HOW TO LEAD VBS
*Even in a Year with COVID-19
The Signs of the Times

Social Distancing and Uncertainty

The COVID-19 pandemic and shelter-in-place orders have obviously been a major challenge for the church, from the impact on those who have become ill or died to major financial consequences.

As we look ahead to how we can best serve our parish, it is very difficult to plan when we have no idea when shelter-in-place orders will be lifted (or when families and leaders will be comfortable meeting again).

Timelines for relaxing social distancing will vary by state and region. In some areas, we may be able to start gathering again in a matter of weeks. But there is a good chance that some or all of the summer will be off-limits for gathering children (even if worship is resumed with social distancing adaptations). Some schools are even making contingency plans for remote learning in the fall.

Families & Faith in Shutdown

We may be trying our best to stay connected to our families, but it is challenging from both sides. It was hard enough to encourage some families to attend in-person experiences of Mass or religious education. If you are streaming Masses, how many views are they receiving each week?

We are concerned that many families—especially those on the margins of the parish—have taken a step back from the church (and perhaps God), at a time when faith is so needed. Are some forgetting about church? Or treating it as optional?

This year, 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. It’s not going to be entirely easy to navigate, but VBS is a unique way to serve families and remind them how fun and meaningful faith can be.

Meeting Families Where They Are At

Weeks of social distancing and “home schooling” are stressing many parents as they juggle working at home with keeping their children occupied and educated. Many in-person summer camps and vacations are already being canceled, so parents may be frantic for other options.

Many leaders are anticipating big turnouts for Vacation Bible Schools this year, for children hungry to get out of the house and have social interactions. If social distancing extends through the summer (after any school guidance has ended), parents will be desperate for ways to engage their kids.

Online games, streaming media, and video chat have taken advantage of the vacuum. Why can’t we as a church? This is a huge opportunity to evangelize and draw in families, even beyond the “usual suspects.”

What if each of your regular families invited two other families to participate? What if you could exit this crisis with more families in your ongoing ministry than when it started?
Embracing the Unknown

Flexible Formats

This is not an ideal situation, to say the least. Vacation Bible Schools are designed for and best experienced as an in-person event, but we simply don’t know when that will be possible. So let’s be creative!

Your best bet this year is flexibility, which may mean having a Plan A (for if social distancing is relaxed) and a fall-back Plan B (with a delayed schedule, smaller groupings of children, or an online experience).

The bottom line is this: You do not have to put off your decision to host a VBS this year or start planning it. In fact, this is a great time to get started, while many of your leaders may be bored at home, twiddling their thumbs. Most of your preparation will be the same, whether you end up going with your Plan A, Plan B, or even a Plan C.

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 in the first place. 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, we would argue that all of the above goals are 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).
Shifting Expectations

If you host a VBS this year, it may look very different from any other year. That’s okay. Focus on your goals.

The complex kits from publishers can intimidate leaders or make us think a VBS has to be done a particular way. But a VBS does not need to be complex, expensive, or a ton of work to be fun and successful. We’ve seen small churches put on simple VBSs on shoestring budgets 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!

Surveying the Options

Let’s talk through some options, which we detail later in this document. Please bear with us and suspend judgment for a bit as we explore some fresh possibilities. The Kingdom of God is a pretty crazy idea, too, after all.

Here are some different ways you can host this year:

- **In-person experiences**
  - **Traditional summer format**: This would be a typical VBS approach, probably with some adaptations for safety.
  - **Segmented**: If social distancing rules limit the size of gatherings, you can offer mini-VBSes, each with 10-20 kids. Gatherings could meet in neighborhoods or at the parish.
  - **Delayed**: If the shutdown continues through the summer, you could delay until an in-person gathering is possible, probably on a weekend or during evenings in the fall so as not to conflict with school schedules.

- **At-home experience**: In this approach, families could participate online from their homes, via video conference (e.g. Zoom), on-demand videos, and/or printed instructions.

It’s Crucial to Connect People This Year

After weeks or months of shelter-in-place, **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.

We can connect personally through VBS, even if we’re limited to doing it through video screens. And we need to be aware that there is a big difference between live, interpersonal connections and a pre-packaged virtual experience (whether through printed or pre-recorded video). Real social connection requires two-way communication.

You can find options for virtual VBS solutions that probably have great, creative content. But the best way we can serve our children and families this year is to find a way to still be a church that connects the Body of Christ, even if it’s messy and difficult.
Growing Up Catholic VBS

We will be referencing our Growing Up Catholic VBSs through the rest of this document as an example. It is a particularly good option for the unique situation we find ourselves in this year, whether you offer an in-person or at-home experience. Here are some of the reasons why:

- **Affordability.** Our starter kits are priced well below other popular VBSs, keeping your budget low.
- **Downloadable & reproducible.** A single purchase of a physical or downloadable starter kit allows you to electronically share the full curriculum with all your other leaders (or families) at no extra cost. This is very handy while leaders are sheltering in place. (Color booklets are sold per child.)
- **Simplicity & flexibility.** We give you everything you need without overwhelming complexity. Choose activities from multiple options to best fit your format. You are welcome to adapt, create custom videos for use during your VBS, etc.
- **Adaptations for at-home usage.** We are adding extra options—such as video conference games and videos explaining how to complete select crafts (for our latest theme Peace Lab)—especially for at-home use.
- **Musically spirited.** You’ll be humming along to top-notch, kid-friendly music from OCP (Oregon Catholic) Press that won’t drive adults crazy. Your music ministry could even incorporate most songs into Sunday worship services through standard OneLicense.net licensing.
- **Five themes are available.** Take your pick. We focus on core discipleship topics that are relevant to daily life.

In-Person Experiences

Safety Adaptations

If you are fortunate enough that it is both permitted and safe for you to offer an in-person VBS event, you will still want to keep risk of COVID-19 transmission to a minimum. Here are some ideas for how to do that:

- **Review any national or regional health guidelines** for gatherings of children. Your diocesan schools or public school district may have suggestions.
- **Adapt your snack policy.** If preparing snacks on-site, be especially attentive (e.g. wear masks and gloves). Or serve pre-packaged, individually wrapped snacks instead.
- **Regularly disinfect surfaces** (especially as groups rotate through stations).
- **Encourage hand-washing and use of hand sanitizer.**
- **Organize your rooms so children are spread out** more than usual.
- **Divide children into smaller groups** that stay together throughout the process (and limit exposure to others). You might also divide students into separate rooms by age.

Visit our [GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com](http://GrowingUpCatholicVBS.com) website for testimonials, generous previews of the curriculum, clips from our sing-along music videos, and more.
Whole Family VBS

While this may be a harder sell this year—when parents are spending so much time sheltering in place with their kids—we highly recommend shifting your VBS from a drop-off model to an event attended by both children and parents.

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.

- **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.

Traditional Summer Experience

If you can pull off a typical summer VBS format, then it will generally play out as in any other year. Your main considerations will be scheduling, and perhaps lead time for promotion, sign-up, and registration. We recommend posting an online sign-up form. You can easily do this for free using Google Forms, SurveyMonkey, or other sites.

Segmented Summer Experience

Social distancing rules may allow for VBS experiences beyond individual families, but limit the size of gatherings to under 10 or 20 kids. One way to do this would be to schedule the VBS at your parish in **multiple time slots** (e.g. a morning, afternoon, and evening group) and/or multiple weeks. You would need a much smaller team to host each session.

Another approach would be to **bring the experience into the neighborhood.** Group children geographically and/or by age and host each gathering at homes, using driveways, yards, nearby parks, or other large spaces. Assign one or two leaders (who could be parents) to each neighborhood gathering.

These experiences would basically run just as a traditional experience, with fewer children. To make the leaders’ jobs simpler, record videos that could be played at each gathering (e.g. skits, large group presentations).
Delayed Experience

Delaying an in-person experience until sometime in fall is a good fall-back plan that can relieve some scheduling stress and uncertainty. It is also an engaging way to kick off the start of your catechetical year, especially after losing the end of your previous year. You will presumably have to schedule around school hours. Here are some possible options:

- **Five consecutive weeks.** For example, hold it as five consecutive Tuesday nights or Saturday mornings.
- **Full weekend.** Choosing Labor Day weekend would give you even more time, as long as too many people aren’t trying to leave town.
- **Fall break.** Again, families may plan to vacation out of town. We suggest informally surveying your parents.

If offering on a weekend, we recommend incorporating Mass into the experience. If possible, have your music minister feature some of the VBS songs in the liturgy.

If offering on evenings, offer families a simple dinner as part of the experience.

At-Home Experience

Leading from Afar

We’re not going to lie. It will be a challenge to offer an at-home VBS experience that is anywhere near as engaging as an in-person event. But with some creativity and preparation, you can offer a great experience.

Here are four methods for leading an at-home VBS. You will probably want to utilize all four, although the balance between them will be key.

- **Interactive video streaming.** Through this approach, leaders and kids can interact in meaningful ways over video conferencing. This can be quite effective and a lot of fun, as many children are learning through streaming class experiences this year. Basically, you want to be able to host a virtual dance party (where everyone can see each other dancing).
- **Pre-recorded videos.** These can be used to describe and demonstrate crafts, share the message of the day, portray skits, and more. Children (or parents) can play them whenever they want and repeat them as needed.
- **Written instructions.** Some activities are simple enough that a child can follow printed instructions, such as in activity books or sheets.
- **Parent support.** At some level, a parent will have to be involved to help their child get started and work through the process. The younger a child is, the more parental involvement will be necessary. The better the pre-recorded videos and written instructions are, the easier it will be for parents to help. Some parents may be excited to be involved and could “homeschool” their child step-by-step through the process, but the vast majority will likely not have the dedicated time or interest for that level of involvement.
So much of the magic of a VBS is about the relationships and energy that come from gathering together. When the Body of Christ is split up, we’re a bit disconnected. So we think the interactive streaming is an important method to offer, with the other options in supporting roles.

**Materials**

Even if materials for crafts and activities are relatively easy to acquire, it is important for the parish to do the leg work to gather and distribute them to each family, making it all as simple as possible for parents. You also cannot assume that all families will have access to a home printer or craft materials (especially with social distancing making some shopping difficult). It is easiest for the parish to buy for everyone.

We assume that social distancing rules will be relaxed enough such that parents could pick up their “VBS in a box” (or bag) at the parish. If not, you could mail the materials to each family. Each box could contain:

- Materials for any crafts or activities.
- A DVD of sing-along music videos and/or audio CD or USB drive.
- Activity booklets.
- Instructions for accessing streaming video, on-demand videos, or other downloadable content.
- Outlines and schedules to help participants follow the process.
- Fat markers (e.g. Crayola felt tip) and blank paper to write/draw responses.
- T-shirts or any other “promotional items.”

**Video Technology**

Many of us in ministry roles are not experts at technology. If this is an area in which you could use help, seek out one or more people in your parish to be your technical experts (there are likely many candidates). You will specifically need help in filming and posting pre-recorded videos and in hosting the interactive streaming sessions.

We recommend that you identify exactly what you need, communicate it clearly to your tech leader(s), set a schedule, and then check in as needed.

**Pre-Recorded Videos**

You will likely want the ability to record and post some videos before the VBS begins, so that participants, parents, or leaders can view them at their convenience. We recommend creating separate short videos for individual purposes (e.g. one per craft) rather than covering multiple things in a single longer video.

Here are some things you and your tech leader will want to consider:

- **Choose a hosting site.** The simplest solution is to create a free new account and channel on YouTube specifically for your VBS.
- **Record videos.** Coordinate with your leaders to film the videos. It is quite easy to record high-quality videos with mobile phones or a computer with a camera.
Speak loudly and clearly in a brightly-lit area for the best quality.

- **Post videos.** Your tech leader will need to determine how to get the videos from your other leaders or help them post directly.

### Interactive Video Streaming

This technology will allow you to have live video conferences with your participants, so at least part of the at-home experience will be relational and interactive. This method will be the least familiar to us as leaders and take the most creativity.

We recommend using the same approach typical in an in-person VBS by having **both large group sessions and small group sessions**. Each small group would be led by a different leader. The Zoom conferencing service has a feature called “Video Breakout Rooms” which allow you to begin a conference with a large group, split it into smaller groups, and then resume as a large group, which is exactly what you would want. Alternately, this could be achieved by having multiple shorter video conferences each day, some with the large group and others as small groups.

If you don’t offer small breakout groups, it may make sense to offer each session **multiple times** so you can limit the number of children in each to make it easier to have conversations and interact.

Here are some technical considerations for you and your tech leader:

- **Choose a service.** Zoom.us is one of the most popular video conferencing services, and many your participants may already be familiar with it. We have also had good experiences with StartMeeting.com, and there are many other options. Most of these services require some sort of fee, but the costs tend to be reasonable.

- **Practice.** Do not try your first live session before you have practiced with your leaders (and maybe some guinea pig families) beforehand at least once. Some leaders will probably need to learn how to share their screens to show music videos, slide presentations, or other visuals. Ensure that any music that is shared can be heard. Practice all transitions as you would be doing in the actual sessions. Let everything go wrong in the practice instead of your first session!

- **Fix the audio quality.** If you are going to be playing music videos or singing in the session, it is important that the leader doing so configures their computer correctly. Video streaming services assume you will only be talking, so the default settings result in terrible audio quality for music. For example, here is a video explaining how to fix this for Zoom: [https://youtu.be/mEAb4G063sM](https://youtu.be/mEAb4G063sM).

- **Plan for two-way communication.** Work out with your tech leaders the best ways to hear from children. Unless you have a very small group, you will probably want to mute everyone by default except presenters to minimize ambient noise. Children could indicate that they want to speak by typing in a chat box, physically raising their hand, or using the “raise hand” button found in some streaming apps. A leader would have to unmute them in the app so everyone can hear them.

- **Plan for breakout groups.** If you will be offering small groups led by separate leaders, determine how you will do this smoothly and practice. If using Zoom, learn about the Breakout Rooms feature [at this link](https://).
• **Trial run with families.** The week before your VBS begins, you will want to be sure each family can connect, see and hear presenters, and be seen and heard. Ask your tech person to set up test sessions, perhaps for a few families at a time. A good test would be for your tech person to play sing-along music videos. Make sure your tech person has phone numbers to reach families in case they need to be coached. Families should be able to connect with computers, phones, or tablets.

• **On-call help.** If at all possible, have a tech leader on-call at a number that families can call during the actual sessions in case something goes wrong.

Beyond the technical issues, consider how you can best use this medium to make this an interactive experience. For example:

• **Utilize the chat box**, so that children can type in questions, answers, and ideas at different points.

• **Draw and write.** Sometimes simple is powerful. Prompt participants to answer questions visually by drawing or writing on paper with a fat marker and holding the page up to the camera. Everyone in the video conference can then see the responses.

• **Use body language.** Similarly, help participants use movements/postures to communicate.

**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).

**At-Home Example**

Using our *Peace Lab* VBS theme, let’s talk through how it might be adapted for at-home use with the different methods we reviewed. The structure of our various Growing Up Catholic VBS themes are all very similar to each other and relatively similar across other vendors. Learn more about the typical format and daily schedules in the director guide for each theme.

Our schedules are very flexible, with options for shorter or longer daily sessions. Here, we will walk through a schedule for a two hours and 15 minute session, commenting on how it could be adapted for at-home use.

Note that our themes have a simpler early childhood track for children ages 4-5 that parallels the same process. Parents would obviously have to be fully involved to support a child of that age, but a leader could potentially lead parents with their children over interactive video.
Gather

Each day typically begins with a ten minute small group meeting to check in, answer questions, and make sure everyone is ready. If you are meeting in virtual small groups, it may be a good idea to have this kind of session at least on the first day. It will probably take longer to talk through some of the logistics.

Worship

Next comes a 25 minute large-group experience that includes a welcome, call to worship, music, offering, and a drama to present the day’s Bible story. It generally can all be presented in a very similar way to how it would be done in person. While this part could be pre-recorded, it would be the most important to stream if possible.

Call to Worship

In Peace Lab, the call to worship incorporates sign language for the word “peace,” which everyone can learn and perform together. It will look great to see everyone doing the motions on video.

Music

Peace Lab includes hand motions for all of its songs, described in written form. Sing-along music videos are captioned with lyrics and show children performing the motions. Motions would normally be taught step-by-step by a leader the first time a song is used. You can play the music videos during your stream, and everyone can sing and dance along. Our licensing also allows you to let children play the music videos on-demand.

If you have a musician to perform the songs live, they can use the provided lead sheets. Powerpoint presentations with the lyrics are also available, so you can display them as needed.

Bible Memory Passage

Children usually memorize a Bible passage throughout the week (also accompanied by hand motions). We provide a Powerpoint presentation with the words so you can easily display them.

Drama/Skit

The dramas in the Peace Lab theme are all relatively simple, with only two characters. Even for more complex skits, your actors can all play their parts from their own homes. In fact, it may add a bit to the humor.

Responding

In this section, children are invited to reflect silently on a few questions. Usually, we recommend giving them 30 seconds to share with someone nearby afterwards. That could simply be skipped, or you could offer an alternate way to share with the big group (e.g. calling on individuals, using chat, writing on a paper and showing it).

Sending

This section is usually wrapped up with a song and a blessing.
Respond

Small groups would normally then rotate and participate in three Response stations, spending 30 minutes on each one.

Active Response (games and activities)

These were generally written to be interactive, large group activities, requiring children to be in the same physical space, so they are not easily adapted. We are in the process of adding replacement games specifically for video conferences to our VBS kits. Or you can simply exclude this section from your experience.

Bible Response (Bible story discussion, booklet activities)

This section is designed to be an interactive small group experience, including child sharing, review of the Bible story and drama, reflection, more focus on the Bible memory verse, activities from the optional booklets, an ongoing craft, a song, and a closing prayer. A variety of additional options are included.

This station could easily be offered as a streaming small group session as-is. If that's not possible, parts of this station could be incorporated into a streaming large group session, pre-recorded on video, or worked on individually with some parent support.

Creative Response (crafts and snack)

This station consists of a snack and a number of options for craft activities.

The Peace Lab snacks will require parental involvement. If parents choose to offer the snacks for their own child, they can easily follow the written instructions, or they can offer simpler alternatives.

Craft activities could be led in a variety of ways. Parents could follow the written instructions, but video show-and-tell (with parent support, especially for younger children) will be much more effective. Small group video sessions would allow a leader who has learned the craft to coach children through and keep them on-track just as they would in person. But pre-recorded videos or demonstrations in large-group video sessions can also work.

We are filming demonstration videos for some of the crafts in Peace Lab, which you can share with your participants or use as examples on which to base your own videos. We will also collect and make available video demonstrations of crafts from any of our themes that are shared with us.

Finances

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. The coronavirus situation adds some additional considerations.

Many parishes have a culture of charging participants of their programs to cover the costs. But consider it from a different perspective.
First, a “pay-per-service” approach is not the best model of Christian stewardship. It communicates to your parishioners that they should only pay for what they “get out” of the parish. This is a consumer-oriented approach, rather than a mission-based model in which we generously pool our resources together to do the work of the church together.

Second, if we view VBS as a tool for evangelization, even if we offer it for free, it is a very inexpensive way to draw families to your parish. We have found that Protestant churches are more likely to offer their VBS for free than Catholic parishes, because they see it as an important part of their mission to evangelize.

Now, this year in particular, your parish budget is probably suffering. Your pay as a leader may have been suspended or reduced. It is perfectly fine to charge so you can break even, pay for your time as a professional leader, or even support your ministry budget a little.

Many families (especially outsiders) will compare your VBS to other day camps, which can be quite expensive. Asking for a financial commitment can also help you get firm registrations. If you charge, we recommend setting a price well below other day camp alternatives, which should still allow you to more than cover your costs.

This year we should also be attentive to the fact that families are experiencing financial struggles of their own. Many parents have been laid off, furloughed, or seen a drop in income. We highly recommend offering scholarships to those in financial need by request. Pride may get in the way of some families asking for that accommodation, so find a way to give them an “out.” For example, you could add a check box to the application indicating that they will make a contribution to the parish at a future date when their finances allow. We wouldn’t want families to decide against their children participating because of financial reasons.

Other Considerations

Order Lead Time

Shelter-in-place orders and other impacts from the coronavirus have impacted online shopping and delivery times. We recommend that you plan well in advance so you have plenty of time to acquire all materials, including simple craft items. Don’t assume you can get materials quickly.

We’re Happy to Help!

Do you have questions or just need to talk through how this could all play out at your particular parish? We’d love to chat. Contact us at resources@pastoralcenter.com or give us a call at 1-844-727-8672.
Appendix A

Here are some additional guidelines drawn from our Vacation Bible School: What, Why, How? resource that you may find helpful.

Why VBS?

Fun Faith Formation

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

Evangelizing Families

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

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

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

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

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

Getting Started

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:

Our EarthKeepers VBS has the added advantage of introducing children and their parents to Pope Francis’ encyclical On Care for Our Common Home, which can otherwise be difficult to fit into the regular faith formation curriculum.
Theology - The VBS options span the theological spectrum, so take a close look at the content to be sure the core of what you will be teaching your kids is compatible with what your community and the broader Catholic Church teaches.

Engagement - You want your VBS to not only be fun, but be engaging. Will it be interesting and start meaningful conversations? Will it stay with the children in the weeks and months afterwards?

Price - VBSs can be pricey, but compared to the time and energy it would take to develop your own they can be a bargain. Be sure to factor in the cost of all the pieces you will need, as extra booklets, toys, and craft items can add up.

Ease of use - Every VBS is going to say that it is easy to use, so you’ll have to do your own evaluation. If you have leaders who are less experienced, be sure to look at the materials through their eyes (or have them help you evaluate).

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

Recruit Your Team

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 for the volunteer as being one of the kids in attendance.

- 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.

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.
Spread the Word

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

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

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.

Reaching Out

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.
VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL

A Different Kind of VBS

Through learning how to resolve conflicts and figuring out ways to help others, children will learn how to be peacemakers with this theme. The five Bible stories will lead children on an awesome adventure through the Bible, equipping them to follow Jesus as compassionate peacemakers.

Featuring the songs "Power of Peace," "I'm a Peacemaker," and "Walking the Ways of Peace" (and more) by Jesse Manibusan.

• Day 1: Jesus (Mt 5:9, 43-48) • Blessed are the peacemakers.
• Day 2: Abram & Lot (Gn 13) • Peacemakers find good ways to solve problems.
• Day 3: Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz (Ruth 1-2) • Peacemakers help other people.
• Day 4: Jonathan, Michal & David (1 Sm 19-20) • Peacemakers speak up for what is right.
• Day 5: Martha & Mary (Lk 10:38-42) • Peacemakers ask for help to resolve conflicts.

Pricing
• Downloadable starter kit: $79
• Downloadable + Physical starter kit: $129
• Optional booklets (preschool or K-5): $2.75
• CDs or MP3s to send home: 1-4: $8 ea.; 5-9: $4 ea., 10+: $2.50 ea.
### DIGGING FOR TREASURE: Parables Revealed

*Listen up! Dig deep! Jesus had a lot to say.*

And those who listened discovered a treasure in his words.

At first, Jesus’ parables seem simple. Of course we know that the type of soil in which seeds are sown is important for plants to grow, but what does that have to do with us? And if someone asked us for food, we wouldn’t be rude and give a stone instead! Or, what if we lost something important to us? Of course we would look high and low and celebrate when it was found. It turns out, however, that the parables have a greater meaning beyond what we first see. So come along, listen, and dig deeper for the treasures of the kingdom of heaven!

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### SURPRISE! STORIES OF DISCOVERING JESUS

*Jesus surprised and blessed the people he met*

With each encounter people discovered more about Jesus. This theme allows children to be surprised as they discover Jesus, too! Each of the five daily Gospel stories tells about someone surprised by Jesus. Kids will also sing and dance along to catchy, bouncy, faith-filled music. **Surprise!** invites children from preschool to grade 5 to come along on the journey, to open their eyes, and to see what Jesus has in store!

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### MESSAGE RECEIVED: Hearing God’s Call

*God has a message for you! Can you hear it?*

Samuel heard it during the middle of the night. Mary heard it through an angel. The disciples were hard at work when they heard it. They all heard God’s special message just for them! This theme lets children know that God continues to call all kinds of people—including them! People are called to love God and follow Jesus every day. Those who hear God’s message and respond are forever changed.

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### EARTHKEEPERS: Adventures for Creation Care Kids

*A VBS for living Pope Francis’ Encyclical: Laudato Si’*

Pope Francis encourages us to care for our common home. Learn how the Bible teaches us to care not just for nature, but for all of creation (people included). This theme makes it fun to make a difference, and brings simplicity, sustainability, and community into the process. Practice being “care-ful” through earth-friendly crafts, healthy snacks, cooperative games, catchy songs, and more.

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

Or contact us at: 844-727-8672 or resources@pastoralcenter.com