

SO ORDERING OUR LIVES
A GUIDE FOR DEVELOPING A PLAN FOR VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL 2021
VIRGINIA CONFERENCE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
VERSION 2 – APRIL 8, 2021

Assumptions and Questions:

The primary assumption upon which this document is based is that while the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic will potentially be better than it was in 2020 with the rollout of the vaccine, we will still be wearing face coverings, washing our hands, and remaining socially distant. We are not expecting 2021 to be the return to the “normal” we experienced in 2019. The best-case 2021 scenario is that by summer, churches will be able to welcome people back with limited restrictions. The worst-case scenario is that churches will remain in a slightly modified 2020 version. The most realistic scenario is somewhere between 2019 and the summer of 2020.

So then, what will this look like in reality? Will we have to provide an “all virtual” experience, or will it be possible for us to have VBS in person, and if we have VBS in person, will the safety requirements be so restrictive that they hamper the fun and learning that make Vacation Bible School what it is?

In other words, what can our children, parents, and leaders expect from VBS 2021? The answer to this question can be found in the document below. In a nutshell, VBS ministries in 2021 will still need to operate within the five layers of mitigation, which are **sanitation, distancing, face coverings, health screenings, and ventilation**, in addition to the guidance below that precedes them. Those planning VBS in 2021 will need to work closely with the church’s existing [Healthy Church Team \(HCT\)](#) to develop a plan for a safe VBS to be submitted for approval to the District Superintendent. This document will help enable you develop your plan.

This will be a living document that will be updated as the situation with COVID-19 improves, as the TAM has been. It is the goal of the Mission and Ministry workgroup to create a resource that can adapt as things change and we gather more information regarding how to do ministry as safely as possible.

While this document contains numerous guidelines, it is important to remember that once these guidelines are assembled into a plan approved by the District Superintendent, the plan contains requirements that must be followed. Also, any HCT plans for VBS must abide by and work alongside the church’s established [Safe Sanctuaries policy](#). Those planning VBS 2021 should take care to plan for the training of volunteers in both the church’s Safe Sanctuaries policies and the HCT plan for this ministry.

Considerations

Consideration #1: How large can VBS 2021 be?

Plans for VBS must abide by the Governor’s limitations regarding the permissible size of gatherings, which as of April 1, 2021 is 50 persons indoors if the space allows with adequate distancing. [This up-to-date scientific resource](#) provided by Georgia Tech is one that should be in the toolbox of all HCTs and VBS planners, as it helps to calculate COVID risks based upon the size of gatherings. More information regarding the size of VBS is found below in the sections pertaining to the “five layers of mitigation listed above.”

Consideration #2: When should VBS 2021 be scheduled?

While it is common for VBS to be scheduled in the July-early August timeframe, it may be prudent for VBS planning committees to at least consider hosting VBS later in the summer, such as in the middle of August so that the local community has a better chance for reaching “herd immunity” which

means the pandemic has subsided enough for it to be safe to be together. Churches may even elect to host VBS as a “back-to-school” event or as a program over a weekend in early autumn for this purpose.

Another alternative is for the local church to host more sections of VBS with fewer children that begin in early summer and stretch over the entire season. This is certainly more work but it may allow the local church to reach many more children because the parents of those children may be much more inclined to send their children to a smaller VBS gathering.

Consideration #3: Where should VBS be hosted?

In most churches, VBS is almost always hosted at the church, and for good reason. Having VBS at church helps connect the community to the geographical location of the congregation. Having VBS at the church puts this ministry in easier proximity to resources of the church that are necessary for a fun and successful VBS, resources such as materials for games and crafts, technology for lessons, as well as restrooms, playgrounds, and the like.

However, hosting VBS at the local church is not the only option, and this may be an area where the church needs to be creative in 2021. Creative ways to host VBS in alternative locations and alternative times can be found in [this helpful document](#) from Lifeway.

Consideration #4: How long should each day of VBS last?

The longer in-person gatherings last, the greater the risk of the transmission of COVID-19. Put simply, a shorter day of VBS is better than a longer one. In addition to this, as indicated in the section below on ventilation, the more time that participants can spend outdoors, the better. Therefore, it is imperative that VBS planners consider how much outdoor time they can offer as well as how they would have to adapt in the event of inclement weather. Furthermore, the answer to Consideration #4 is inexorably linked to the question asked in Consideration #5 below.

Consideration #5: What about snacks?

During pandemic, the Conference has limited the on-site consumption of food to churches hosting ministries providing thermal shelter to the homeless during the winter months. There are three major reasons for this guidance. First, church meals typically increase the length of time persons are present at church (see Consideration #4). Second, the consumption of food typically involves people sitting in close proximity and requires the removal of face coverings for a period of time. Third, food consumed at church is often prepared in people’s homes, which greatly diminishes consistency between the environments in which food is prepared.

Taking into account Consideration #4, since a shorter VBS is a safer VBS, it stands to reason that it is possible to host a VBS without serving snacks during the program. Instead, prepackaged store-bought snacks could be safely distributed at the end of a day of VBS so that children could consume them on the ride home.

Consideration #6: What about crafts and other activities?

For all VBS events, it would be imperative for children and volunteers to wear face coverings over their nose and mouth and be socially distanced. This would also be true for parents/guardians picking up and dropping off children. There is more information on this in the section below on distancing.

In many VBS ministries, children share items such as toys as well as crayons, glue, colored pencils, and other art supplies. During this time of pandemic, it is necessary for the church to have a plan in place to eliminate the need for this kind of sharing as well as to clean and sanitize all areas used by this ministry, especially high-touch areas and restrooms.

Consideration #7: What about music?

It has been [documented](#) how singing greatly risks exposing people to COVID-19 due to how [singing projects droplets and aerosols](#). For this reason, any singing can only take place outdoors for less than 15 minutes, with everyone a minimum of six feet apart, and with everyone wearing an appropriate face covering over the nose and mouth.

Consideration #8: What about the vaccine?

Because it is unlikely that by the summer of 2021 enough people will have been vaccinated to help reduce (a vaccine will not eliminate COVID-19) the risks of this global pandemic, the provisions of this document will apply to all participants and leaders, regardless of their vaccination status.

Applying the Five Layers of Mitigation *Sanitation, Distancing, Face Coverings, Health Screenings, and Ventilation*

1. Sanitation

Those developing a plan for VBS with their HCT will need to create a plan for the sanitizing of the spaces used for VBS, especially high-touch areas and restrooms. VBS programs would need to be organized in such a way that sanitation could be done regularly throughout the day, which would include, for example, groups of children utilizing alternating areas in the church. If children are rotating through multiple activities throughout the day, it may be necessary for no area to be used twice in a row so that the space can be thoroughly sanitized during the time when the space is unused. Another possibility is for there to be adequate time left between sessions that can be used for sanitizing the space before the next group arrives.

The plan for sanitation should also include the cleaning of items such as colored pencils shared between sessions. Leaders of VBS should make sure that children and adults wash their hands at regular intervals and should have a plan for a child or adult who develops COVID symptoms during the day to be safely isolated until they can be taken home.

If possible, the best practice is for each child to have supplies that are dedicated for that child only. That being said, we realize that cost may be prohibitive for such dedicated supplies for each child.

2. Distancing

As stated in the considerations above, all participants in VBS, both children and volunteers, must maintain six-foot social distancing as much as possible, which includes classroom time, times of worship, walking as a group through the halls, etc. This extends to outdoor gatherings as well.

Because children generally enjoy socializing, great care must be shown to empowering volunteers to keep children separated, which may require the presence of more volunteers than a church may have in a typical year. Volunteers will need to be mindful of avoiding close contact when interacting with children (i.e. taking them to the restroom, correcting behavior, etc.).

3. Face Coverings

One of the best ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 is through the use of appropriate [face coverings](#). Appropriate face coverings are KN95 medical masks or cloth. The face covering must cover the nose and mouth of the wearer. These face coverings are distinct from clear face shields which are only appropriate if used in concert with a face covering that covers the nose and mouth.

It is imperative that all present at VBS (i.e. children, volunteers, and parents/guardians dropping off children or picking them up) wear a face covering at all times. There are no exceptions. Anyone who

cannot wear a face covering cannot participate in VBS, and anyone who removes their face covering and who will not put it back on must depart VBS until they are willing to comply with this requirement. While the wearing of a face covering can impede instructional time for the VBS volunteers, creative solutions will be necessary in order to maintain this crucial layer of mitigation. The only instance where face coverings may briefly be removed is when snacks are consumed and using the provisions of Consideration #5.

4. Health Screenings

Provisions for health screenings must mirror the health screening provisions in the [Technical Assistance Manual \(TAM\)](#), p. 18. VBS leaders must maintain records of who was present each day of VBS, including their contact information in case contact tracing is necessary. Those unwilling to abide by this requirement may not enroll their children in VBS.

In the event of someone who was present at VBS tests positive for COVID-19 or was in close contact with someone else that tests positive for COVID-19, the pastor of the church will make sure that the parents/guardians of all children present as well as all volunteers are notified. The pastor will also notify the [Virginia Department of Health](#) and the District Superintendent. The hope is not to cancel VBS just because someone tests positive or was in close contact with someone that tests positive. That being said, the decision about whether to shut down will be made by the local church in consultation with the District Superintendent.

5. Ventilation

As mentioned in the Considerations section above, [ventilation](#) is an important part of COVID-19 safety. Churches hosting VBS should make sure that they are following [best practices](#) in regard to ventilation, including (but not limited to) opening windows and having as many events as possible outdoors.

Some Questions for VBS Planners and Healthy Church Teams (HCTs) to Ask

While not an exhaustive list, what follows represents good questions for those responsible for VBS to ask and answer as they develop their safe VBS plan for approval by the District Superintendent. As always, each question should be answered with an eye towards “Who will be the person responsible for this?”

The Five Layers of Mitigation:

1. Sanitation

- How will the space(s) used by VBS be sanitized at the end of each day?
- What are the “high touch” areas?
- What cleaning supplies will the church need to procure in order to be prepared for VBS?
- What will the plan be for having participants and volunteers in VBS regularly wash their hands or use hand sanitizer?
- How can sanitizing be done during the hours when VBS is taking place?
- How can children be rotated from space to space for activities in such a way that spaces can be sanitized between sessions?
- How can items like pencils, crayons, glue, and paper be distributed in such a way that minimizes the number of times these items are touched/handled?
 - How can these shared items be sanitized throughout the day?

- Could prepackaged crafts be used, crafts either prepackaged in Ziplock bags by volunteers or crafts that come prepackaged?

2. Distancing

- What will be the relationship between the size of the space we can use for VBS and the number of children who can enroll, since social ~~six-foot social~~ distancing is required at all times?
- How will distancing requirements affect the number of volunteers we need for VBS?
- What are the best ways to keep children separated at each point during the VBS day?
- In addition to classrooms, how will distancing be maintained in hallways, doorways, **parking lots**, and restrooms?
- What kinds of activities can we have or not have, since we need to maintain social distancing between children, as well as between children and adults?
- How will distancing be maintained during times of pickup and drop off?
- How will situations be handled where children and/or adults will not maintain distancing requirements?

3. Face Coverings

- What kinds of activities are best, given the requirement for face coverings?
- What activities will not work (i.e. physical activities)?
- How will volunteers best communicate with children while wearing face coverings?
- How will situations be handled if a child or adult refuses to wear a face covering or refuses to wear one properly?
- Where will the church procure additional face coverings to have on hand during VBS?
- How will outdoor activities work in concert with the wearing of face coverings?

4. Health Screenings

- What will be the most effective way to communicate to parents/guardians the requirements for health screenings [found in the TAM](#)?
- Who will be the volunteers who greet parents/guardians at drop off each day to ensure that the protocols for health screenings are followed?
- Who will maintain the contact information for the families of children participating in VBS?
- What is the plan if a parent/guardian refuses to participate in the health screening process or refuses to provide accurate contact information?
- What will be the notification process for all present during VBS if it is discovered that someone present at VBS has tested positive for COVID?
- How will you communicate to someone enrolling a child in VBS or volunteering at VBS that they are agreeing to notify the church if someone in their family tests positive?

5. Ventilation

- Is the church the ideal location for VBS this year, and if not, is there a better place in the community for VBS in 2021?
- How much of VBS can be held outside?

- Can activities be held both inside and outside? What is plan B for outdoor activities in the event of inclement weather?
- How can ventilation for inside spaces be improved using [guidelines provided by the Conference?](#)
- Can windows and/or doors be propped open?
- How short can VBS days realistically be while still being worthwhile to have?

Other Questions to Consider:

A. Preparation

- How can the VBS planning team best work alongside the Healthy Church Team in its planning?
- When will the process of designing of the required plan to be submitted to the District Superintendent be started?
- Who will contact the church's insurance company to make certain that hosting VBS will not affect coverage?
- How can the trustees or property committee support VBS by helping those planning this ministry make the best use of the church's space?
- When is the earliest VBS volunteers can be recruited for 2021?
- How will these volunteers be trained in these new COVID safety protocols?

B. Communications:

- How can the church begin communicating as early as possible that VBS 2021 will look considerably different than it did in past years?
- How can the church best communicate the safety requirements for VBS 2021 in advance of the start of VBS, so that parents/guardians can prepare?
- How can VBS 2021 be communicated to the congregation in such a way that makes clear that ministry to children is the work of the whole community of the baptized, and as such, everyone can contribute in some way?

*With God's help, we will so order our lives after the example of Christ,
that these children, surrounded by steadfast love,
may be established in the faith, and confirmed and strengthened
in the way that leads to life eternal.*

CONGREGATIONAL BAPTISMAL PLEDGE #2
THE UNITED METHODIST HYMNAL P. 44