

SURVEY OF WELS VBS COURSES--PAST AND FUTURE

by
Bruce Bitter and Robert Smith

Senior Church History
Prof. Fredrich
April 17, 1984

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 1 - 1

Part I - The History of VBS Materials in WELS 1 - 2

Part II - Results of Questionnaire 2 - 1

Conclusion 2 - 6

Appendix A - Reprint of Questionnaire A - 1

Appendix B - Charts B - 1

Acknowledgments

The impetus for this paper came from the Wisconsin Synod's Board for Parish Education. This board is planning to produce some new Vacation Bible School (VBS) materials this summer (1984) and are looking for some direction from the field so that they can meet the needs of the present congregations. This paper intends to take a look at the history of VBS materials in our synod and then speculate at to its future.

A note of heartfelt gratitude is in place for Pastor Kujath (Publishing House) and Pastor Fischer (Board for Parish Education), both of whom agreed to be interviewed concerning the history of VBS materials, and to the 48 pastors who took time out from their busy schedules to sit down and fill out the questionnaire we sent to them. Without the input of these men this paper would not have been possible.

Part I -- The History of VBS in the WELS

Before 1953 the Wisconsin Synod did not have any materials of its own for use in Vacation Bible School (VBS). Some congregations used materials published by Concordia Publishing House (CPH), but even those were not available before the 1940's. Before actual VBS materials were available most congregations simply used Bible History books and taught lessons out of them. It would appear that the idea of Vacation Bible School in our circles was an outgrowth of summer school.

In 1953 the Board of Education produced the first course in a four course series for exclusive use in VBS. The motivating force behind the materials seems to have been twofold: a simple desire to "have our own"; a desire to acquaint children who were not in a Christian Day School with the Catechism and the general technique used in our synod to teach the Catechism. This probably explains the stated purpose of the materials:

This series is written to provide lesson material for Vacation Bible Schools and Saturday Schools. Special consideration is given to the needs of congregations as yet without a Christian Day School, and of such as have mission opportunities among children from unchurched homes. In explaining the Chief Parts of Luther's Small Catechism by means of stories from the Bible, these Lessons will serve to familiarize the pupil with both Catechism and Bible before he enters the Confirmation Class. The Lessons are not only instructive, but set up in an appealing way in order to stimulate interest even in those children whose parents offer little or no encouragement.

The materials provide student manuals for four levels of

students: Beginner, Primary, Junior, and Senior. They also provide two teachers' manuals: Beginner-Primary and Junior-Senior. The teachers' manuals are divided into two sections: introductory notes and suggestions; lesson outlines. The first section includes the following:

1. Purpose: Gives the purpose for which the material was written.
2. General Set-up: Explains the content of the materials and the length of time the entire course is set up for.
3. Teacher's Guide: Explains the inclusion of teachers' guides in the materials. This section also shows the teacher generally how to present a lesson.
4. Handwork Projects: Suggests certain handwork projects which correlate with the individual lessons.

All four courses follow the same teaching methodology for all four levels of students. The teacher begins the lesson with an aim in the form of a question, then presents the story, and then asks questions about the story in such a way as to lead the students to an answer to the original question. The teacher finally applies the truths learned in the lesson to the every day lives of the children. For example, in the lesson on creation the aim is: How did the world come to be? The teacher then presents the story of creation and then penetrates the story by means of questions until he finally gets the answer from the students: The world came to be when God created it. Application points out all the things we see around us and the fact that they have come from the hand of God.

These courses are really three week courses, but they can be cut down to two weeks if desired by combining certain lessons on certain days. The courses, as the purpose makes clear, are aimed primarily at students who are members of congregations for further education in the summertime. There is very little in the courses for outreach.

All four of the courses are based on Luther's small catechism. The 1953 course is entitled I Believe and is based on the Apostles' Creed. The 1954 course is entitled Teach us to Pray and is based on the Lord's prayer. The 1955 course is entitled Teach Me Thy Way and is based on the ten commandments. The 1957 course is entitled Grant Us Thy Grace and is based on the section in the catechism about the means of grace.

This series was published again and again for almost twenty years. It wasn't until 1970 that new materials were produced. In that year the Board for Parish Education (BPE) of the Wisconsin Synod came out with a single course entitled God's Great Love. This was a correlation of material from the Sunday School course at that time. Apparently there was some sentiment ~~for using VBS more for outreach because the purpose of this~~ course is stated as follows:

This course was especially arranged to teach unchurched children. We know that there are many homes in every community where the Word of God does not live and rule. There are many children who have not heard the simple truths of the Gospel. Our purpose, then, is to lead them to a knowledge of the God who created and redeemed them. This can only be done by teaching them

the word which alone "is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth" [Rom. 1:16]. While we want to show the child his sin and what he deserves because of it, we want especially to reveal to him a love which he has never known before--the love of God in Christ. We accomplish this when we lead lost sinners to trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior and to serve Him in their daily lives. To that end may God bless your teaching of this course.

Two years later the pendulum swung back the other way. In 1972 the BPE began a five course series. All of these courses are based on the catechism again. Their primary purpose is to further educate children already members of the church. Four of the courses assume a prior knowlege of God the Creator and Redeemer. The second course tries to get the best of both worlds. It is based on the second article, and since the second article talks about the very basics of the Christian faith the material is also well suited for outreach. The writers for this series were Christian Day School teachers.

All of these courses follow the same basic format, generally the same as the materials produced in the 1950's. They include teachers' manuals and booklets for the use of the children. There is a different teachers' manual and student booklet for each of the four levels. Each teachers' manual is again divided into two sections: introduction and lesson plans.

The introduction gives information about how this course is to be used. It includes:

1. he Teacher: Explains the teacher's call, work, and an example for the teacher to follow.

2. Purpose: Explains the purpose for which the course was written.
3. Arrangement: Lists the stories selected to conform with the purpose of the course.
4. Material: Shows the availability of the two main materials for the course, the teachers' manual and the childrens' leaflets or booklets.
5. Devotions: Suggests devotions to be used daily.
6. Handcraft: Suggests handcraft ideas for the lessons.
7. Schedule: Suggests a daily schedule beginning at 8:30 A.M. and ending at 11:30 A.M.
8. Visual Aids: Recommends the use of visual aids and suggests some possibilities.

The BPE courses are ten day (2 week) courses employing two different teaching methodologies. Level 1 presents a theme at the beginning of the lesson and then uses the presentation of the story and the discussion to support the initial theme. For example, in the story of the creation of the world, the theme presented at the beginning is: God loves us. The entire lesson, presentation and discussion, supports that theme. This seems to have been done because little children have an easier time grasping the lesson truth in this way.

The upper level material uses the same methodology as that produced in the 1950's. However, the content of the theme grows in quantity as the level of the student grows. For example, the themes for the succeeding levels in one course is: God Wants us to Pray (level 1); God Wants His Children to Pray Boldly, Trusting Him (level 2); Jesus Teaches us to Trust our Heavenly

Father to Answer our Prayers with His Blessings (level 3); Jesus Teaches us to Pray Diligently to our Heavenly Father for all that we Need (level 4).

The 1972 course is entitled God's Commandments and is based on the ten commandments. The 1973 course is entitled Jesus Christ-Savior and is based on the second article. The 1974 course is entitled My Christian Life and is based on the third article. The 1975 course is entitled Lord, Teach us to Pray and is based on the Lord's prayer. No course was printed in 1976. The 1977 course is entitled My Heavenly Father and is based on the first article of the Apostles Creed.

This series was repeated once and at the present time it is being repeated the second time. Because of a decline in sales during the second time around and because only one of the five courses in the BPE series can be used well for outreach, NPH published a new course in 1983 which has the specific purpose of outreach into the community. The course was written by a Pastor and Mrs. Tim Kujath. It is a proven course, used with success in his congregation. It has just one teacher's manual and one student booklet. The teachers' manual includes the following:

1. Introduction: States the purpose for which the course was written.
2. Description of the Course and How it is to be Used
3. Daily Schedule
4. Opening and Closing Devotions: Suggests devotions to be

used for the entire group to begin and end each day.

5. Presentation of Daily Lessons: Suggests different ways to present the lessons for each day.
6. Application
7. Answers to Activities
8. Answers to Study Questions
9. Handcraft Ideas

The format of this course is quite a bit different from the BPE courses. The whole course has a general theme centered specifically around outreach. The theme and title of this course is God's Got a Plan. The course only lasts for five days. On the first four days the lessons show how God had a plan for four different people recorded in the Old and New Testament of the Bible. On the fifth day the lesson shows how God also has a plan for each of the children in the VBS. Hence the fifth lesson serves as the major application of the whole course.

The teaching methodology is different too. Instead of having each individual teacher present the lesson to his class, the lesson is presented to all the students at the beginning of the day. This presentation can be done in any form ranging from a puppet show to film strips, short plays, presentation by the pastor, or anything else a fertile imagination can come up with. The presentation always ends with the theme for the day.

For the penetration of the story the individual teachers simply follow the printed questions in the teachers' manual,

which are also printed in the students' booklets. These are designed to expand upon the theme that has already been presented. The same questions are used for all four age levels. There are also some activities the answers to which are facts from the story for that day. The activities are different for the different age levels. They are games like dot-to-dot, cross-word puzzles, mazes, etc. All are intended to reinforce the facts of the story and reemphasize the theme for the day.

This year (1984) NPH has printed a second course with generally the same format as the one for 1983. It is again a course which was written and used by one of our pastors and has proven successful. This one was written by Pastor Richard Stadler. The theme of this course is Jesus the World's Best Friend and it again strives to leave the children with the truth that Jesus is their best friend too.

Part II - Results of Questionnaire

A questionnaire was sent out in January 1984 to about 60 pastors. This questionnaire asked the pastors to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the present VBS courses used in our churches and to make suggestions for future courses to be developed. We received 48 responses. Here is a summary of the responses to this questionnaire (The questionnaire itself is reproduced in full in appendix A):

Please list the years during which your church has held VBS since 1974:

This question was designed mainly to introduce the questionnaire. Since this questionnaire was sent only to those pastors who have a VBS in their church, it would be expected that just about every response would list all the years from 1974 on. The tally is this: 38 responses listed every year, and 8 responses said that they skipped a year here and there. The reason that these 8 did not have VBS every year was either because the congregation was not in existence for each year or because the pastor in question had not been in that congregation every year.

What course(s) have you been using?

74% of the responses indicated exclusive use of NPH materials, 20% indicated a mixed use of NPH and Concordia materials, and 6% indicated a use of the "Inner City" course and materials from outside sources.

What do you see as the most important purpose for VBS:

- A) Education of the church's young.
- B) A tool for evangelism in the community.
- C) Other _____

21% listed A as their choice, 42% listed B, 31% said that education and evangelism are equally important, and 6% listed other purposes as most important. (Note: About 40% of the questionnaires were sent to mission congregations.) Other purposes mentioned were these: A chance for teenagers to serve in their congregations. A chance of members to serve. The integration of the Christian day school children with the children from public school.

One respondent commented: "I would see the VBS serving first and foremost as a mission arm of the church. When the congregation sees the VBS in this light, and seeks to tap the unchurched potential of the area, they will find it will serve well as a mission agency. In almost every urban setting, there has to be some mission potential that needs to be tapped. It's all in how a congregation views the VBS and how it views its area for mission potential."

How important is VBS in your church's plan
of Christian education: of evangelism:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| A) Vital | A) Vital |
| B) Very helpful | B) Very helpful |
| C) Nice, but not necessary. | C) Nice, but not necessary |
| D) Not really needed. | D) Not needed. |

The answers to this question are charted in appendix B. The results in brief are these:
For Christian education, 15% listed VBS as vital, 56% as very helpful, 20% as nice, but not necessary, and 9% as not needed.
For evangelism, 28% listed VBS as vital, 59% as very helpful, 11% as nice, but not necessary, and 2% as not needed.

Please comment on what you feel are strengths of the NPH VBS courses:

Strengths:

As a mission arm:

Here the responses listed several categories of strengths:
Clear presentation of sin and grace. 24 replies listed this as a strength of current NPH VBS courses.
More emphasis on spiritual training rather than "baby-sitting."
Proper interpretation of Bible truth. Two replies listed this as a strength.
Helps for the teacher.
It presents one concept at a time.
The craft projects help the child relate what they have learned at VBS with their parents.
The hymns are not too difficult.
Clear and easy to understand. One pastor said, "It provides basic Bible information to expose young minds to the Gospel and Christian direction for godly living. Four replies listed this as a strength.
Uses familiar stories.
Shows desire to share gospel.
Uses basic Bible stories.
VBS is interesting and leads children into Sunday School.
Material is attractive.

As an educational tool:

Good illustrations and activities.
Good teacher preparation.
Incorporation of historical context in gospel presentations.
Use of catechism as an outline. One pastor wrote: "[The course] made it possible to emphasize during the summer a principle part of catechism to our potential confirmands.
Quite thorough.
Good tool for Bible review. Three replies listed this as a strength.

Material reinforces what children already know. Two replies listed this as a strength.

Reviews catechism. Students like projects.

It gets children into the Bible.

Provides some lessons not covered in Sunday School.

Logical presentation. "Well-designed; all inclusive of what is needed."

Note: The strengths and weaknesses listed here cannot always be divided into one of the two categories. Often they apply to both uses of VBS.

Weaknesses?

As a mission arm:

One pastor mentioned that the closing service is too complicated.

Too much skipping back and forth between the Old and New testament.

Weak applications especially in terms of personal outreach. Three replies listed this concern.

Weak in affectation of will.

Not enough emphasis on sanctification.

Too much religious terminology. In this connection another pastor mentioned that the material is too advanced for the unchurched. "At times the exercises assume the unchurched are acquainted with Luther's Small Catechism; an evangelistic too should stick with the Bible. Six replies listed this as a concern, but one reply stated that the course was too simple.

Lesson too long.

"Artwork has exclusively white faces. Our VBS is 90% black."

Course needs more flexibility as to a 1 or 2 week course.

Needs more songs.

Not enough "busy work" to keep children in lower grades occupied.

Ten-day course too long.

As an educational tool:

Not exciting enough. One reply was this: "The exception was '83's 5-day course. The plays, puppet shows, movies and filmstrips made the stories come alive for members and non-members alike--and the staff had fun, too!" Need for more visual aid. "NPH looks dull, sounds dull, reads dull." Twelve replies listed a lack of attractiveness as a concern.

Not sensitive enough to minority needs.

Not enough student participation.

Overworking the same stories. Too many repeats of S.S. stories. Five people listed this as a concern.

Too simple. Five people listed this as a concern.

Weak in application. Two people listed this concern.

Lack of worksheets.

Effective use requires a lot of teacher preparation.

Crafts inadequate and too hard. "Getting volunteers to prepare handicraft has become increasingly difficult over the years since a larger percentage of women are working out of the

home. To keep our VBS going we were 'forced' into choosing a different course."

Weak in doctrinal content.

There should be more courses available.

More help needed for the 3-4 year level.

Attempts to do too much in too little time.

How easy has it been for your teachers to use the NPH courses?

Easy, according to 10 responses.

No problem, according to 12 responses.

No lesson plans.

The pre-1980 NPH courses were not easy to use.

New teachers have difficulty with it.

Difficult, according to two responses. "V.B.S. teachers are often not trained teachers. They must be assumed to need much help."

The craft suggestions are either too easy or too difficult, according to 2 people.

One noted that too much time had to be spent gathering materials.

"Hard to be inspired with material."

Hard for teachers to follow up and reinforce.

Would you prefer that NPH supply the materials for handcrafts with the course? If so, how much per handcraft box would your church be willing to pay?

38% said yes, 62% said no. Of the ones that said yes, 5 people said they would be willing to pay whatever it takes. One person was willing to pay \$1-2; 7, \$2-3; and 3, \$3-4. Two people indicated that the best thing would be for NPH to continue to supply suggestions for crafts so that teachers can scrounge up materials themselves.

The Board of Parish Education is writing a new VBS course. Do you have any suggestions on how they can improve the course--students' manual? teachers' manual?

Suggestions included the following:

Although our questionnaire did not ask whether people preferred the 5- or 10-day course, 4 listed a preference for a 5-day course, 1 for a 10-day course, and 1 said that both should be available.

Get people in the field to write them rather than people in the office. One pastor wrote: "Let them breathe, let them rub elbows with the world, and then, and only then, write."

Include more variety.

"Keep in mind our synod is not made up of all farmers, all white and all people living in the Midwest. Make the student lessons colorful like the Inner City lessons."

Include detailed lesson plans.

Arrange the format like the new Sunday School material. Five people suggested this. Evidently there has been a recent Sunday

School course that would serve as a good example of a course drawn up with the principles of good education in mind.

"Follow the lead of the new 5-day course from 1983. It was great!

One pastor wrote: "We need to teach our people to be priests who study the Word, share it, and are comfortable to pray in all situations."

Take a good look at Concordia's material.

Have a VBS course dealing with the whole family. Two people made this suggestion.

There is a need for improved organization and interest-evoking presentations.

Student manuals.

Include some outside games. One commented on the need for more activities in the 3-5 year old age bracket. Two people made this suggestion.

Include new songs. One pastor suggested looking at some of the songs in A.L.C.'s "Kids of the Kingdom" booklet. Three responses made this suggestion.

Students' manual at Level 1 should include a worksheet with each lesson. Two people suggested this.

Student manuals could include better art work. This could include line drawings. "Keep it colorful, updated, with a variety of activities from day to day." Include pictures of Hispanics and blacks. "Our materials look like they were produced in 1920. We must have people in our Synod who are in tune with the 1980's." Perhaps include a filmstrip. Six replies made suggestions in this connection.

More and better application questions and examples from everyday life. Four people made this suggestion.

Closing service too difficult for children to learn.

Go into more detail.

Use different stories to emphasize a particular doctrine. Two people suggested this.

Improve the way in which questions lead to inferences.

The 7th and 8th grade manuals should have more application than lower levels.

Teacher manuals.

Teachers' manuals could have an idea for each opening devotion.

Include a planning schedule.

More suggestions for application. Two responses made this suggestion.

Should include as much background information as possible.

Since the first day is harder to get through for the teacher, more helps and materials should be included for that day.

One pastor suggested looking to the teacher's manual for the inner-city VBS course for ideas.

Give suggestions for audio-visual aids.

CONCLUSION

This is the first year in which the Wisconsin Synod has called a man to serve as chairman of the evangelism committee of the synod. This seems to be the result of a general swing in favor of evangelism and outreach which has been growing throughout the past decade and a half in the synod. In keeping with this swing the materials provided for VBS have begun to swing more and more solidly in the direction of evangelism and outreach. In 1985 NPH is planning to publish another five day course according to the format presented above. In that year the BPE is also planning to make available a second five day course with emphasis on evangelism. In addition, the BPE is planning to again make the present ten day course available, simply changing the KJV references to NIV. In this way it is hoped that most of the needs of the synod's congregations will be met in regard to VBS.

As far as the questionnaire is concerned, there were a wide range of views and suggestions for VBS courses. Some of the views expressed in the replies conflicted with views expressed by others. Yet there were a few suggestions and comments that stood out rather prominently: Replies stated appreciation for the way that present courses present law and gospel clearly. Concern was also expressed that the new course have a variety of illustrations and examples to catch the eye of the student and to help him or her understand the Biblical truths being taught. The responses to the questionnaires also evidenced concern that

there be enough timely applications of the lesson.

One pastor who responded to the questionnaire thought that we were "barking up the wrong tree." He said that the important thing was not so much what the course looks like but the willingness of the pastor and his people to devote time and attention to having a viable VBS program. While it was not the intent of this paper to survey attitudes concerning VBS programs, his point is worth consideration. One can have the best VBS course in the world, but if the pastor and his volunteers are not willing to devote time and effort into the program, it will all be for nought. Therefore we ask God to bless us both with a new course that teaches Bible truths clearly and effectively, and with people willing to devote time and talent to the instruction of God's little ones.

** PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS **

Please list the years during which your church has held VBS since 1974:

What course(s) have you been using?

What do you see as the most important purpose for VBS:

- A) Education of the church's young.
- B) A tool for evangelism in the community.
- C) Other _____

How important is VBS in your church's plan
of Christian education: of evangelism:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|
| A) Vital | A) Vital |
| B) Very helpful | B) Very helpful |
| C) Nice, but not necessary. | C) Nice, but not necessary |
| D) Not really needed. | D) Not needed. |

Please comment on what you feel are strengths of the NPH VBS courses:
As a mission arm:

As an educational tool:

Weaknesses?

As a mission arm:

As an educational tool:

II page

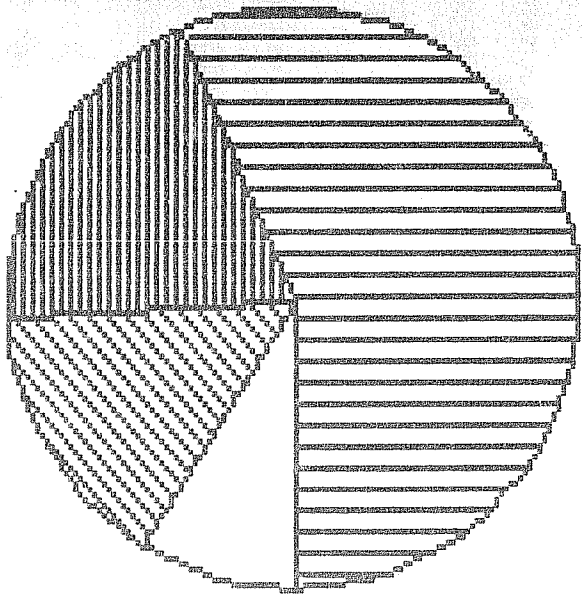
*** IF YOU WOULD LIKE OR CAN AFFORD TO SPEND ANY MORE TIME, PLEASE ANSWER WHATEVER QUESTION ON THIS PAGE YOU WISH ***

How easy has it been for your teachers to use the NPH courses?

Would you prefer that NPH supply the materials for handcrafts with the course? If so, how much per handcraft box would your church be willing to pay?

The Board of Parish Education is writing a new VBS course. Do you have any suggestions on how they can improve the course--students' manual? teachers' manual?

IMPORTANCE OF VBS IN EDUCATION

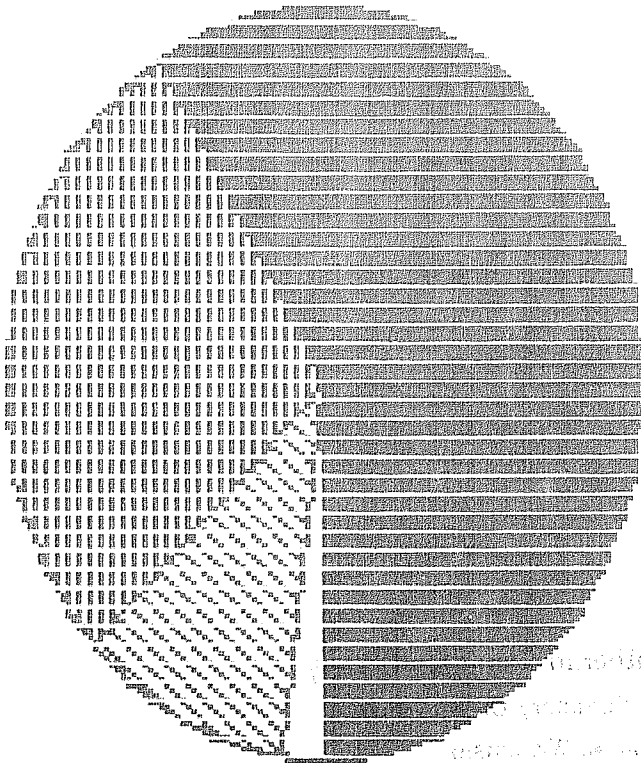


56.51%
HELPFUL

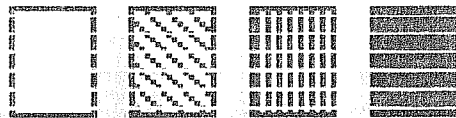
19.57%
NICE

15.22%
VITAL

8.70%
NOT NEEDED



THE
M
O
N
T
H
L
Y
M
A
G
A
Z
I
N
E



2
N
O
T
H
E
L
P
E
D

3
S
O
R
T
E
D
E
L
I
T
E
R

3
S
O
R
T
E
D
E
L
I
T
E
R

3
S
O
R
T
E
D
E
L
I
T
E
R