

Kathy Hillman: Vacation Bible School: Letting children know Jesus loves them

July 24, 2015

One summer, my grandparents chose Vacation Bible School week for my annual visit. With an August birthday, I was too young, but First Baptist Church in Marfa's pastor, Cliff Johnston, welcomed me anyway. Besides, my grandmother Barton provided all the refreshments.



Kathy HillmanEvery day, we marched behind the American and Christian flags and the Bible. Once inside, we pledged allegiance to the flags and to God's Holy Word. Traditional "Stand Up" and "Sit Down" chords governed movements. I'll never forget the morning Bro. Johnston chose me to carry the Bible. Butterflies flew in my nearly 6-year-old tummy. I was scared, excited and not sure I could hold the huge book upright that long. But the pastor was sure.

From that moment, I loved Vacation Bible School—as a child, helper, Texas Baptist summer missionary and whenever-I-can volunteer. VBS has impacted generations. Historians differ on its origin. D.T. Miles, a Methodist pastor's wife and teacher, held a four-week Bible school in Hopedale, Ill., in 1894.



Vacation Bible School

at Gaston Avenue Baptist Church in Dallas, circa. 1920. (Photo courtesy of the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives) In 1898, Virginia Sinclair Hawes, children's department director at Epiphany Baptist Church in New York City, dreamed of getting children off the streets and into God's kingdom. She rented a beer hall for Everyday Bible School. Boys and girls came. They did crafts and learned Bible stories, Scripture and songs. Two years later, her pastor insisted the school be at church. The children didn't come, so they moved back to the beer hall.

Hawes' sister Charlotte married Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor John Broadus. Thus WMU Training School Principal Maud McLure learned of the program. In 1914, students at the Training School—later Carver School of Social Work—in Louisville, Ky., taught 102 children in the first VBS under Southern Baptist auspices.



Lindsay (a youth helper) and Kathy Hillman with an almost-two-year-old during VBS at Columbus Avenue Baptist Church, Waco. (Kathy Hillman Photo) Today, VBS continues that effective outreach. Churches reduced the program to five mornings, afternoons or evenings and added themes and decorations. One year, several denominations in my hometown partnered in “The Great Comeback—Mega Sports Camp” using athletics facilities.

In 2014, an estimated 2,711 out of 5,333 Texas Baptist congregations—57 percent of churches, 26 percent of missions—held VBS. Enrollment totaled 402,200. However, 80 percent of churches averaging more than 200 in worship participated. For every 23 children enrolled, one publicly follows Jesus. That means in 2014, about 17,500 boys and girls trusted Christ in Vacation Bible Schools in Texas Baptist churches. Another 1,640 felt God’s call to church-related vocations.



Children practice worship music during Vacation Bible School at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Mansfield. (Photo: Bethlehem Baptist Church in Mansfield) Enlisting workers and covering costs challenges smaller churches. First Baptist Church in Sonora averages 115 on Sundays. Although the town's elementary school only has 300 pupils, First Baptist enrolls 150 and averages 100 children in VBS—80 percent from outside the church. Pastor Matt Killough explains, "The congregation budgets \$3,000 and spends six months preparing, planning and praying." He dedicates three services to the VBS theme Scripture.

The church believes "Jesus loves every child in Sonora, and every child needs to hear that." Fifty workers of all ages ensure it happens. Mayor Wanda Shurley states, "Our community is a better place to live because of the dedication and commitment First Baptist Church of Sonora has for spiritually educating our children."



Children enjoying VBS at First Baptist Church in Sonora. (Photo: First Baptist Church, Sonora) This summer, a third grader made his salvation decision. While not unique, this was different. Killough explains: "I have children repeat a prayer, but he insisted he didn't need me to lead. Instead, on his own, he asked Christ to come into his heart and be his Savior. He asked God to forgive him and thanked Jesus for dying on the cross for his sins. This had never happened before, even with adults. Vacation Bible School was the vehicle to teach him to know Jesus personally."

Others share similar stories, Kathleen Mahanay was "a blessed little girl, growing up in First Baptist Cleburne, attending Sunday School, GAs, choirs, revivals and Wednesday night prayer meeting." She admits VBS crafts were her favorite, but clearly she listened. At Vacation Bible School, she sang, "I don't have to wait until I'm grown up to be what Jesus wants me to be" and asked Jesus to be her personal Savior.

She was baptized by her pastor, Bob Fling. His wife, Helen, served as president of national WMU, whose training school students led that first

Southern Baptist Vacation Bible School. After marrying David Hardage, Kathleen became a pastor's wife and enjoys telling VBS Bible and mission stories.



Like many, Kathleen's experience isn't dramatic. Instead, it's the story of "a little girl and a church of faithful teachers and volunteers who made wanting to live for Christ a natural and beautiful step. Vacation Bible School influences children in ways we will never know until we get to heaven."

Amen and amen.

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