VBS Is More Than a One-Off Event; It's an Investment

4 ways to use this one-week program to ignite year-long discipleship.

Beth Howe

Months before children fill your church for Vacation Bible School, preparation begins. You choose a VBS theme. You purchase items, decorate the church, recruit and train volunteers, and invite families. Then the big week arrives. Your church fills with children singing, eating snacks, making crafts, and learning about Scripture. Kids have fun. The gospel is shared. And then the week ends. Many of the children walk out the door and disappear until next year's VBS. For too many churches, this scenario plays out year after year.

Vacation Bible School is often one of the most intense weeks in the life of a church. For many churches, it is the largest outreach event of the year. But if VBS ends for your church as soon as everything is cleaned up for next Sunday's service, you're missing out on a world of potential.

No leader wants to spend lots of money and countless hours preparing and leading VBS only to see everything go back to normal the next week. Churches need a follow-up plan. I've seen four follow-up methods multiply the benefits of VBS well beyond one short week in the summer.

1. Follow up with all attendees.

My church always gets registration information for all children who attend VBS. We do this primarily for safety, but it also gives us everything we need for critical follow-up: their address, phone number, and parents' names and email. We also ask where they attend church, but I'll dig into that below. I've seen several follow-up methods work well. Some churches send a postcard or an email to all of the families thanking them for attending VBS. Others use this opportunity to invite people to a Back-to-School Bash, an upcoming Christmas Services, or other children's ministry events. And don't delete this distribution list immediately after your follow-up. We use ours to invite the same families to next year's VBS.

Inevitably, some children won't come beyond your yearly VBS program. But by sending out invitations to other events, you will welcome those from the community into the life of your church. I love seeing the same children who attend our VBS at other events. Parents are looking for safe events for their children, and your church can meet that need.

2. Follow up with unchurched attendees.

When you reach out to those who attended your VBS program, don't miss those who are unchurched. In your registration process, ask families what church they regularly attend. If they leave that space blank, follow up with that family more strategically. You can do this by phone, but it's better to find a more personal connection, such as a welcome gift. I find it especially

effective when the pastor or a key church leader makes a personal phone call or sends a handwritten letter.

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I know of one church that hosts a cookout the Sunday after VBS for all the families who attended. Then they invite those families without a church home to a special lunch after the next Sunday's service. Other churches gather volunteers on the Sunday after VBS to deliver goodie bags—including candy, simple activities or toys, and church information—to unchurched families. This doesn't have to include a long, formal conversation. Just drop off the goodie bag and say, "Thanks for coming." If no one is home, simply leave it on the door.

These simple ideas will encourage unchurched VBS guests to return.

3. Follow up with those who decide to follow Christ.

Whether your church does a formal altar call during VBS or offers other opportunities for children to commit their lives to Jesus, make it your top priority to contact these kids. Your church has an obligation to help disciple them. If the child has a church home other than yours, it's easiest to email or call the children's leader at that church and let him or her know. This not only ensures a consistent line of discipleship, but it also promotes unity among churches in your area.

If the child is a member of your church, follow up with their parents and schedule a time to meet personally with the child to make sure they truly understand what happened. Consider plugging these children into a new believer's class if your church offers one.

If the child who decides to follow Jesus is unchurched, make contact with their family. Send a letter inviting them to the new believer's class or invite them to a lunch provided by the church. This may open up an opportunity to share the gospel with the parents as well. A letter or email invite is great, but a personal call from church staff makes a greater impression.

4. Follow up with the volunteers.

Volunteer recruitment for next year's VBS starts with appreciating those who served this year. We try to let each volunteer know how vital they were to the success of our VBS program. Handwritten thank you notes make each volunteer feel appreciated. Also, give volunteers an opportunity to evaluate VBS this year. Offer specific questions to answer on paper, through email, or with an online questionnaire. Ask them to be specific and honest. This kind of unvarnished feedback will help improve VBS for the next year.

It can be hard to measure the success of Vacation Bible School. It is great to know that each child had the chance to hear the gospel message in a fun and inviting setting. But there is opportunity for even greater mission when churches intentionally reach out to the whole family. I've tried to change my perspective from thinking of VBS as a one-off event. Now I view it as an

investment in the church's constant mission to multiply disciples. This has led to entire families joining our church and dedicating their lives to following Jesus.

Beth Howe has worked in children's ministry for the past 14 years. She loves writing, teaching, and serving the local church to see more people saved and discipled.