

REVITALIZING VBS
FROM A GLORIFIED DAYCARE TO A GLORIOUS OPPORTUNITY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MEQUON, WISCONSIN
FEBRUARY 2015

Abstract

Vacation Bible School has been a valuable tool for Sunday School teachers and congregations for many years. However, in recent years it seems as if attending a Bible School during the summer is losing its appeal. This doesn't necessarily mean fewer numbers though. Parents still find these types of programs invaluable as they look for something to keep their children busy during the long summer months. Some even use these programs as a free daycare service. But does this mean that kids are in VBS for the wrong reasons and won't get anything out of it? Some pastors whom I have interviewed expressed the need to rethink the way they do VBS. The need for revitalization is evident. But are there variations of the traditional VBS that retain the true essence behind a Bible school program while still attracting families? In this paper, I will explain how the purpose of Vacation Bible School has changed during its lifetime. I will also take a look at what is needed for a congregation to design a program that fits their needs and works well in their setting. Finally, I will explore variations on the traditional VBS program and evaluate how they meet the needs of the congregations that use them.

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Introduction

Andy and Rachel are typical children who attend your Vacation Bible School program. They are not members of your congregation but have attended Christmas for Kids in the past. Rachel is six years old, and this is her second year attending VBS at your church. She is still a little hesitant walking into the building since she is still getting used to the new surroundings, but she shared with you that she is very excited to act out the lessons in class. Andy is ten and has attended VBS at your church for three years already. Although he still participates well during the lessons and craft time, you are sensing that he's starting to feel "too old for VBS" and may not come next year.

Andy and Rachel's parents both work and find it convenient to have their children in VBS. This gives the children a break from the summer program that they attend at the YMCA, and it's free! You have talked to Andy and Rachel's parents a few times to get to know them and see if they would like to learn more about what their children are being taught. They respond politely, "Yeah, maybe we will look into that. But at the moment things are pretty busy with the summer sports schedule." You realize they are not very interested and will try again at future events.

I'm sure you've run into the same situation, or one very similar, many times. So often, no matter the back story, unchurched parents who send their children to VBS programs are really only interested in having an activity for their children during those long summer months. Some parents even enroll their children in several VBS programs. When invited to future ministry events, they will respond politely but usually never end up coming. More and more this seems to be the trend – parents enroll their children in a program not because they really care that much about what the program has to offer, but simply because it is something inexpensive to keep their children busy while they pursue careers.

So what's the point in even having a VBS program? Many congregations spend weeks, even months preparing for VBS. First, the curriculum needs to be chosen. Then, teachers need to be found and briefed. Crafts need to be prepared, classrooms set up, snacks designated for each day. The list of preparations goes on and on. Some VBS programs even come with extensive checklists going out 4 and 5 months. What's the point of spending all this time and effort on something that many parents will use simply as a babysitting service? Why go through all the

trouble when many of these children you won't see until next year? It often seems like a whole lot of effort for very little return.

The problem as I see it is this: many VBS programs today, even ones that could be considered very successful in terms of numbers, are no longer a truly effective outreach tool. I don't mean to detract from the Gospel which the children hear when they attend VBS. I thank God for the numbers of any VBS program even if the children "merely" hear God's Word for a week. However, VBS just doesn't seem to be bringing whole families into the church for continuous exposure to the means of grace – a relationship which allows not only for the creation of faith, but also the continuous nurturing of that faith.

Therefore, I propose a reevaluation of the way most churches are going about VBS. Should it still be considered an evangelism tool which is able to bring whole families to faith? Or should it be thought of more along the lines of pre-evangelism – something used to hook families so that they stick around and are more likely to participate in other areas of ministry? In this paper, I intend to take a look at the way VBS has been done in the past, how it is typically done today, and how we can improve upon it in the future. I want pastors and lay members to reevaluate their current VBS program. I want them to identify their purpose for VBS and evaluate whether or not the methodologies they are using achieve this purpose. This takes into account their own congregation and the setting in which they are doing ministry. Finally, I will identify a few variations of the traditional VBS program and weigh the strengths and weaknesses of each one. Congregations can use this evaluation to design a program that is best for them. This is an important topic to research because a revitalized VBS program can be a valuable tool for initiating long term relationships with unchurched families in which they can be connected to the Means of Grace.

Literature review

There are not many sources which evaluate the current state of Vacation Bible School programs and how they fare in society today. Yes, there are new VBS programs coming out which claim to be a refreshing and much needed change from the way things were done in the past, but in general, the changes that are made are quite marginal. For example, in the VBS program entitled "God's Got a Plan", Tim and Liz Kujath state that because of the changing

society, “we felt a compelling need to write this course.”¹ However, it seems like the biggest change that was made in this program was shortening the length of the program from two weeks to five days. This may have been a big change at the time, especially since VBS was originally created to allow Sunday School teachers more time to teach lessons that they weren’t able to cover during the regular Sunday School curriculum.² Nevertheless, despite some minor changes, VBS has really remained much the same since it first began.

Besides modifications to the program itself, there are also VBS handbooks which carefully explain the different roles, jobs and expectations of all those involved with the program. Such handbooks include guidelines for not only VBS staff but also congregation members who send their children to VBS but are not considered VBS staff. Although these changes and careful descriptions try to address the problem of dwindling VBS programs, they often seem to fall short in terms of any significant revitalization.

There are, however, many sources which talk about the need for church ministry in general to be revamped in order to keep with the times. In his book, *Why Can't We Grow? We Can!*, Neal Boese brings the problem to the forefront asking questions like, “Is this hemorrhage inevitable? Is there no good remedy? Are mainline Christian congregations doomed to fade away into obscurity?”³ Lewis Drummond seeks to address this problem in his book, “Reaching Generation Next: Effective Evangelism in Today’s Culture”. Drummond talks at length about how the mindset of society has changed and addresses the problem of “taking the gospel to a world whose citizens see themselves as ‘special cases’ of individuality where no universal codes apply.”⁴ And although he focuses more on the small church, Dr. Terry Dorsett notes the difficulty of bringing God’s Word to today’s generation in his book, “Mission Possible: Reaching the Next Generation through the Small Church”. These sources are all very valuable in my research but still fail to hit the nail on the head with VBS.

In an attempt to remedy the situation and get the family back into church, there are also many other books which have been written. One book, entitled “The Family Friendly Church”, by Freudenburg and Lawrence, had several sections that were useful. One such section included

¹ Tim and Liz Kujath, *God's Got a Plan*. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1978), 3.

² Wikipedia. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vacation_Bible_School>

³ Neal R. Boese, *Why Can't We Grow? We Can!* (Lima, OH: Fairway Press, 1988), back cover.

⁴ Lewis A. Drummond, *Reaching Generation Next: Effective Evangelism in Today's Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 9.

a “look at a paradigm shift that is impacting Christian education in the church.”⁵ Another book entitled “Making Your Children’s Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid’s Week” offers many suggestions on how a congregation can structure their children’s programs to be more “kid friendly.” Although this book is mainly talking about a type of Sunday School which runs during worship, it does offer some suggestions which could be easily carried over into a Vacation Bible School setting.

Despite the literature surrounding the topic of VBS and its place in our current society, there is a serious lack of anything that hits the target dead on. Taking this into consideration, and also the countless survey responses I received back indicating the reality of dwindling VBS programs and a definite need to revitalized, I have concluded that a paper focused on revitalizing VBS for today’s society is a definite need.

VBS in the Past

As I began my research on this topic, I found that informational sources on Vacation Bible School are quite lacking. A simple search for VBS, either online or in a library catalogue, will reveal countless sources on VBS programs and curriculums but very few sources on how to actually run a Vacation Bible School program, what the purpose of VBS should be, or the history of VBS. After much digging for the history behind VBS, I found that many websites, which I would regard as weak sources, were all saying pretty much the same thing. These “weak sources” would often cite several stronger sources, like online articles or publishing companies; however, when I tried to access those sources the host website usually indicated that the article was no longer available. I believe the articles were no longer archived on their respective host websites because most of them were older than ten years. Therefore, what follows is a history of Vacation Bible School in the United States based on a compilation of information from the websites I could access.⁶

⁵ Ben Freudenburg and Rick Lawrence, *The Family Friendly Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc., 1998), 97.

⁶ These sources include: Wikipedia.com < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vacation_Bible_School>; everything2.com < <http://everything2.com/title/Vacation+Bible+School>>; christianitytoday.com < <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/juneweb-only/6-30-43.0.html>>; growingkidsministry.com < <http://www.growingkidsministry.com/events/vacation-bible-school/the-history-of-vacation-bible-school/>>; and aboutthechildrensdepartment.com < <http://www.aboutthechildrensdepartment.com/2010/12/when-and-where-did-vbs-first-begin.html>>.

Vacation Bible School began as an extension of Sunday School which ran for a few weeks during the summer. An article by Steven Gertz on christianitytoday.com states, “Unofficially, it is possible to trace the roots of VBS as far back as the 1870s, when the Methodist Episcopal Church offered summer Sunday School institutes to the general public near Lake Chautauqua, New York.”⁷ Gertz goes on to explain that in 1873, Bishop John H. Vincent proposed that this program should include other educational and cultural elements. This movement was quickly borrowed and adapted by Christian groups across the country. Gertz then goes on to talk about how VBS got its “official” start. It seems the distinction between the unofficial beginning and the official beginning is in the structure of the program. This structure will be explained in further detail in the paragraphs following. This is where most other sources pick up the story.

In 1894 in Hopedale, Illinois, the first Vacation Bible School, resembling the form we know today, was instituted by Mrs. D. T. Miles, a pastor’s wife and resident of Hopedale. Mrs. Miles was a public school teacher who, after marrying, also began teaching Sunday School. However, Mrs. Miles felt limited by the time constraint of having only one hour per week for Sunday School. So she started a daily Bible school during the summer months to teach children. Her first Bible school enrolled 40 students and lasted four weeks. She used a local school for classes and had outdoor activities at a nearby park.

A few years later, in 1898, Eliza Hawes, director of the children’s department at Epiphany Baptist Church in New York City, started an “Everyday Bible School” for underprivileged children. Classes for this “Everyday Bible School” were held in a rented beer hall on New York’s East Side – it was the only place available at the time. This is where Gertz’s article on the history of VBS gets its title, “From Beer to Bibles to VBS”. This Bible School program ran for six weeks during the summer. Included in the program were music, Bible Stories, Memory verses, games, crafts, drawing, cooking, and more. When the program was three-years old, she already was supervising seven separate schools. Hawes continued her Bible School program for seven years before retiring.

Soon, Dr. Robert Boville of the Baptist Mission Society became aware of Hawes’ summer program and recommended it to other Baptist churches. Boville then personally helped

⁷ Steven Gertz, “From Beer to Bibles to VBS: How America got its favorite summer tradition,” *Christianity Today* (1 June 2003): <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/juneweb-only/6-30-43.0.html>>.

established several summer school programs like the ones run by Hawes for his own denomination. By 1901, these programs were taught by students the Union Theological Seminary and other college students as well. During one summer, over a thousand students were enrolled in the five different Summer Schools which the Baptists had running at that time. The program was extended to ten schools in the next year and by 1903 Boville expanded his program to 17 schools. In 1923, he began to promote VBS internationally and founded the World Association of Vacation Bible Schools.

A quick overview of the history VBS shows that Miles and Hawes are primarily responsible for establishing the concept of Vacation Bible School. Perhaps, Hawes heard about Miles' program and implemented it in a way that more closely resembles the programs we have today. Another possibility is that Miles and Hawes developed similar programs simultaneously. After its development, Dr. Boville made the Summer Bible School movement popular. Finally, Standard Publishing gets credit for standardizing and publishing Vacation Bible School programs nationwide. The publisher created a full scale VBS program that ran for five weeks in 1923. By 1948, they divided it into three grade levels including kindergarten, primary, and junior. In 1952 Standard Publishing introduced a single-theme concept, much like we have today, and by 1987 they offered more than 120 different teaching tools for churches to use to run a VBS program. In 1998, the publisher reported that more than 5 million children attended VBS programs every year. What started as a means to get in a little more teaching time with member children quickly grew to be a an international outreach sensation.

By the 1930s, VBS had already begun spreading to the WELS, although there were very few congregations that had a program this early. At this time, the WELS used a curriculum that was based on the catechism. The purpose was to introduce the catechism to children in a more concrete way. Children were already learning catechism memory work every Sunday in Sunday School, so VBS was used to hopefully make these truths more vivid and meaningful to them. Like the Baptist churches that began Vacation Bible School, the WELS VBS programs also ran for several weeks. Within a couple decades, VBS was a growing trend in the WELS.

In the 1960s, the WELS began to expand more rapidly as a result of the break with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS). It was at this time that a major shift began to happen. At these new WELS mission congregations VBS shifted from an inreach program to an outreach program. At the same time the catechism VBS curriculum was gradually replaced with

a one or two week course that focused on basic law and gospel truths. Today in the WELS, VBS is typically a one week program with a curriculum consisting of 5 simple Bible stories. These lessons have a content level which leans more toward outreach rather than inreach.

As we take a look at the past, we can see that Vacation Bible School had a specific goal, and a specific method of attaining that goal. At its origins, summer Bible programs, which eventually became Vacation Bible School, were targeted at nurturing children of the congregation. Mrs. D. T. Miles wanted more time for teaching Sunday School, but was only allotted one hour per week. So Mrs. Miles started a summer Bible program in which she could finish up the lessons that she wasn't able to get to during the school year. This program was always open to the public but primarily targeted at children of her own congregation. It was Mrs. Hawes who began to change the purpose of the program. She used it as an outreach tool – bringing God's Word to underprivileged children in New York City. As the Vacation Bible School movement spread across the United States, it seems as though these programs followed a similar pattern, especially in the WELS. The programs were targeted primarily at children of the congregation and secondarily at those who are unchurched. For the WELS, it wasn't until the 50s that Vacation Bible School became a tool for outreach. In those days, the average VBS program was around 3 weeks. This is fine for nurturing members but perhaps a bit lengthy for outreach purposes. This was shortened to an average of 2 weeks by the 70s.⁸ As time progressed, you can see a clear shift in the purpose of VBS; namely, moving from inreach to outreach. But this clear shift in purpose fails to be seen in the implementation of the program.

VBS in the Present

For many years, Vacation Bible School programs remained much the same. Yes, they went from around three weeks down to one week. Curriculum materials have also been streamlined, and it seems like every religious publisher has its own program that comes out new every year. But the fundamental way in which Vacation Bible School is run has remained much the same for over a century. The same basic structure of the program set up in 1894 by Mrs. D. T. Miles, with scheduled time for Bible stories, crafts, music, etc., is still used today. Vacation Bible School is still very schedule oriented; it is still run much like a school. But is this classroom routine still the most effective method of going about VBS? In the past, children

⁸ Kujath, 3.

learned primarily through lecture, and question and answer. Today, children often learn through experience, group work, and visuals. A look at VBS today reveals that VBS programs may need some revision both in the purpose of having a VBS program, and in the way in which VBS is conducted.

Today, most Vacation Bible School programs are conducted in much the same way they were years ago. The child who comes to VBS can expect that when he arrives, he will first go to the registration desk where he will check in and grab a nametag. Then he will go to his assigned classroom where there will be coloring pages to work on, or his craft from the previous day that he didn't quite finish. Once it's officially time for the day to begin, the class will proceed to the sanctuary with all the other classes for an opening skit, followed by a prayer and perhaps some singing. After that, each class will go back to its own classroom for the Bible lesson of the day. Following the Bible lesson is recess where the child will play some organized game – sometimes pertaining to the theme of the day or week. After recess, he can expect to receive a snack, and then go back to his classroom for craft time where he will work on a craft that reinforces the lesson. Finally, he will go back to the sanctuary for music time and then be picked up by his parents. The same schedule is followed every day with perhaps a slight variation on the last day to accommodate a picnic or closing activity.

Does this sound like the VBS program at your church? There might be some slight variations as to the order of the schedule but I'm sure this describes the majority of VBS programs in the WELS. This is how VBS was done last year at the congregation where I vicared. This is how VBS was done at the churches I attended when I was a child. This probably even the way VBS was done when you were a child. The program itself has remained much the same, but the setting in which it is used and the target audience has changed over the years.

Advertisement for VBS has changed slightly over the year, especially as technology has changed. Now most congregations have a website where they advertise events going on at their church. A church will also have, most likely, a list of prospects from previous years to whom they can simply send out invitations to by email. Some congregations might even have online registration. The old ways of advertising are also still being used and, according to my survey, it seems these methods are still the most popular. Word of mouth is high in the rankings, in terms of how many congregations push for this type of advertising. One congregation with a well known VBS program has even gone so far as to say, "It has a great reputation in our

community.... Word of mouth has definitely been [our] best advertisement.” Many congregations also advertise their program on their church signs, or even put up a separate banner to attract more attention. Going door to door with flyers or door hangers is, according to my survey, the most popular way of advertising for a VBS program. To round out the list, several other forms of advertisement which congregations use today are newspaper and radio ads, mailings, and advertising in the community parade.

Follow-up is another important aspect of a VBS program. Everyone knows that sharing God’s Word with a friend or acquaintance just one time often does not make them lifetime members. Therefore, it is important to keep ongoing contact with children who attend VBS and their families. One respondent to the congregational survey said, “Unfortunately, we haven’t seen many of our first time VBS families come to worship right away, and so we try to connect them to the next event. We’ve found that generally it takes a couple of years and attending a few family type of events before those prospects decide to come to worship.” I have seen many similar responses in my survey and heard the same type of comment related to other church events as well. It seems that the way most congregations attempt to keep this continued contact is through personal visits and phone calls. Other valuable follow up methods include sending home a letter with the children after VBS and adding the unchurched families to the prospect list for future invitations. Some congregations also give out a video or CD of pictures from the week. All these are important in keeping families connected to a congregation. A congregation that cares and a program that stands out will be remembered by parents in future years. Some parents will enroll their children in future events; others will simply be more familiar with that congregation. In either case this allows the congregation to have that continued contact which could lead to connections in other areas of ministry.

That being said, many congregations are frustrated because their efforts do not seem to be connecting families to other areas of ministry. One survey respondent said, “We have not had our VBS generate interest in our worship services. VBS families often asked about our preschool and Lutheran grade school, but none to my knowledge have enrolled.” Another respondent shows the lack of interest from the families that enroll their children in VBS. He said, “For registration purposes we ask the parents to fill out a form. One of [the] questions we ask is for them to indicate other areas of need or interest. Rarely are any of those boxes check[ed].” This, I conclude, is the reason why many congregations echo the response that VBS is “not the most

effective outreach tool” and why some congregations have even gone so far as to drop the program completely.

I did not receive many responses back from the survey I sent to VBS prospects⁹, but what I did receive back gives a glimpse into why further interest seems to be lacking. Although most of the families attended the same VBS for two or three consecutive years, half of the respondents also attended the VBS program of another church – one respondent even indicated that they attended three other VBS programs in the summer of 2014. When asked, “Why do you enroll your children in Vacation Bible School at this church?” only a couple respondents said anything about the program itself or the Bible being taught. Most enrolled because they went to the preschool, or wanted to get to know the school. One respondent even said, “They don’t see a need for more than a kid’s program.” The attitude of the unchurched toward VBS was emphasized even more, when VBS prospects were asked, “What are 5 things you appreciate about Vacation Bible School at this church?” only two respondents mentioned God’s Word or the lessons. In responses to other questions of the prospect survey, half of the respondents indicated that they actually attend another church in the area. It seems that many unchurched people value VBS as a daycare program of introduction to the school more than a Bible-based program for their children. I will add the disclaimer that these responses have come from only two congregations, and with only a few responses from each, the results may be skewed. However, in speaking with many more people who attended VBS at a couple other churches, I have received responses along the same lines.

Pastors who have responded to the congregational survey gave similar feedback. One responded, “Most don’t get involved more because they basically have a church home and make the rounds to all the VBSs being offered in the summer to keep their kids busy.” Another said, “We are in a very heavily churching area. Almost all have said that they appreciate the VBS, but attend other churches.”

So why is it that such a large program – one that typically lasts for a week, but takes months of preparation – results in such lack of interest from families? Is Vacation Bible School still an effective tool for outreach as it was in the past, or has it simply become, as I am sure many now view it, Vacation Baby Sitting? As I paged through the many surveys I received back from pastors and congregations regarding their VBS programs, one trend became very apparent.

⁹ Only six people responded

When asked, “What is the main goal/purpose of your Vacation Bible School program?” two answers kept coming up. While some answered that their goal was to “get their name out” and others said they wanted to “grow their school”, far outweighing these and other responses were “share the gospel with children” and “reach out to the unchurched”. These are fine goals for a VBS program – goals that, according to my research, are present for most, if not all, VBS programs in WELS churches. But does the structure of our VBS programs reflecting these goals or is it simply what has been handed down to us from years past?

In the book, “Why Can’t We Grow? We Can!”, the author starts out by reflecting on the way things were done in the past. He looks back to the time when his father immigrated to the United States from Germany. For his father, finding a church was easy. But he wasn’t just looking for any church; he was looking for a church with a few qualifications. The church needed to be Lutheran. He would prefer it if they spoke German and used the German liturgy. And, having festivals which were rooted in German culture was also a plus. The author’s father found exactly the church he was looking for. In fact, the author says,

What was true for my Dad and his family was true for many other families throughout the United States. Whether it was German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian or Finnish, the church played a major role in helping immigrant Lutherans adapt to this new world. The purpose of the church was clear: to reach out and care for people who appreciated and valued the traditions of another world. German Lutherans opened their doors and hearts to German Lutherans. Swedish Lutherans opened their doors and hearts to Swedish Lutherans. The same was true for the Norwegians, Danes and Finns. This purpose was clearly seen in congregational life.¹⁰

This was a very fitting way to do ministry at a time when many were immigrating to the United States – some seeking a restart on life, many seeking religious freedom. Congregations noticed that these people were looking for churches in which they would feel comfortable, and these congregations provided what people were looking for. Their outreach methods matched their purpose of ministering to European immigrants. However, a look at history shows us that as the times change, the church hasn’t always adapted to remain in step. This does not mean doctrinal changes; the doctrines of scripture remain the same and are always applicable. Rather, the church can adapt externally, adjusting the way it goes about sharing the gospel with others. Yes, some changes have been made. Very few churches still have their services in German or any other European language. In fact, some churches have even progressed so far as to make a

¹⁰ Boese, 7.

second language change, offering services in Spanish or Chinese. And yes, we now have our own hymnal and our own orders of service in these hymnals, rather than using German hymn books and the *Deutsche Messe*. But the way we do ministry today, specifically in the area of VBS, seems to be stuck in the past. Although the purpose of VBS has changed for many congregations – that is outreach instead of inreach – the methods of achieving this purpose have remained much the same. Boese sees the same lack of adaptation for ministry in general,

Even though decades have passed, the purpose of the Lutheran Church 100 years ago, 50 years ago, and even 30 years ago is still the purpose today. Church life focuses on worship, education for children and fellowship. And those to whom the Lutheran Church reaches are those who appreciate the tradition and ethnic heritage. But this approach, this focus that once was the strength of the Lutheran church no longer bears the same fruit, nor creates the same sense of excitement, nor does it draw others into its fold. Therefore, the church is struggling and this struggle is most dramatically seen in congregational life.¹¹

Granted, Boese wrote his book in 1988 and many things have changed since then but he brings up an interesting point regarding ministry. Times have changed. Congregations need to carefully consider purpose and method as they do ministry in a changing society.

We are currently living in the era of postmodernism. This era is categorized by general skepticism and anti-establishment notions. “Sociologists and others tell us that this new spirit has come about as a reaction to the sterility of modernism, or so-called modernity, the socialized, philosophical, rational mind-set that grew out of the Enlightenment movement.”¹² The people of this era are willing to listen to different ideas and opinions, but they synthesize this information to form their own truth. Their truth, although it differs from the truth of others, is at the same time compatible with the truth of others. Therefore, it is difficult for a church to proclaim an absolute truth to a society that will either reject it as its own or synthesize the message, taking only bits and pieces that are compatible with what they already believe. Drummond says,

The upheaval of society caused by the postmodern era has been met with widely divergent reactions within the thinking Christian community. There are those who consider any sort of reaction to traditional views a threat. Others want to do something to reach postmoderns but seem at a loss as to what to do. Then there are those who just shut their eyes and ears and plod along as usual.¹³

The question of how to minister to postmoderns is important to every area of ministry, but it is especially important to consider when ministering to second and third generation postmoderns –

¹¹ Boese, 8.

¹² Drummond, 15.

¹³ Drummond, 28.

ones who have been so thoroughly ingrained with their own way of thinking that they cannot comprehend any other worldview. It is critical for the church to stay with the times so that it is able to communicate the gospel effectively to each new generation. Drummond summarizes the importance in this way:

In summary, the breakdown in community and the loss of older community values has precipitated a new worldview and resulting communication problems that hopefully can begin to be met by a new community through which Christ can be proclaimed. May the church be prophetic and prepare for what lies ahead and not get entangled with old, irrelevant methodologies, lest we lose the ear of the postmoderns all together. We must not let that happen.¹⁴

Another aspect of this worldview is the focus on self. Since everyone is entitled to have their own version of truth, then each person will consider for themselves what truth suits them. It's the "me" generation. Everything is done for the benefit of self. People work hard so that they can further their career. They strive to earn a larger salary so that they can enjoy the fruits of their labor. And although they work for more money, it is not the money itself that they desire. Rather, it is the desire for time. They desire time for themselves, doing the things they like, and time for family, doing the things that the family likes. Therefore, many individuals work hard during the week so that they can play hard on the weekends, leaving little time for worship, Sunday School, or family involvement in programs like VBS. People are no longer interested in experiencing Christianity through VBS or any other area of ministry. Instead, they are using it as a babysitting program during the week so that the parents can work and have a little extra money for what is truly important – time for themselves and time for family.

In the past, reaching out to European immigrants was simple: a congregation would merely have to remember its heritage – German Lutheran, Swedish Lutheran, Norwegian Lutheran, etc. Today, people aren't necessarily looking for the same old church they are used to. Nor are they typically looking for the kind of church their parents attended. Today people are in search of what's new and popular. They want experience many different things so that they can decide for themselves what they like best. To remain viable in such a society, congregations have to present the gospel in a way that speaks to a postmodern culture. Congregations need to have direction, a purpose which drives their ministry and directs the methods in which ministry is

¹⁴ Drummond, 123.

done. This purpose will allow a congregation to focus its ministry and make important decisions on the way ministry is done.

Therefore, what purpose should a congregation have as their focus for Vacation Bible School? According to the WELS Parish Services “Vacation Bible School Manual” of 1987,¹⁵ “The Vacation Bible School functions for two primary purposes: NURTURE and OUTREACH.”¹⁶ It goes on to define each of these purposes a little further.

As the children and staff are NURTURED by means of God’s Word through the power of the Holy Spirit, they are enabled to grow in their faith. We help them learn more about God and what he has done for the salvation of all sinners and continues to do out of His great love and mercy. We apply God’s revealed truths to the present life of the children.

As we REACH OUT, we bring the Good News of God’s love in Jesus Christ to those who do not yet know it. Matthew 28 becomes the second primary purpose as Jesus Christ charges us to “make disciples of all nations.” Jesus invites us to be partners with Him in this great work. The Holy Spirit works through the Word of God we correctly teach, and He creates faith in the Gospel truth that through Christ God has reconciled sinners to Himself.

NURTURE and OUTREACH, these are the two purposes which determine everything we do as part of Vacation Bible School.¹⁷

The survey responses I received were along the same lines. They indicate that congregations want to share the gospel with children – a purpose which matches the “nurture” section in the handbook. The surveys also indicate that congregations are focusing their VBS programs primarily those outside the congregation rather than primarily on their own members as was the case in the past. This purpose matches the “reach out” section in the handbook. As I mentioned earlier, Vacation Bible School used to be simply an extension of Sunday School which ran in the summer for children of the congregation. Therefore the structure of VBS was much the same structure as Sunday School – lessons on Bible stories surrounded by activities like crafts and music. Since VBS affords a teacher more time, the music and craft time can obviously be extended and scripture can be more thoroughly covered. Today, the structure of VBS remains much the same while congregations are attempting to use it in a very different way. In the same way, they are also trying to take old methods to an audience that is very different from the one of the past.

¹⁵ This is the only manual of its kind that could be found in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library

¹⁶ WELS Parish Services, *Vacation Bible School Manual* (River Forest, IL: LEA-TEAM, Parish Ministry Resources, 1987), 11. (emphasis theirs)

¹⁷ WELS Parish Services, 11. (emphasis theirs)

Many congregations are looking for ways to breathe new life into their VBS programs. Many congregations have seen a lack of new families attending VBS. Some congregations are only serving member families, and others have discontinued their VBS programs due to lack of interest. One respondent to the congregational survey remarked, “As I answer the questions of your survey I see clearly how woefully inept our VBS program has been (or perhaps more accurately: how woefully inept I have been) in doing the very thing your research project is seeking to remedy.” This respondent also indicated a need to address this issue in his congregation. He said, “I would be keenly interested in implementing recommended changes to correct that problem, making our VBS program more productive and our outreach efforts effective.” Another respondent reflected the idea that Boese was getting at in his book, that sometimes a church just keeps the program alive because that’s the way things have always been done. This respondent said, “Is VBS an effective outreach tool for a congregation or is it doing the program because it always has?” These are just a couple of such respondents looking for a rethink on the way we do VBS.

Some congregations have tried to address this issue by converting their “traditional VBS” program into a program that is more attractive to children and their parents. Some have converted their VBS program into a sports camp. One respondent even said the congregation received double, possibly even triple, the amount of children for their soccer camp than they had received in the past with their “traditional VBS” program. A variation on the sports camp which some congregations have tried is science camp or fine arts camp. Some congregations have switched to an all day VBS which allows working families to take their kids out of daycare for a week and place them into “Vacation Day Camp”. Still other congregations have moved the time of their VBS from morning/afternoon to evenings so that parents can participate with their children in VBS. There are all kinds of different VBS programs a congregation could try in order to do ministry, but with so many choices which one is best? One respondent, reflecting the times we live in, stated, “We live in a visual, electronic, quick world. We lag behind in delivering the Word in a more efficient, exciting, and faithful way. We need cutting edge, digital, visual material that can be used in multiple ways to reach the most. I believe the golden age of traditional VBS has passed its prime.”

This raises an interesting question. Has the time for “traditional VBS” gone the way of the dinosaurs? Are congregations struggling because they are trying to animate the lifeless

skeleton from an age that is passed and gone? Or is the rethink that is needed something that goes far beyond the outward structure of a VBS program? Already in the late 70s, people in the WELS saw the need for change. In a VBS program by Tim and Liz Kujath entitled, “God’s Got a Plan”, the problem is stated,

Because the world seems to be offering more and more alternatives to Vacation Bible School (baseball, swimming lessons, summer school, etc.), because it is becoming increasingly difficult to find teachers who are able to make a commitment for two weeks and because five day VBS courses have been requested more and more, we felt a compelling need to write this course.¹⁸

I think what is really needed is not necessarily a new VBS program altogether. What is needed is a look at the purpose behind a congregation’s individual VBS program. This purpose is going to be different for each congregation. One respondent said, “I don’t believe all WELS churches have the same idea for the goal of VBS. Not all VBS programs are intended for outreach.” That is exactly right. Each congregation is unique in itself, and each congregation is ministering in a unique societal environment. Each congregation, therefore, needs to identify its purpose for VBS and then choose a program for VBS which will achieve that purpose.

How Will VBS Look in the Future?

In a postmodern society in which both parents are working, a society which doesn’t really care about seeking an absolute truth, it is difficult to see how Vacation Bible School could ever really become anything other than Vacation Baby Sitting. Is VBS becoming more of a pre evangelism tool, a way of making connections, rather than a tool for evangelism, a means of sharing the gospel? It is obviously a very good thing that children, regardless of their parents’ motives for sending them, hear the Word of God which is alive and actively working in their hearts for the salvation of those who believe. I have heard stories of people who have returned to a church years later simply because they attended preschool there or remember always going to the children’s programs at that church. But what about the rest of this child’s family? Should VBS somehow include the parents and possibly even the older siblings of these VBS children? Is it possible to build a relationship with the entire family through a VBS program, or should we be content with and focus on the blessing of this child who hears the good news of the Savior? What is an effective and fitting purpose for VBS these days?

¹⁸ Kujath, 3.

The primary purpose of any type of ministry is found in the great commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). Jesus has commissioned believers to share the gospel with all people. Jesus has also emphasized that little children are included in “all nations”. He said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Mt 19:14). Therefore, sharing God’s Word with children should be the primary and underlying purpose of every VBS program.

However, this primary purpose can be supported by several secondary purposes. One of these can even be seen within the great commission itself. We are to “go and make disciples of all nations” – a command which calls us to reach out to those in our community – and we are also to “teach them to obey everything I have commanded you” – a command which calls us to nurture those within the congregation. So, one secondary purpose is a focus on either inreach or outreach. VBS can also be targeted either at children, as is the case with most VBS programs, or at the whole family, as is the case with evening VBS programs and other variations. So, another secondary purpose is a focus either on children or whole families. Both of these build on the primary purpose of sharing God’s Word and help a congregation more specifically identify its target audience.

There are other purposes for a VBS program as well. A VBS could be used to introduce prospective students and their families to the preschool or elementary school. A VBS could also be used to gain a presence in the community. In fact, the purpose of a VBS program is really only limited by the congregation’s creativity in ministry. However, if a congregation attempts to accomplish too many purposes with one program, they will end up stretching the program so thin that it doesn’t effectively accomplish any of its purposes. Therefore, as I researched VBS programs, identifying the purposes that seemed most fundamental for shaping the program itself came down to two questions. Is the focus of VBS going to be outreach or inreach? Is this VBS going to target whole families or children? A congregation needs to answer these questions before it can go about planning the structure of its VBS program. When a congregation answers these questions, it can focus on its target audience and make the appropriate changes to its program.

Identifying the purpose of a VBS program is of the utmost importance. It sets the tone for your program and keeps a congregation focused when making decisions regarding their program. In his book, Boese recalls a time when he was researching congregations that were growing and why they were growing. He remembers expecting to find “an aggressive pastor, good facilities, a good music program, excellent youth programs, active programming with many opportunities available. [He] expected the worship to be meaningful with good preaching and a crisp, moving format.”¹⁹ He does remark that many of these qualities were present in the churches he studied, but the overall results revealed something that shocked him. “In all of these steadily growing parishes, the purpose of the congregation was clearly defined.”²⁰ Boese was researching the church in general, not just a children’s program, but I think his findings are applicable to Vacation Bible School as well. Boese even makes the remark, “The reason some churches grow and some do not grow is not attributable to location nor geography, but it has to do with the way congregations understand their purpose and target the nonchurched for outreach efforts.... Churches which reach out and grow are clearly focused on purpose.”²¹ Boese is saying that a church first needs to identify its purpose.

The point Boese is making can also be narrowed to one area of ministry, like VBS. Once the purpose is identified, it then needs to be shared with the members of the congregation so that, with this driving force, the congregation can have a focused and effective strategy for ministry rather than an all-encompassing yet flimsy strategy. Some may say, “But we did identify our purpose for VBS, and we still failed.” Identifying the purpose is only half the battle. After identifying the purpose, the congregation then needs to make decisions about its program with their purpose(s) clearly in mind.

Perhaps a couple examples will help flesh out the importance of having a specific purpose and the implementation of it. Suppose a congregation does not specifically answer the question, “Is the focus of VBS going to be outreach or inreach?” As this congregation begins the process of choosing material, it will have to wrestle with the wide range of curriculums available. There is simpler material with well known Bible stories, or there is more complex material which, for example, covers the Apostles’ Creed. If this congregation continually offers simpler, well known Bible stories to a group that is primarily member children, they may easily get bored and

¹⁹ Boese, 15.

²⁰ Boese, 15.

²¹ Boese, 10.

disinterested. Conversely, if this congregation delves into the Apostles' Creed and the many challenging details of it, an audience that is primarily visitors may get confused, frustrated, and not return.

On the other hand, if a congregation does not specify their target audience, families or children, they will find it difficult to decide upon what type of VBS program to run. An evening VBS targeted specifically at children will most likely flop. Evenings are when busy, working parents get to spend time with their children. If the parents come with the child to the evening VBS hoping to spend time with their child, but find out that the program was really only meant for children, they may not come back. Likewise, a morning or afternoon VBS program meant for families may see certain disappointments. Since parents often have to work during the day, they will not be able to attend the VBS program. Moreover, any classrooms or teachers dedicated to ministering to parents will most likely be wasted space and wasted time. A congregation first needs to identify its purpose, then use this purpose to design a program and guide decisions.

It is also important to note that, although identifying a purpose is important, it does not have to be rigid, and set in stone. What I mean is that a congregation's purpose may shift its emphasis depending on the needs of the program. Allow me to give a few examples of how a congregation could emphasize different purposes according to its needs. If a congregation is struggling to keep a Vacation Bible School running, it would be beneficial for that congregation to have their purpose lean toward children and the retention of those children. To do this, the program needs to be appealing to children so that they are drawn in. Perhaps this comes in the form of converting a longstanding "traditional VBS" program into a sports camp, or other variation of that sort. Perhaps this means simply giving a "traditional VBS" program a refresher. Stunning visuals and hands on activities could be utilized to attract children who are used to fast paced activities and games which are constantly flashing something new on the screen.

Perhaps after a few years, this church is bursting at the seams with children at its VBS, but the children are mostly just being shipped in for a free babysitting without any further contact from the family. This congregation may now want to consider a shift in purpose to try to get the whole family involved. This shift in purpose could result in a shift to an evening program so that working parents can attend. Or, it may result in several one day programs on weekends so that parents can spend their much desired family time doing something wholesome, perhaps something resembling an Easter or Christmas for Kids program. This is just one example to

illustrate the point of how a congregation may need to adjust its purpose as it sees a change in the ministry or those it seeks to minister to.

Just as the purpose of a VBS program could vary greatly depending upon the congregation and its ministry, so also the type of VBS program can vary greatly depending upon the purpose that drives it. Every program will have its own strengths and weaknesses, so it is important to evaluate the different types of programs available and the facilities and volunteers available to run the chosen program. It is also important to note that whatever program a congregation finally chooses, the congregation also needs to frequently evaluate whether or not the program is fulfilling its intended purpose.

What follows are a few different types of VBS programs that are being used today. Each program is briefly described and evaluated according to its strengths and weaknesses. This is not an extensive list of everything available, but it touches upon the most common types of programs. If none of these programs seems to be a viable match, a congregation could come up with its own program or mix and match certain elements of the programs below.

Traditional VBS

First is the Traditional VBS program. This has already been described in the “past” and “present” sections of this paper and I’m sure the vast majority of readers know how this type of program works, so I will not explain it in detail again here. However, I will point out a few additional details concerning this type of VBS program. First, this type of program lends itself very well to the primary purpose of any type of ministry – sharing God’s Word with people. Each day of the program is focused on the Bible lesson for that day. The songs, crafts, and devotions all emphasize the lesson. Second, this type of program is run in a structured and orderly way, much like the classes that students would attend during elementary school. This allows for time spent on God’s Word to be maximized and focused. This type of program would lean more toward ministering to children, rather than families, since it is typically run from late morning to early afternoon – the perfect time for parents to drop their children off before heading to work. Depending on the curriculum, this program could be used either for outreach or inreach.

There are a variety of publishers that make material for exactly this type of program. Obviously there is Northwestern Publishing House and Concordia which produce themed VBS programs new each year. A lesser known publisher, coming out of the Lutheran Church –

Missouri Synod, is Pax Domini Press. At first glance, this publisher may not seem to be caught up with the times, judging by the design of the material, but it is very doctrinal. I offer this suggestion with caution. The publisher does try to push the sacraments in every program, even at times where it doesn't fit in. However, if you are looking for a program with a little more depth than the typical animal, space or jungle themed programs that are so prevalent, then it might be worth taking a look at Pax Domini Press. The congregation that I vicared at last year used one of Pax Domini's programs because a large and solid base of children had already been established, and the congregation felt confident it could offer more depth while still retaining children. If none of these publishers seem very appealing, a congregation could always design its own program – especially if the gifts were present in the congregation.

A second concept for revitalization of a traditional VBS program would be updating the “bells and whistles” which are used during the program. I can remember, as a child, a felt story board was very exciting – especially when the teacher called on students to put the felt characters up on the board. Today, however, children have shorter attention spans, and they learn through hands-on activities. In the book, “Making your Children's Ministry the Best hour of Every Kid's Week”, Sue Miller and David Staal state the challenge in this way, “The need for ministry creativity grows as other sensory stimulation increases throughout the world for kids – television creates high excitement expectation, video games offer virtual adventure, and the media targets children with compelling messages.”²² Whether you like it or not, this is the world we live in. This is the world that school teachers, public speakers, and Vacation Bible School teachers have to compete with as they struggle to retain the attention of digital age children. One way to spice things up could be having some sort of interactive display or a larger project which all the daily crafts fit into. Adding flare to your VBS program could also be as simple as adding games to the daily lessons. Children, especially the younger ones, love acting out the daily Bible lessons. A teacher could also take the buzzers from an old board game like *Taboo* and have the students answer questions with those after dividing them into groups. Finally, if you are going to use a themed VBS program, commit to it. And this isn't in an attempt to cover up the fact that you teach the Bible at VBS. Children will remember the church that suddenly turned into a zoo or the teachers that all dressed like pirates. Adding these kinds of things to make your traditional VBS

²² Sue Miller and David Staal, *Making your Children's Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid's Week* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 74.

program memorable will likely bring children back to hear God’s Word again next summer as they wait with anticipation to see what comes next.

Full Day program

There are several variations on the Traditional VBS program. One is hosting an all day event so that parents can really drop off their kids and still fit in a full work day. Now, some might immediately react to this by saying, “But this is Vacation Bible School not Vacation Baby Sitting! We aren’t doing this just to provide free daycare.” That is true. We are not doing this just to provide free daycare, and no one really likes to be taken advantage of. However, in another light, could you think of anything better than parents dropping their kids off for a full day of *Bible School*! I mean, the word Bible is right in the name; we aren’t even trying to hide it! So, if parents trust us to take care of their kids for about 8 hours a day all week long, we’ll take it! In fact, one of the main reasons congregations use a full day program is to fit the schedule of working parents.

One way to schedule a full day VBS is to simply use a traditional VBS schedule, but lengthen or add certain parts. A music teacher can take advantage of more time by delving into the rich text of each song while it is being practiced; ensuring that students understand the biblical truths that they sing about. A longer day may also allow time to show segments of a video each day. Having taught VBS several times in the past, I know that there is always a need for more time in the day. A full day VBS program can allow for much more content and activities.

Another version of the full day VBS program would be a service/activity oriented program. One pastor I interviewed shared a schedule with me that had a large portion of the day scheduled for “Food Bank and river walk clean up”. On other days in the schedule, this time slot was filled with hiking, biking, sports, and water activities! Surrounding the service/activity each day was an opening devotion, a lunch devotion, and music time. This same type of schedule could be rearranged in numerous ways including a traditional VBS in the morning and a sports camp after lunch – this sort of schedule allows parents to pick up their children halfway through the day if they so desire.

Although the term “Full Day VBS” could cover a wide range of schedules, there are some strengths and weaknesses to this type of program that are fairly consistent. One major

strength is that this type of VBS program fits well into the schedules of working parents. In a community where it is common for both parents to work, this type of program could see many children of parents who would enjoy a week of free childcare – and this isn't a bad thing! This type of program also allows for more opportunities for more in-depth learning, scheduling variety, and longer activities. However, this full day of activities also means that volunteers need to have the energy and stamina to make it through the whole day. Some congregations may have a teaching staff that is used to this type of day, but others may be relying solely on volunteers. By the end of the week, this type of program can be taxing for individuals. To help alleviate some of the strain, be sure to give volunteers a break during music time, snack time, and craft time. Yes, this may mean more volunteers, but it is well worth it.

Feedback from a full day program is usually very positive! People appreciate the time and effort put into the program. They also notice the caring atmosphere which naturally develops when teachers get to spend a little more time with the kids. Children also like being able to invite their friends to something like a sports camp or larger activity which is usually included in this type of program. However, a full day can get long for younger kids, especially preschoolers and kindergarteners, so allow parents to pick up their children early if they want to. When considering the purpose of a VBS program, the full day program can really lend itself well to both outreach and inreach. It supports inreach because more time is available for teaching the deeper truths of each lesson, and outreach because families are always looking for summer activities for their kids!

Evening program

Some congregations have opted instead for an evening VBS program. This type of program also uses the same general schedule as a traditional VBS program. The major difference, however, is that instead of being able to lengthen it like the full day VBS program, here one needs to condense the program to be able to fit it into just a couple hours each night. In fact, it has been suggested that each “day” of a traditional VBS program be split up into two nights due to the time constraints. Another thing to consider when scheduling this type of program is to avoid supper time and bed time. The pastor I interviewed ran his program from 6:30pm to 8:30pm to fit the window.

There are several reasons why a congregation might consider using an evening program over a traditional VBS program. The primary reason being that it allowed families to grow together through the lessons, activities, and even simply the time spent together. This type of program is meant to be geared toward families as a whole. Parents are able to come *with* their children instead of just dropping them off. The classes that are taught can be parenting or family oriented classes. Another reason for choosing this type of program is to get more volunteers involved. Many people are busy working during the day and unable to volunteer for a week of VBS so this evening program works out well for them. In other cases, the school faculty may do everything for VBS and the congregation wants to get others involved. An evening program allows for even those who work full time to get involved.

This type of program was still fairly new for the pastor I interviewed, and he did some tweaking after a second run through. First, he said that it might be better to run the program for several Wednesdays during the summer rather than a straight week. His reasoning was that holidays or vacation can get in the way of a week long program. He also spoke of the busyness of volunteers who work a full day and then give up their evening to help out with the program. It might be easier to give up an evening for several Wednesdays throughout the summer rather than giving up a straight week of evenings. The pastor also said that, although attendance actually went down – probably because families don't need daycare in the evening – parents did come! Parents were interested in coming to spend family time and learn about family related issues.

Summer Camp

A growing trend for summer programs is to ditch the classroom atmosphere completely and opt instead for more of a camp feel. The most popular are sports camps, but some congregations have alternatively hosted a science camp, art camp, or even a music camp. Contrary to what one might think, these types of camps still have a strong focus on God's Word. In fact, a well thought out camp can even incorporate God's Word in a way that is immediately applicable. For example, on the second or third day of the camp, when the focus shifts from learning skills to learning teamwork, the camp leader can have a devotion on the body of Christ emphasizing that all the different parts of the body work together in unison. The children will then see this image played out in a very real way as the volleyball is bumped to gain control, set

to prepare the offense, and then spiked to gain a point. Three very different roles are necessary to successfully return a volley.

Summer camps, since they are very unlike their classroom counterparts, have a very unique set of strengths and weaknesses. One strength of the summer camp is that it will be very appealing to children. Moreover, this type of program could allow for valuable face-to-face time between the members of the congregation and unchurched parents whose children are in camp. This is especially true if the camp ends with a sports competition or display of work which parents are invited to attend. A weakness of this program, however, is that there will not be as much of a focus on God's Word as there would be in a traditional VBS program. Summer camps, especially sports camps, will also need to limit the age of children who attend. This needs to be done to keep the camp at an appropriate level. If the camp spans ages 5 through 13, the 5 year-olds will most likely feel overwhelmed and the 13 year-olds will most likely not feel challenged enough. With careful planning and preparation, a congregation can maximize the strengths and minimize the weaknesses of this type of program.

Of the various types of VBS programs available, surveys and interviews indicate that this type of program often gains the most attention. Some have indicated that this is a very unobtrusive way for people of the community to get onto the church property or mingle with members of the congregation. However, a congregation that chooses to use a sports camp must guard against making the program only a sports camp. David Valleskey says in his book on evangelism, "Getting close to a person is not evangelism. Telling a person about Jesus is evangelism."²³ Getting people onto the church property is not evangelism; it is pre-evangelism. Members of the congregation must use the opportunity of having families on their property to tell them about the reason for the hope that they have.

Invisible VBS

One final variation on VBS that I found is actually derived from a Sunday School program developed by Randi Pomerantz. He developed something called "The Invisible Sunday School", which I thought was a rather interesting idea, especially if simply sharing God's Word with children is your primary goal. Although I am not aware of this type of program being used currently by a congregation, I included it in this paper because it is a very unique type of VBS.

²³ David J. Valleskey, *We Believe – Therefore We Speak* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995), 186.

Depending on the purpose a congregation decides upon for their VBS program, the possibilities of how that program is conducted are endless. “The Invisible Sunday School” or “Invisible VBS”, if you adapt it for this type of use, could be one of many ideas a congregation comes up with to share God’s Word.

The program works in this way. A single VBS lesson is printed out and distributed to local businesses on a weekly basis – one new lesson each week. This works best if the lessons are primarily story format with lots of pictures to color. The congregation can even attach a small box of crayons to each lesson to make it easier for the child to use. The idea behind this type of program is, “If the business detains customers because of services being provided, quite often the parents really appreciate the coloring project that would keep their children occupied while they are detained.”²⁴ Pomerantz suggests using this type of program at businesses like nail salons, hair salons, doctors’ offices and many other places where children need to wait with their parents for some service to be provided. Of course, a congregation should first talk to the company before distributing materials.

This type of program may not get people familiar with your church or even bring anyone into church – although a well designed lesson will include the church’s name and contact information, perhaps even some brief details about the church. However, this program will teach children God’s Word at a time when they have nothing else they can really do. Families will also get to know your church as one that cares for filling hearts with God’s Word, not just filling pews with bodies. Parents will most likely also take a look at the work their children did and maybe even pick up a few Bible stories in doing so.

The Invisible VBS would be used really only for a unique purpose, or it could be used in the background of any other program. This type of program doesn’t really keep children coming back for more contact with the church, unless of course children are excited to go to the salon with their mom each week so they can see what lesson is coming out next. This type of program does not really involve families either, although the message of the gospel can easily be shared with the whole family from a simple coloring lesson. But, this program does share God’s Word with children. At an office where only magazines like *People*, *Life* and *Time* can be found, children will be pleasantly surprised by a stack of coloring pages with a story that includes a

²⁴ Randi Pomerantz, *The Invisible Sunday School*, (8 January 1997). (not yet published)

small box of crayons! When they color and read the storybook meant just for them, they will get to know the wonders of God and the forgiveness found in Jesus.

There is one problem with this program, however. How many children do you see today simply sitting around looking for something to do while waiting for their parents? Today, any idle child is very likely to have his or her nose glued to some type of device. Very rarely is anyone today looking for something to do. In a world where glowing entertainment is always right in your pocket, printed material in a waiting room often goes unnoticed. Therefore, the Invisible VBS may have difficulty appealing to anyone other than very young children.

A brief look at each of these programs is meant to get the creative juices flowing. This is by no means an extensive list of VBS programs available. Once a congregation has identified its purpose, it can use these popular ideas as a springboard for tailoring its own program. Sometimes, a little bit of trial and error is needed. A congregation trying the evening VBS program may need to tweak the timing from year to year to find what works best. A congregation using the full day VBS program may need to figure out when to time breaks throughout the day to keep the children going. The important thing to do is to always ask questions and look for feedback. Ask your own members about their thoughts on the program. Ask visitors about the things they appreciated and the things that could have run more smoothly. Then, listen to what the people have to say and make adjustments to the program as needed. Finally, a congregation needs to remember to evaluate the purpose of its VBS program often. This will allow the congregation to keep its program focused on achieving this purpose.

Conclusion

The literature available and the surveys I received back clearly show a need for a revitalization of Vacation Bible School. The original purpose of VBS, that is, to act as an extension of Sunday School, is no longer the reason many congregations have VBS programs today. However, the way in which these congregations go about VBS has seen very little revision, despite the primary purpose shifting from inreach to outreach. Moreover, this generally outdated program, although still used by busy parents, does not relate in the most effective way

to the children who attend – children of the fast paced, salad bar²⁵ mentality of postmodernism. Therefore, a revitalization of VBS is greatly needed.

There are three main purposes or goals which I think every VBS program needs to consider if it wants to thrive in today's society. First and foremost, a Vacation Bible School program needs to share the good news of the Gospel with children. This aspect must not be absent from any VBS program, whatever form it takes. Second, a VBS program should decide whether it wants to focus primarily on children or on the entire family. In either case, a congregation needs an attractive program which brings in its target audience and keeps them in year after year. Finally, a congregation should decide whether it wants to target its VBS program at inreach or outreach. I think for a VBS program to be successful, it needs to have thought through all three of these elements to some extent. This does not however limit a congregation from considering other purposes for their program. There are many viable choices today for revitalizing your VBS program, but a congregation still needs to figure out the purpose for their own ministry, and use this purpose to drive their program.

One area for further research would be the dynamics of the congregation and how this individual characterization plays a role in choosing a VBS program. I attempted to find out this information through my congregational survey, but the results were fairly inconclusive. I did ask some basic questions about the setting of each congregation, but could have gone into greater detail. Also, question 5 of the congregational survey meant to draw out a brief description of the VBS program each congregation was using and if that program was achieving its purpose, but this question was often misunderstood as an advertising or follow-up question.

While conducting surveys I have found that many congregations are looking for new ways to breathe life into a dying program. Congregations are well aware of the changing climate of society but they don't always know what to do about it. Perhaps other areas of ministry have adapted, but no other program brings in children and exposes them to the means of grace quite like VBS – even if it is used initially just for free babysitting. Congregations need to see this as the great opportunity it is and design a program that makes the most of it. Congregations need to identify their purpose for VBS. This will depend greatly upon the makeup of the congregation itself, the makeup of its community, and the standing of that congregation within its community.

²⁵ Pick what you like, leave what you don't

Once the congregation has identified its purpose, only then can it go about designing a program which fulfills this purpose.

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Appendix A

Congregational Survey²⁶

I would like to ask for your willingness to participate in a survey for a research project I am working on. I am researching how congregations can bridge the gap between the children sent to VBS and the parents who send them so that parents would become interested in other programs offered by the church. I will also be surveying parents who have sent their children to VBS but are not interested in any further relationship with the church. If you have a list of prospects from VBS that you think would be valuable for my research, please send the list to me with the information you have on them. Include if possible: name, address, email address, and phone number. I will gladly share the information I have gathered with your congregation. Thank you for your participation.

Church Information

Name and location of Church: _____

Church Demographics

Use the number scale to describe the area in which your congregation is located

| | | | | | |
|--------------|---|---|---|---|--------------------|
| Rural | | | | | Urban |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Impoverished | | | | | Affluent |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Monocultural | | | | | Culturally Diverse |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |
| Secular | | | | | Religious |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | |

3. What kind of facilities do you have available? (example: preschool, grade school, youth center, etc.)

4. What is the main goal/purpose of your Vacation Bible School Program?

5. What strategies is your congregation implementing to achieve this goal/purpose?
Are these strategies working?

6. What are you doing for Vacation Bible School advertisement?

²⁶ <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/H2H5WGD>

7. What are you doing for Vacation Bible School follow-up?

8. Does your Vacation Bible School program generate interest in other areas of ministry among families who attend? If so, what areas of ministry are they interested in?

9. What percentage of families who attend VBS get involved with other areas of ministry at your church? Of those who do not get further involved, what do you think is their reason(s)?

10. Are there any additional questions I should have asked which you feel would be important to my research purpose? Please share them here, as well as any answers that you feel would be helpful.

Appendix B

Vacation Bible School Survey²⁷

I would like to ask for your willingness to participate in a survey for a research project I am working on. I am researching how congregations can establish a better relationship with parents who have sent their children to Vacation Bible School. Thank you for your participation.

How many Vacation Bible School programs have you enrolled your child(ren) in for the summer of 2014?

How many consecutive years have you enrolled your child(ren) in Vacation Bible School at [Name of Congregation]?

Why do you enroll your children in Vacation Bible School at [Name of Congregation]?

What are 5 things you appreciate about Vacation Bible School at [Name of Congregation]?

What are 5 things you feel could have been done better?

Have you gotten involved with any other activities at [Name of Congregation]? If not, could you please explain why?

Are there any things [Name of Congregation] could do to make you interested in establishing a more regular, long term relationship with that congregation?

Are there any additional questions I should have asked which you feel would be important to my research purpose? Please share them here, as well as any answers that you feel would be helpful.

²⁷ <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/KCHH6HP>