VBS: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Beaty, Willie R., comp. *New Horizons in Vacation Bible School*.
Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1993.

Mentioning Vacation Bible School to an adult almost anywhere in the nation brings recollections of a happy summertime adventure from childhood. Vacation Bible School may be the only church experience some adults remember. If pressed, they likely will be able to remember, if not produce, a cherished item they made in VBS.

No matter their religious background or current church involvement, many adults have had positive experiences with Vacation Bible School and are willing to allow their children to attend. Vacation Bible School may serve as the church's best strategy for reaching families of young children.

Because of its universal appeal and acceptance across denominational lines, parents do not attach denominational barriers to Vacation Bible School as they might to other outreach approaches, which they might reject.

In fact, Vacation Bible School began with a nondenominational tone and Southern Baptists, as a denomination, were rather slow to promote Vacation Bible School as a program of church work. Many Southern Baptist churches apparently were having considerable success with Vacation Bible School in the first quarter of this century before the Southern Baptist Convention added it as a program of work. Although Southern Baptist Vacation Bible School provides for youth and adult sessions, in its beginnings, and in general practice, VBS has been an event for children.

Initially, it was a plan of a compassionate doctor's wife who sensed a need to get children off the streets of New York during the summertime. Mrs. Walker Aylett Hawes went to New York City from Charlottesville, Virginia, with her husband who was specializing in a medical ministry to children. She noted that many of the children attended to at her husband's clinic received injuries as they played in the streets of New York City. She surmised that they needed something safe and fruitful to occupy their time.

In 1898 and 1899, Mrs. Hawes rented a beer hall in the city's East Side to conduct her Everyday Bible School. Thus, Bible School began with an evangelistic thrust of taking the study to where the people were.

However, her pastor insisted that the school in 1900 move to the church, Epiphany Baptist Church, located about a mile from the East Side beer hall. After two weeks of meeting at the church, it became clear to Mrs. Hawes that children from the East Side would not attend at the church. She returned the school to a location near the beer hall for the rest of the summer.

Mrs. Hawes was a Baptist and a sister-in-law of John A. Broadus, a founder and later president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. The stamp of Baptist missions and evangelistic involvement was on the very beginnings of Bible School.

In 1901, after three years of Mrs. Hawes' effort, the New York City Baptist Mission Society picked up the banner of Vacation Bible School and established schools throughout the East Side. Robert G. Boville, of the Mission Society, used college and seminary students to lead the work in five schools in 1901. The next year, Boville expanded to 10 schools and had 17 schools by 1903.

He left the Baptist Mission Society in 1904 and for two years promoted interdenominational Vacation Bible Schools in New York City. In 1907, he organized a national committee for Vacation Bible Schools, first expanding to Philadelphia and Chicago and then throughout the nation. By 1916, the movement had spread to Canada. Until his death in 1937, Boville promoted Vacation Bible Schools in numerous foreign nations.

Meanwhile, Vacation Bible School in the United States was continuing to grow with several denominations developing their own programs. Early efforts by other denominations to develop a program of Vacation Bible School include that of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., which in 1910 assigned the work to its Department of City and Immigrant Work within the Board of Home Missions. In 1915, the Northern Baptist Convention made Vacation Bible School a major activity under the American Baptist Publication Society. The Northern Baptist Convention printed its first Vacation Bible School textbook in 1918.

Vacation Bible School work drifted south. Howard Lee Jones left his pastorate at Epiphany Baptist Church, where Mrs. Hawes began her work, to become pastor of First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Tennessee. He later moved to a church in South Carolina. After leaving New York, Jones wrote Mrs. Hawes commending her for her work in Vacation Bible School. Whether Jones or other persons took Vacation Bible School to churches in the south is uncertain.

By 1921, Vacation Bible School was a trend that was finding favor among pastors of Southern Baptist churches. That year, the Convention approved the suggestion of its Sunday School Lesson Committee that pastors and Sunday School leaders give consideration to the values and possibilities of Vacation Bible School. In 1922, the Sunday School Board assigned the work of Daily Vacation Bible School to the Sunday School Administration Department.

The Sunday School Board (Lifeway Christian Resources) provided a pamphlet describing Daily Vacation Bible School work and a manual of how to conduct it. Beyond the pamphlet and manual, the Board seemed to have a rocky start in trying to develop an emphasis for Vacation Bible School work.

Bryan Robinson was hired in 1924 to supervise the work but resigned later that year. It was through an article in The Christian Index, newspaper of the Georgia Baptist Convention, that Sunday School Board Executive Secretary I.J. Van Ness learned of the successes of Daily Vacation Bible School in a Georgia church.

Pastor Homer Grice wrote to The Christian Index about how Vacation Bible School had worked in his church in Washington, Georgia, for the past two years. The church held its first Vacation Bible School in 1922 with an average attendance of 150 for the 20-day school. After reading Grice's report in the state Baptist paper, Van Ness wrote Grice expressing frustrations with the School School Board's inability to move forward with a strong Vacation Bible School program and promotion plan.

Van Ness invited Grice to use 20 minutes of the hour allotted to the Sunday School Board at the annual Convention meeting to speak about Vacation Bible School. In a 3-age response to Van Ness' invitation, Grice outlined ways the Sunday School Board could promote Vacation Bible School, thus creating his own job description. He became director of the new department that was to be formed for Vacation Bible School later in 1924.

Grice worked with state convention Sunday School department to promote VBS. He wanted to avoid setting up new organizations in the local church and in state conventions. He believed the purpose of getting churches to use their idle Sunday School facilities for a four-week school in the summer could naturally be a function of the Sunday School organization.

Grice promoted a plan that gave children a daily program to minister to physical, mental, moral, and spiritual needs. He incorporated a patriotic regimen with the still-familiar opening exercises of pledges to the United States flag, the Christian flag, and the Bible Grice wrote the pledge to the Bible for use in Vacation Bible School.

The work blossomed under Grice's leadership and became truly a Southern Baptist program. The Sunday School Board estimated that approximately 300 schools were conducted in Southern Baptist churches in 1926 – only two years after Grice began his work. By 1934, approximately 700 schools were reaching as many as 100 thousand children.

Grice suggested that the Sunday School organization would need to promote VBS if it was to be permanently built into the education program of the churches. The pastor should remain the chief officer of VBS, but the Sunday School officers should plan, promote, and administer the school, Grice proposed.

As Vacation Bible School was promoted through district associations with state clinics to train volunteer workers, the number of schools began to skyrocket. After finally topping 1,000 schools in 1935, the total was well over 4,000 in 1939 and more than 20,000 by 1950.

As he built a Southern Baptist program for VBS, Grice developed a curriculum that was uniquely Southern Baptist, with an emphasis on missions and a related focus on the then-fledgling Cooperative Program.

In 1951, the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board planned a celebration of 50 years of Vacation Bible School work. The Sunday School Builder magazine devoted the entire issue to recognizing

the achievements of Vacation Bible School. Less than two years later Grice retired from his work at the Sunday School Board.

Charles Treadway took up where Grice left off as editor of VBS materials. Sibley C. Burnett, Grice's associate since 1938, continued as the denomination's senior leader in promoting Vacation Bible School Work.

In 1970 a significant change was made in VBS. The familiar pink, blue, yellow, red, and green spiral-bound cycle and group-graded curriculum books were replaced with an all-new annually dated curriculum. Along with the new curriculum came a new age-grading basis and new terminologies. Space age technologies and the information explosion began to make their mark on VBS. Guided by the prevailing educational philosophies and a more sophisticated society, this new design and materials met the needs of churches for nearly two decades.

Another innovation of the 1970 was the development of a three-tiered field service strategy to carry information and training to the VBS faculties in the churches. Associations and state conventions had conducted training for VBS materials for several years. However, the first VBS Institute was planned and conducted in 1970 to introduce the new materials. It was so well received that the institute approved for training state convention teams has continued. The basic team has grown from five to 10 members, and as many as seven special team members have been added.

In 1967, Sibley Burnett, who had earned the title of "Mr. Vacation Bible School," retired, but continued serving as a VBS leader in his local church until just weeks before his death in the summer of 1972. He was succeed by Art Burcham (1967), Willie R. Beaty (1982), Rebecca "Becky" Martin (1996), Jerry Wooley (2006), and Melita Thomas (2017).

The following information, added April 2006, is updated each year by the VBS Ministry Specialist.

In 1992, Southern Baptist Vacation Bible School hit an enrollment record of 3,709,174.

In 1997, the Sunday School Board (Lifeway Christian Resources) 75th year of producing VBS helps, a new format for Vacation Bible School resources was introduced with the introduction of *The Wild and Wonderful Good News Stampede: Telling Others about Jesus*. Based on ten guiding principles that are still used today, the new format introduced children's rotation sites for music, missions, crafts, recreation and snacks. Other additions to this new design included the "ABCs of Becoming a Christian" evangelistic emphasis, music written specifically for the theme by Jeff Slaughter, video with daily drama segments, and a musical based on the daily songs and drama. Preschoolers, children, teens, and adults all have the opportunity to study at an age-appropriate level the same Scripture passages and daily theme, making Lifeway's VBS a true family experience.

In 2003, Spanish translations of the preschool and children's resources were introduced. By 2009 Spanish language resources have grown to include translations of the leader pack, daily songs, "ABCs of Becoming a Christian" memory cross, and both a U.S. and International version of the Spanish Sampler.

In 2005, churches were provided theme options with the introduction of *Club VBS: Beach Blast*. An annual broadly-graded Club VBS theme for preschoolers and children is specifically designed to require less space, fewer workers, and fewer resources. Also in 2005, Lifeway introduced the VBS Preview in Nashville and at Glorieta, New Mexico. VBS leaders from across the country had the opportunity to explore VBS resources, experience a VBS worship rally led by Jeff Slaughter, and preview the VBS musical performed by a local children's choir.

In 2006, resources designed specifically for fifth and sixth graders were introduced under the name VBX. The new format was designed to be used as a self-contained VBS experience for preteens or in conjunction with children of all grades.

In 2007, preschool resources adapted the rotation model with the introduction of the 3s—Kindergarten Rotation Pack. VBS Previews were expanded from two events at two locations to four events at three locations. The VBS Expo, a hands-on crafts, decorations, and snack experience became the major centerpiece of the Preview events.

In 2008, a Special Friends Edition was added to the growing list of Lifeway's VBS resources. Special

Friends Edition produced instructional resources for leaders working with children, teens, and adults with special needs.

By 2009 Southern Baptist Vacation Bible School enrollment averaged around 3,000,000. Approximately 10 percent of participants identify themselves as unchurched.

In 2011, Club VBS resources were produced for the last time.

In 2012, Dove-award winning artist Jamie Grace joined the Lifeway VBS Kids to record three of the *Colossal Coaster World* songs (written by Paul Marino and Jeremy Johnson) and motions.

In 2013, Backyard Kids Club™ Resources were added to the premier theme family of resources.

In 2014, *Zip for Kids* was introduced as a customizable VBS, camp, and summer event curriculum.

In 2017, Go and Tell Kids was launched. Designed exclusively for mission trips, this "VBS in a box" offered all digital curriculum and a clear five-session gospel presentation.
In 2019, Lifeway Kids and Lifeway Research published It's Worth It: Uncovering How One Week Can Transform Your Church. The book unpacked research pointing to the continued effectiveness of VBS as a discipleship and evangelism strategy.

In 2020, multi-age resources were introduced, giving churches the option to group their kids either by age/grade or in more broadly-graded classes.

Lifeway VBS Themes

1990	Share Hope: Reach Through VBS
1991	Celebrate Jesus
1992	Fantastic Journey
1993	Summer Shine
1994	Trail of Treasures
1995	Windows on the World
1996	Go For the Gold
1997	The Wild and Wonderful Good News Stampede: Telling Others about Jesus
1998	StarQuest - A Galactic Good News Adventure
1999	Mt. Extreme: The Ultimate Good News Challenge
2000	The Fantastic Good News Ocean Odyssey: Diving into the Depths of God's Faithfulness
2001	Truth Trackers and the Secret of the Stone Tablets
2002	Amazon Outfitters: On Expedition With the One True God
2003	The Great Kingdom Caper: Cracking the Character Code
2004	Far-Out Far East Rickshaw Rally: Racing to the Son
2005	Ramblin' Road Trip – Which Way Do I Go?
	Club VBS: Beach Blast
2006	Arctic Edge: Where Adventure Meets Courage
	Club VBS: SpaceQuest
2007	Game Day Central: Where Heroes are Made
	Club VBS: Jungle Jaunt
2008	Outrigger Island: Living God's Unshakeable Truth
	Club VBS: Cactus Canyon
2009	Boomerang Express: It All Comes Back to Jesus
	Club VBS: Truth Trek
2010	Saddle Ridge Ranch: Roundin' Up Questions, Drivin' Home Answers
	Club VBS: Route 254
2011	Big Apple Adventure: Where Faith and Life Connect
	Club VBS: Beach Blast
2012	Amazing Wonders Aviation: Encountering God's Awesome Power

2013 Colossal Coaster World: Facing Fear, Trusting God
2014 Agency D3: Discover, Decide, Defend
2015 Journey Off the Map: Unknown to Us, Known to Him
2016 Submerged: Finding Truth Below the Surface
2017 Galactic Starveyors: Discovering the God of the Universe
2018 Game On! Gearing Up for Life's Big Game
2019 In the Wild: Amazing Encounters with Jesus
2020 Concrete & Cranes: Building on the Love of Jesus
2021 Destination Dig: Unearthing the Truth About Jesus
2022 Spark Studios: Created in Christ, Designed for God's Purpose
2023 Twists & Turns: Following Jesus Changes the Game
2024 Breaker Rock Beach: God's Rock-solid Truth in a World of Shifting Sands
2025 Magnified!: Discovering the Bigness of God in the Smallest of Things
2026 Illumination Station: Shining a Light on Who Jesus Really Is
2027 Take Flight: Trusting God's Faithfulness Above All