



CAYMAN ISLANDS REGIONAL MISSION COUNCIL

WEEKLY UPDATE

July 14, 2021

VOLUME 6 ISSUE 28

UCJCI 42nd SYNOD THEME 2021 – Rooted, Resilient: Responding in HOPE (Health, Opportunity, Peace, Evangelism)

Vacation Bible School

A Brief History

By Rev. Otto Menko

When preparing for their annual plan, most congregations include an old-time favorite, Vacation Bible School. For many of us, it is almost impossible to imagine summer without this staple of the church year. The acronym VBS conjures a rich mixture of fond memories in our minds; days filled with Bible stories, singing songs, making various crafts, playing games, and having a lot of fun. Interestingly, it is as much anticipated and enjoyed by volunteering grown-ups serving in various capacities as by participating children.

VBS offers a very special opportunity to congregations to engage the children of the church and community in a more intense, more focused, more impactful way. Besides being exposed to the message of the Bible day after day in various activities, they also learn to ‘connect’ to the church environment and its people, forming positive impressions in their hearts and minds. Through our daily interactions with them they begin to see the church as a big family with an open heart, with love that welcomes, embraces, appreciates, and eager to journey through life with them.



VBS in progress at the John Gray Memorial UC July 12, 2021

The real benefit of VBS and indeed, the key to our ‘success’ as Church lies not in what we are able to ‘drill’ into them about God in a short week (or during the weekly Church/Sunday School and other activities), but in the quality of relationships, we can develop. No amount of religious teaching or fancy programs can match the power of being exposed to persons who are living examples of faith, who through their attitude, behavior and actions display genuine and authentic Christ-

likeness. Ultimately, ministry of any kind is not about doing the right thing but doing it the right way. May our ministry through VBS and through all we do, draw everyone closer to Jesus Christ and God.

But have you ever wondered how, when and why Vacation Bible School started in the first place? Let us take a brief, cursory view of its origins and rich history.

To begin with, it must be made clear that a concise, detailed, authoritative, and ‘official’ VBS history doesn’t exist. What can be established with a degree of certainty is based on various historical documents, articles, records, and a few books containing bits and pieces pertaining to this matter.

The widely held view is that the origin of Vacation Bible School can be traced back to various, independently organized events that, over time, coalesced into what we know today as VBS. The common thread among these initiatives is the recognition of a need and the resourcefulness and dedication of persons passionate about meeting those needs.

1874 A precursor of VBS can be linked to inventor Lewis Miller and Methodist Episcopal bishop John H. Vincent who started a camp in the vicinity of Lake Chautauqua, NY, for training Sunday school teachers which eventually expanded to include programs and activities for children as well. This became quite popular and began to spread to other churches.

1877 Church-organized summer activities were introduced in Montreal, Canada, but there is no further information on these.

1894 In Hopedale, Illinois Mrs. D.T. Miles, a former public school teacher, and wife of a Methodist preacher introduced an interdenominational four-week **Bible school** that enrolled 40 children. The meetings were held in a local public school and a nearby park provided the venue for recreational activities. Mrs. Miles was assisted by teenagers from her congregation. Besides teaching Bible stories and memory verses, the activities included various crafts, singing, contests, and storytelling. Parents paid \$1 for each child, and Bibles were donated by the American Bible Society.

1898 Mrs. Walker A. Hawes, the Children’s Ministry Director at New York City’s Baptist Church organized an **“Everyday Bible School”** in the summer to minister to the immigrant children who spent their idle summer days running the streets of New York City’s East Side, getting into all sorts of mischief. She rented out a nearby beer parlor that was unused during the day, and for six weeks she gathered the neighborhood children

for Bible stories, Scripture memorization, singing, games, crafts, drawing, and cooking. This program was run until 1900.

1900 Robert G. Boville, executive secretary of the New York City Baptist Board of Missions followed in line but instead of a beer garden he utilized unused churches and reached out to unoccupied teachers and university students to run summer programs called “**Vacation Church School**”. By **1902** this program was introduced in Philadelphia and Chicago, and in **1907** Boville created a national association of vacation church schools.

1900 In Elk Mound, Wisconsin, Howard R. Vaughan, a Congregationalist pastor started a similar program but it was shorter and more Bible-focused. His program depended on hired public school teachers to lead the classes. Eventually, this ministry led him to produce a manual (written by Hazel Straight Stafford, a high school teacher) entitled “**The Vacation Religious Day School**,” which was published by Abingdon Press in **1920**.

1910 The VBS concept was adopted by the Presbyterian Church’s Home Mission Board, in **1915** the Northern Baptists did the same, with other denominations following in suit. These denominations then went on to formalize the process and method of instruction and published their own VBS textbooks.

By **1922** there were 5,000 such schools. Most vacation church schools run a five-week-long program that included Bible lessons, worship, music, open-air activities, games, sewing, weaving, basketry, hammock-making, as well as talks on patriotism and hygiene.

During the following decades, VBS continued to grow and expand. By the **1950s** over 60,000 VBS programs were engaging close to 5 million children. While the numbers increased there were also some concerns. One was that the original 5-7 weeks long program was reduced to two weeks. The other concern was about the educational value of VBS. While VBS continued to be very popular, more and more people were of the view that VBS was barely more than a “supervised recreation center to which mothers anxious to get rid of their youngsters can send them”. (This may sound familiar.)

But there were also other voices, like that of Charles F. Treadway, editor of VBS materials for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board who pointed out that the greatest value of VBS is in its potential as a tool of evangelism, to win boys and girls to Jesus Christ.

By the **1970s** most churches opted for a one-week VBS and in the last few decades, even that format shrank down to either a morning or evening VBS due to the limited availability of volunteers. According to studies conducted by the Barna Group, the number of churches offering VBS (in the USA) is steadily declining since the **mid-1990s**.

In the **United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands Vacation Bible Schools** are held since the **1970s** (in Jamaica) and the **late-1980s** (in Cayman) and many -now church members- grew up attending these events. This year six of the

nine congregations in the CIRMC have in-person VBS, while the UCJCI in Jamaica will offer a virtual VBS (via Zoom) due to Covid-19 restrictions.

SOURCES: “First Vacation Bible School Was Held In a Beer Garden in New York in 1898,” June 27, 1958, Daily Progress, Charlottesville, Virginia; “Fond Memories of Vacation Bible School Can Last a Lifetime,” Aug. 6, 1994, The Virginian Pilot; “A Brief History of Vacation Bible School,” June 20, 2017, by Chris Gertz patheos.com; “The History of Vacation Bible School” by Nick Hardesty, September 12, 2018 owensboroliving.com; “VBS: A Historical Perspective” dba.net; “Facets of Faith: Who created vacation Bible school?” by Leila Pitchford-English July 5, 2019 theadvocate.com

Congratulations!

The Cayman Islands Regional Mission Council extends to **Aiden Watler** the heartiest congratulations on being chosen as the recipient of the 2021 William A. Dart Memorial University Scholarship.

This is indeed a great indication of his disciplined approach to learning, his community involvement, the sterling support and nurture of his family and the excellent learning environment of the Cayman Prep and High School.

We wish him the very best as he pursues higher learning at the University of California, Berkeley.

Truly, CPHS has continued to prepare students to compete with the very best of scholars and Aiden is a living testimony of the tremendous work being done by the students, faculty, administration and governing body of the school.

With every good wish for the continued success of Aiden and the Cayman Prep and High School,

from the CIRMC

UPCOMING EVENTS

July 17. (Saturday)

Lay Leaders Training Course – 9:00am - via Zoom

July 18. (Sunday) 8th Sunday of Pentecost

Children’s Camp (Sunday – Friday) 8 AM – 6 PM at the PYC



on Radio Cayman 89.9
every Sunday at 7:45 am

July 18, 2021
Rev. Louis Herard-Sully

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