biblical theme of the day.
- Snack suggestions are relevant to the theme of the day.

### **Weaknesses:**

- Expense of supplemental materials, including prepared crafts.
- Mission projects are often unrelated to the theme and have no direct connection to activities.

## ***En La Naturaleza (Into The Wild Spanish Edition)***

LifeWay Christian Resources

<https://ebv.lifeway.com/>

Starter Kit: \$69.99 (Preschool and Elementary)

**About the publisher:** Lifeway Christian Resources VBS is a comprehensive curriculum that includes a broad range of resources and activities for all ages. Lifeway is a major provider of Christian resources primarily for the Southern Baptist Convention. Its materials are intended for evangelical churches with sin and salvation-oriented theologies and with megachurch-type infrastructure and culture.

Lifeway VBS programs primarily focus on salvation and the need for everyone to be converted of sin by the Holy Spirit. Every aspect of its VBS curriculum from the first welcome to the take-home CD has an underlying purpose of leading participants to a conversion experience. The tone of the curriculum, both for the participants and the leaders is heavy-handed, with little emphasis on God's love. Despite themes that sound uplifting, the central message lacks the joy that the Christian life promises. Creedal churches will find it difficult to adapt 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.

**2019 Theme:** ¡Acércate! ¡Enfócate en Jesús! (Zoom in! Focus on Jesus!)

Session 1 – Encounter in the temple. (Jesus knew why He came. Luke 2:41-52)

Session 2 – Encounter at the river. (Jesus is the Son of God. Matthew 3:1-17)

Session 3 – Encounter on the water. (Jesus proved He is God's Son. Matthew 14:22-33)

Session 4 – Encounter at the tomb. (Jesus rose from the dead. John 20:1-18)

Session 5 – Encounter on the Road. (The Bible was written so I can believe. Luke 24:13-35)

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

### **Includes:**

- |                             |                          |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| X Music CD and DVD          | X Detailed leader guides |
| X Detailed decorating plans | X Snack recipe cards     |
| X Promotional videos        | X Preparation timelines  |

### **Strengths:**

- Detailed lists, charts, and timelines make planning easy.
- Lifeway's VBS website is colorful and easy to navigate.
- A take-home resource, which follows up each day's content, can be purchased or downloaded free.
- 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 many children attend VBS. Creating your own would be time consuming.
- The decorating tips and products to create the setting are complex.
- The majority of the games (only available on cards) are competitive in nature.
- The snack suggestions mostly include sugary or salty choices.

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

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

[https://promailv5. fulfillmentconcepts.com/v5fmsnet/ordent/PmOfferDet.asp?XOFFER=521&xpath=\\*19&XGROUP=19&NotMain=1&PG=&MAXPG=&PmSess1=10488](https://promailv5. fulfillmentconcepts.com/v5fmsnet/ordent/PmOfferDet.asp?XOFFER=521&xpath=*19&XGROUP=19&NotMain=1&PG=&MAXPG=&PmSess1=10488)

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 (\$42).

### **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*

# **Perennial VBS Programs**

## ***Abundance Orchard***

### **Where Faith Grows and Hungry People Are Fed**

Society of St Andrew

800-333-4597

<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 repurposed 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 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.episcopalrelief.org/church-in-action/christian-formation/abundant-life-garden-project>

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 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*

## ***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>

\$48.80 (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](http://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: 1) Praise, 2) EcoJustice, 3) Who is my Neighbor, 4) Interfaith Peace, and 5) Saints and Holy Helpers.

This program 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

<https://www.leaderresources.org/Aslan>

\$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:**

Session 1 - Discovery of Narnia: how ideas color behavior.

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

Session 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.

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

Session 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

[https://www.leaderresources.org/Dare-to-be-Different\\_p\\_46.html](https://www.leaderresources.org/Dare-to-be-Different_p_46.html)

\$49.95 (download)

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

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

### **Themes for each day:**

Session 1 - Our Special Gifts

Session 2 - Following the Footsteps of Saints

Session 3 - Daring to be Different

Session 4 - Foolishness, Faith, and Free Will

Session 5 - The Power of Love

**Age Levels:** K - Elementary

### **Includes:**

**X** Director's Guide

### **Strengths:**

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

### **Weaknesses:**

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

*Joyce Walker*

## ***God's Garden, God's City***

Published independently

<http://www.the-sunday-paper.com/id5.html>

Cost: \$75 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: Country Series**

*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](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:
  - Columbia 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*

## **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](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:**

- X Scope and sequence for each year
- X Timeline/schedule available
- X 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*

## ***Peaceable Kingdom***

Leader Resources

<https://www.leaderresources.org/Peaceable>

\$69.95 (download)

*Peaceable Kingdom* explores anti-bullying themes using 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 3 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

<https://www.leaderresources.org/Pilgrim>

\$74.95 (download)

## ***A Second Pilgrimage: Still Seeking the Kingdom of God***

<https://www.leaderresources.org/Pilgrim2>

\$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, 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

<https://www.leaderresources.org/PrayingAllTime>

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.

**Age Levels:** Kindergarten through grade 5

### **Includes:**

X Leaders Guide

X Activity CD (also contains guide)

**Note:** Copies of the five books must be purchased separately.

### **Strengths:**

- Crafts are engaging and relevant to the stories.
- A half-day schedule for five days is provided. Designs 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.
- 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

[https://www.leaderresources.org/SPY-Parables-VBS\\_p\\_225.html](https://www.leaderresources.org/SPY-Parables-VBS_p_225.html)

Cost: \$39.95

*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*

### ***This Changes Everything: Day Camp Bible Study***

Lutheran Outdoor Ministries

<https://www.lomnetwork.org/curriculum> (scroll to VBS Bundle)

\$100.00 (download)

As part of its series of resources for camps, Lutheran Outdoor Ministries has created separate Bible studies for day camp ministry. The emphasis of the materials is on God's love for all people and for creation. The goal of the Bible study is to create a new community of followers of Jesus Christ who reflect God's love for the world. Included in the VBS Bundle are curriculum development resources to help users organize their programs, plan "back home" activities, and work with special needs campers.

The curriculum is a welcome addition to both camps and churches that offer outdoor day camp experiences. The resources are age appropriate, with activities that include sound teaching and learning practices. Learning objectives are clearly stated, emphasizing both learning about biblical stories and applying that learning to the lives of the campers. Study materials are easy to use, with lists of materials and clear guidelines to gather the group and work through the various components.

The theology of the program reflects its goals by emphasizing God's love and the goodness of God's creation—including the participants, both young and old. Prayers are both spiritual and affirming, focusing both on individuals and the group.

**Age Levels:**   Preschool, Elementary

#### **Includes:**

- X** One week of Bible study
- X** Guidelines for creating Bible study groups
- X** Guide for using the resource in a camp setting

#### **Strengths:**

- Enriches day camp programs with age-appropriate Bible study.
- Curriculum bundle provides excellent tips on using the Bible study in a camp setting.
- Bible study reflect a theology based on God's love for all creation.
- Each session stands alone and could be adapted for use in other settings.
- Can be used in camps with children from different denominations.

#### **Weaknesses:**

- Cannot stand alone as a VBS program.
- It would be difficult, if not impossible, to use with campers from diverse faith traditions.

*Dorothy Linthicum*

## ***Water All Around the World***

Living Waters for the World 2006/Presbyterian Church USA

<https://info.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

<https://www.leaderresources.org/WildWilly>

\$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

<https://www.leaderresources.org/Wizards>

\$49.95 (download)

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

The five sessions and the daily Bible stories are:

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

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

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

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

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

**Age Levels:** Intergenerational

### **Includes:**

X Director's Guide

### **Strengths:**

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

### **Weaknesses:**

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

*Lori Daniels*

## **YodaYada VBS**

Published Independently

<https://revyoda.wixsite.com/yodayadayada>

*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

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*