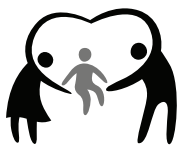




# Vacation Bible School: What, Why, and How?



**Growing Up  
Catholic**  
A ministry of The Pastoral Center

*by Paul Canavese  
The Pastoral Center*

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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# 1

## 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.

## What Are Our Goals?

Before we continue, let's step back to ask what we are trying to accomplish with a VBS in the first place. Sometimes we can put a lot of energy into a project and lose sight of why we are doing it. We encourage you to think through this list of possible goals and carefully consider which are important for your community, and what might be missing.

- **To bring families closer to God.** We want to help children (and their parents) learn about God and experience God's love. This happens through both the head and the heart, so a fun experience with story, music, games, activities, food, and more helps us share a glimpse of the Kingdom's fullness.
- **To bring families closer to the church.** We want to forge deeper connections between families and the parish. This happens through personal relationships.
- **To attract families who are not parishioners or on the margins of your parish.** In particular, we hope to serve those who are far from the church as a possible step toward parish membership or deeper engagement.
- **To provide an opportunity for leaders to serve.** Some adults, tweens, or teens have a gift for this kind of ministry, and look forward to it each year. It gives them an opportunity to witness and have fun themselves.
- **To make money.** We added this option here because some leaders have told us that their VBS contributes to their budget. While it's not a bad thing if that happens, all of the above goals are obviously *much* more important.

These goals generally boil down to evangelization, which is the core mission of the Church.

Most of these goals are *relational* in one way or another. If we are serious about them, any adaptations we make need to prioritize this kind of connection as much as possible. And if we want to connect with as many families as possible, the first step is to get them in the door. That means we need to get in their shoes and understand how the experience can meet their needs (and budget).

## Reconnecting after the Pandemic

We may be trying our best to stay connected to our families, but it is challenging from both sides. Many families—especially those on the margins of the parish—have taken a step back from the church (and perhaps God) when social distancing limited our ability to meet in-person. Are some forgetting about church? Or treating it as optional?

Now, more than ever, we need to *attract* families back to the heart of the church. That's where the dynamic kind of experience found in Vacation Bible Schools can fit in. VBS is a unique way to serve families and remind them how fun and meaningful faith can be.

After many months of limitations, **children and families are starving for social connection**—for communion... for church. Some are even experiencing forms of depression or anxiety because they are disconnected from others. God made us as social beings, so that's only natural.

## Fun Faith Formation

Some of our VBS themes have the added advantage of introducing children and their parents to the most recent papal documents, which can otherwise be difficult to fit into the regular faith formation curriculum.

The catechetical fruits of a VBS are an aspect of how we can bring families closer to God and the church. A VBS experience can be a very 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 that 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, as participants or by making sure they know what their children are focusing on, and coaching them on how to have conversations with them afterwards.

## 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).
- **Prayer** - Bring this decision to God. What does God want to teach children (and their families and the leaders) in your community this year?

## Consider a Whole Family VBS

We highly recommend planning your VBS as an event attended by both children and parents instead of a drop-off model to an event.

We know this may seem counter-intuitive if you consider a purpose of VBS to be childcare, at least in parents' eyes. Will families even participate if parents have to attend? Honestly, we had our own doubts. Then we heard the story of a parish in the Diocese of Dallas who made the switch and saw its VBS attendance *increase*.

The advantages are similar to the dramatic ones we see in parishes that switch their religious education to a whole family model:

- **It leads to lifelong Catholics.** Ample studies show that parents who are active in their faith and discuss it with their kids are much more likely to raise children who remain Catholic into adulthood.
- **It makes it easier for leaders.** Parents direct their own children, meaning you will need far fewer volunteers and everything will be easier to manage. This may be particularly helpful this year as you navigate the uncertainty.
- **It forms parent community.** When parents participate, they meet other parents, form friendships, and deepen your parish community.

We are a leader in whole family catechesis, and it is the focus of our larger Growing Up Catholic ministry. Learn more at [GrowingUpCatholic.com](http://GrowingUpCatholic.com).



- **Parents love it!** Parents appreciate learning more about their faith and having fun, quality time with their children.

As you consider what formats you may use this year, don't rule out the possibility of bringing parents into the process.

## 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.

## Scheduling

There are obviously pros and cons to different scheduling options. Be thoughtful about your approach, as you may be surprised to find good success outside the norm.

- **Week-long** - The most common approach is to host on five consecutive weekdays, with a daily session 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.

- **Weekends** - A VBS can also easily be adapted to be a weekend experience, perhaps beginning on a Friday night. This could also give you the opportunity to schedule a family dinner and weekend Mass as part of the experience.
- **Week-by-week** - Another approach is to host sessions on consecutive weeks, such as five weeks of Wednesday nights or Saturday sessions.
- **Make VBS your year-round curriculum** - A number of parishes have told us that they are incorporating our VBS themes into their regular year-round catechetical program. They explained to us that they find the high-engagement, multiple-intelligence style the most effective approach to both attract participants and help them grow in faith. They found their programs grew significantly when they moved away from a textbook model.

## Doubling Up

Some parishes choose to host their VBS experience more than once (e.g. two separate weeks). This gives greater scheduling flexibility for families (now that kids have such busy summers) and can result in a more manageable attendance each time (with less volunteers and space needed).

## 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 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

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

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

grandparents in your parish to get their grandkids to come. Be sure to encourage your congregation to get as many people in as possible.

## 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.

## Worship Help from the Outside

A great way that you can raise the bar and make your VBS more engaging is to book Jesse Manibusan to pop in on your virtual gathering. He can help teach and lead the songs from any of our themes, as well as inspire, engage, excite, and move hearts. As the composer and performer of many of our VBS songs, he is the perfect person to make your online experience one that none of your participants will forget. We've been friends with him for many years and he is the real deal.

Learn more about Jesse and contact him through his website at [JesseManibusan.com](http://JesseManibusan.com) or Oregon Catholic Press (OCP).





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.

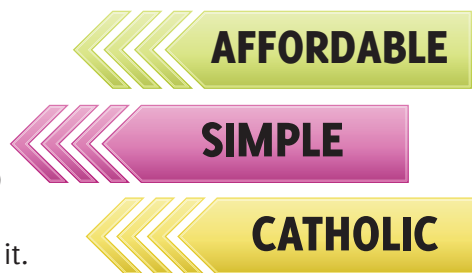



**Growing Up  
Catholic**  
**VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL**



## Draw Families Back in with Fun! A Different Kind of VBS

Growing Up Catholic VBS themes are centered on core discipleship (*kerygma*) and the latest Church documents. They're also a lot of fun, with catchy, meaningful music, dynamic activities, and more. But don't take our word for it. Explore the themes and leader feedback at [GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com](http://GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com).



### AFFORDABLE

- Offered in both downloadable and physical formats, both very affordable.
- Priced below other comparable VBSs, and most components are reproducible.
- Audio CDs bulk-priced at only \$2.50 each.

### CATCHY, MEANINGFUL MUSIC

- Hum along with top-notch kid-friendly music connected with the theme.
- Dynamic music from Oregon Catholic Press featuring Jesse Manibusan and other musicians.
- Hand and body motions to get kids moving!

### IDEAL THEMES

- Core discipleship themes drawn from our faith.
- Includes Scripture, prayer, drama, music, games, crafts, and activities, all nicely integrated to teach children how to follow Jesus!

### ENTHUSIASTICALLY CATHOLIC

- Connections to the CCC, reflections from Pope Francis, saints, the Mass, and more.
- Service opportunities from Catholic Charities USA, Catholic Relief services., and more

### COMPREHENSIVE, BUT SIMPLE

- We make life easy for leaders by giving you everything you need without overwhelming complexity.
- Preschool and elementary tracks.
- Easy to adapt for your time frame & preferences.

### AND MORE...

- Thoughtful take-home pages to inform and coach parents.
- Earth-friendly, and free from plastic junk.

Learn more at [GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com](http://GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com)



**Growing Up  
Catholic**  
**VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL**



## Great Big Beautiful World

Our newest theme invites children to see the ways God cares for the earth and challenges them to be part of caring for and preserving the created world. It breaks open the message of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* in an engaging and age-appropriate way! Featuring music by Bryan Sirchio, Jesse Manibusan, Steve Angrisano, and Chris Muglia.

- Enjoy the beauty and wonder of creation together.
- Invite children to love God the Creator and follow in the way of Jesus.
- Encourage children to notice the ways that we impact the natural world through our choices and actions.
- Challenge children and families to join God in caring for all of creation.

Each day starts with relationship-building, joint worship, music, prayer, and a dramatic presentation of the Bible story. This is a time to SOW seeds of friendship, joy, generosity, and wisdom. These seeds will GROW as children explore, create, play, and learn about God's story at three response stations. In closing worship, children will be challenged to GO out into the world to care for the beautiful world God made.

### Three More Themes for 2022:

#### **PEACE LAB: Discover God's Way of Peace**

*Learn how to resolve conflicts and help others.* Break open the insights of Pope Francis' encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*.

#### **DIGGING FOR TREASURE: Parables Revealed**

*Listen up! Dig deep! Jesus had a lot to say.* Find the hidden meaning buried in the stories Jesus told!

#### **SURPRISE! STORIES OF DISCOVERING JESUS**

*Jesus surprised and blessed the people he met.* Come along on the journey, open your eyes, and see what Jesus has in store!



Learn more at [GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com](http://GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com)

# What Are Leaders Saying?

"I wanted to send a quick note to you and thank you for the awesome VBS program! We are on our 4th day of Vacation Bible School, and it is going so well! We have received many compliments on the content of the program, the kids are having a great time, our teachers and leaders are so pleased with all of the activities.

One comment that really spoke volumes to me was the fact that it is a fairly simple program, and because of this, the message really is received. So many VBS programs have become a huge production, and the message of God is lost in all of the external factors of the program. I am so glad we happened upon your program. I hope you are working on another one for next year, because we will be reaching out to you! This is the first time in at least 15 years that our parish has hosted a VBS. Looks like it will become an annual event for us!"

*–Pam Richter • St. Anne's Catholic Church • Berryville, AR*

"Thank you for the awesome VBS program! So many VBS programs have become a huge production, and the message of God is lost in all of the external factors of the program."

"Everything was great!! The leaders really appreciated all the material—everything was so easy to follow. And the kids love it!"

"I loved the activities and how they all tied into the scriptures of the day."

"Thought this program was spot on."

"The music was upbeat and relevant."

"The sessions were beautifully timed and planned out."

"Most importantly, the KIDS loved it!"

"Our pastor found this program and we are glad he did. He even stopped by a few times throughout the week to play an activity or two with the youth."

"I have done 29 VBS programs over the years, and am so glad to see that there is some truly Catholic curriculum coming forth."

"It was financially reasonable; I could download what I wanted."

"I liked the connection between the Church's teaching and real life."

"We had so much fun with this and the kids loved the music. The recommended snack menus were wonderful. It all worked very well for us."

"Thank you for developing a VBS that put the children in touch with what our Holy Father was encouraging."

"The incarnational language and the games were great."

"It was easy, inexpensive, and the kids liked it."

"It was just awesome."

"I appreciated how Catholic it was! Loved the emphasis on the teaching of the church."

"I'm happy it didn't have all the throw-away junk that other VBSs have."

"The topic and its relevance to children was appreciated."

Learn more at [GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com](http://GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com)

**Or contact us at:**

844-727-8672 or [resources@pastoralcenter.com](mailto:resources@pastoralcenter.com)