

FREE PLANNING PACK

VBS for a Small Church

One room. A handful of helpers. Whatever kids show up.

There's no wrong way to run VBS.

The goal is simple: get kids in the Bible, keep their attention, help them have fun, and help them connect to the love of Jesus. Any shape that does that is a real VBS.

What's in this pack

Page	Sheet	What it helps you decide
2	Pick your shape	Six calendar formats small churches really use, from five mornings down to one night.
3	The one-room day	Sample two-hour schedules for one room or three stations, plus how to fold it to two.
4	The six-volunteer crew	Who does what with six adults in one room. Plus three ways to borrow help.
5	Short on days, time, or money	What to cut, what to keep, and where the budget quietly grows.
6	Your plan on one page	A fill-in worksheet to carry into your planning meeting.
7	Where the lessons come from	Free programs, lessons you already own, our free songs and videos, and the VBS our team wrote.

How to use it

You know your church, your people, and your kids. We don't. So nothing here is a rule. These are patterns other small churches have told us work, with sample schedules you can copy or change. Use one page or all seven. It works with any VBS curriculum, or with lessons you already have.

Your church's own child-safety policy always wins over anything printed here.

Pick your shape

Five mornings in a row is one way to do VBS. It is not the only way. Here are six shapes churches told us they run, or plan to run next.

Shape	What it looks like	Why churches pick it
1. Five mornings or five evenings	The classic week. About two to two and a half hours a day.	Evenings work when your volunteers have day jobs. Some churches add a simple supper first.
2. Four sessions	Monday to Thursday. Or four teaching nights and a family-fun Friday.	Volunteers and families say yes to four more easily than five. This is a real format, not a compromise.
3. Three days	Three mornings, three evenings, or a long weekend.	Easier to staff than five. One church built a three-day program from lessons it already had.
4. Two evenings	Two and a half to three hours each, with dinner. The second night is family night.	The smallest "event" shape. Easy on working parents.
5. One night a week for a month	Four or five Wednesday or Sunday nights. End with a family fun event.	It fits the night your church already meets. No new volunteer week to staff.
6. One big day	A single Saturday, or Friday night into Saturday.	One push, one setup, one cleanup. Run one day at full strength.

What directors told us: *"I am hoping to do a 4 day VBS as I feel like 5 days could be way too much for volunteers and families to commit."* · *"Nothing fell apart but we were wore out after a full week."* · *"Time friendly is key."*

Three questions that pick the shape for you

- 1. When can your volunteers really come?** Day jobs mean evenings or weekends. Retired helpers can do mornings.
- 2. How many days can they give?** Ask before you announce dates. Plan for the number they say, not the number you hope for.
- 3. What do families in your town expect?** Some want a half day. Some want a night with supper. You can ask five parents and know.

One rule for every short shape: cut whole days. Never squeeze days. Don't pack five days of lessons into three. Pick the days you will run and give each one its full time. Kids remember one story told well.

The one-room day

A small church doesn't run a smaller VBS. It runs the same VBS with fewer walls. These are samples. Move the times to fit your church, and allow for room changes inside each block.

One room, all ages together

Time	What happens
8:30	Volunteer huddle and prayer
8:45	Check-in opens
9:00	Welcome and singing (20 min)
9:20	Bible story and talk-about-it circle (30 min)
9:50	Craft at the tables (25 min)
10:15	Snack while the crafts dry (15 min)
10:30	Game, everyone together (20 min)
10:50	Closing, verse, and pickup (until 11:00)

Evening version: start at 6:00 and keep the same order.
Adding supper? Put it first and drop the snack.

Two or three stations

Time	What happens
9:00	Station 1: opening and singing, same room, one leader (25 min)
9:25	Station 2: Bible story and circle (30 min)
9:55	Station 3: craft and snack, one room, two tables (30 min)
10:25	Game, outside or back in the big room (30 min)
10:55	Closing and pickup (until 11:00)

No group chart needed. At this size everyone moves together from room to room, with their leaders walking along.

Only two stations? Keep the opening and the Bible story. Fold craft, snack, and game into one all-together block after the story.

The Bible story never folds. Every other block can shrink, merge, or drop. The story is the one station every format keeps.

When ages 3 to 12 share one room

1. **Tell one story, at the younger kids' level.** Don't stretch the telling up.
2. **Tell hard parts gently.** With preschoolers in the room, every scary moment gets its softest telling.
3. **Ask two levels of questions.** A simple one for the little ones. A deeper "what would you do?" for the older kids. They need the lesson too.
4. **Keep story time moving.** Thirty minutes means motions, answers, and acting it out. Not thirty minutes of sitting.
5. **Offer big kids a job, if they want one.** Reading the verse, passing supplies, partnering with a little one.
6. **Use a preschool-level craft** as the base. Older kids can add detail.
7. **Have preschoolers and the space?** Most churches we hear from give them their own room with two adults, and bring them in for the opening.

Directors disagree on mixing ages, and both sides have run it. One told us mixed-age crews made "the smoothest VBS we've done." Another tried it and went back, because it was "hard to 'teach' to a kindergartner and 4th grader at the same time." In one room you don't get to choose. The steps above help.

The six-volunteer crew

One example of how six adults can cover a one-room VBS. You know your people and your numbers. Change it to fit them.

Role	Adults	Covers
Director	1	Leads the opening, floats everywhere, makes the calls. Names a backup (often the pastor).
Bible story leader	1	The story and the talk-about-it circle, every day.
Activity leader	1	Craft and game, back to back.
Snack lead	1	Snack prep and the allergy list.
Check-in desk	1	Sign-in, emergency contacts, and pickup at the door. A parent is a good ask.
Walker	1	Moves with the kids all day. The second adult for bathrooms and hallways.

Opening a separate preschool room? Add two more. A preschool room always has two adults, so that crew is eight.

Start with your church's own child-safety policy. It wins over anything in this pack. If it doesn't cover this, here is the idea many churches use: no volunteer is ever alone with one child. Leading a group in an open, shared room is fine. Out of sight is what to avoid, so pair up for bathrooms and hallways.

Teens are real help

Teens serve beside adults, not in place of them. Give each one a named job before the week starts: games, song motions, craft help, or snack crew.

Three ways to borrow help

1. **A mission VBS.** A larger church runs its own VBS, then brings the whole team to your building a week or two later and runs it again. Ask your local denominational office, or a mission-minded church nearby.
2. **A community VBS.** Several small churches pool their people, kids, and budget for one full week. It works well where churches already cooperate.
3. **Shared supplies.** Ask a church that runs VBS in June if you can use their materials in July. Tony's church passed its props and curriculum on every year, and counted how many churches got to use them.

What a director told us: "We would love to do a VBS at our church. We did not do one since our Kids Ministry and volunteer pool is very small." If that's you, this pack was written for you.

Train them, don't just recruit them

One director said her biggest job was "training up new volunteers." A 30-minute walkthrough a week or two before goes a long way: the day, each job on paper, safety, and prayer for the kids by name. Background checks are their own step, per your church's policy.

Short on days, time, or money

Short on days

1. **Cut whole days.** Keep each day you run at full strength.
2. **Pick stories that stand on their own.** A child who comes one night should still get a whole story.
3. **We'd keep the day that goes deepest into the gospel.** A closing with families in the room is a good one to keep too. Your call.
4. **One night only?** Run your strongest day complete, and end with a short send-off for families.
5. **Ending with a family fun night?** Open it with a short Bible story so parents hear what the kids heard.

Short on time in a session

Only get a 45-minute slot? Run the Bible story and circle short, about 25 minutes, plus one activity at most. Cutting activities under time pressure is normal. Plan the cut ahead so nobody has to guess.

Short on money

Where the money really goes

1. **Crafts and snacks.** Paper, glue, felt, and grocery staples can run about \$2 per child per day or less.
2. **Printing.** It depends on your curriculum's page count. Print color only where kids will keep it.
3. **Decorations and extras.** Bought instead of borrowed, this is where budgets quietly grow. Shirts and banners are nice. None are needed.

Ways churches keep it low

1. Borrow props. Decorate with cardboard and butcher paper.
2. Ask church members to donate snacks and paper goods.
3. Find a sponsor, or take a special offering.
4. Choose crafts kids will keep, "not junk."
5. Reuse. A curriculum you own as a download can run again next year.

What a director told us: "Kits are EXTREMELY expensive!!!" Another paid to re-buy the music for an older kit "with my own funds." You are not wrong about the cost. You also don't need a boxed kit to run a real VBS.

A sample budget: 20 kids, 3 days

Crafts and snacks	20 kids × 3 days × \$2 = \$120
Printing	Total pages you'll print, counting every copy × cost per page
Curriculum	\$0 if you use a free program or lessons you own
Supper, if you serve one	Extra. Often a church family or class takes a night.
Reserve	About 10% for the things nobody thought of

An example to show the math. Your grocery prices and what your church already owns will move it.

A simple countdown

8 weeks out: dates, shape, key adults and teens. **6 weeks:** sign-ups, background checks per your church's policy, the borrow list. **4 weeks:** print and shop. **1–2 weeks:** volunteer walkthrough, test any science demo. **Week after:** thank-yous and family follow-up.

Our VBS plan on one page

Fill this in and carry it to your planning meeting or your pastor.

Our dates	
Our shape (page 2)	☐ 5 days ☐ 4 sessions ☐ 3 days ☐ 2 evenings ☐ weekly ☐ 1 day
Start and end time	
Kids we expect	
Most we can take with our crew	
Ages we will serve	
Rooms (page 3)	☐ one room ☐ two stations ☐ three stations ☐ preschool room
Rain plan for the game	
Lessons we will use (page 7)	
Music	☐ our own ☐ comes with the curriculum ☐ video songs
Supper or snack?	
How families sign up	
Family night or closing program	
Budget we can spend	

Our crew

Role	Name	Backup
Director		
Bible story leader		
Activity leader (craft and game)		
Snack lead		
Walker (second adult)		
Preschool room pair, if we open one		
Check-in desk		
First-aid-trained adult		
Keeps contacts, allergies, pickup list		
Follows up with families after		
Teen helpers and their jobs		

One adult can hold more than one of these, as long as supervision stays covered. The six-volunteer crew on page 4 covers them all. **After VBS:** learn the kids' names and check in on them. A VBS that ends at pickup on the last day leaves its best work undone.

Where the lessons come from

This pack works with any curriculum. Here are four places small churches get theirs.

1. A free VBS program

Ministry-to-Children has seven complete VBS programs you can download free. They are simple and flexible.

ministry-to-children.com/free-vacation-bible-school

2. Lessons you already own

Other churches have been doing this, and it's absolutely blessed. One church ran a set of Moses lessons as a three-day program. One ran a four-week beach unit on four Wednesday nights. Another ran that same unit as a 4-day VBS. Any four- or five-lesson series with a story, a craft, and a game can be your VBS. We don't have every extra to fully support it, but reach out if there's something we can provide to make it more helpful.

3. Our free songs, craft videos, and object lessons

Budget just isn't there? Use ours. We made teaching songs, craft videos, and object lesson videos for Camp Courage, and we put them on a free page so any church can use them. They work with any lessons. Scan the code, or go to

sundayschool.works/vacation-bible-school/camp-courage-vbs-resources



4. Camp Courage, the VBS we wrote for small churches



Everything you've read about how hard VBS is for a small church is why our team wrote our own. Camp Courage is a five-day VBS built on Joshua 1:9. We made it to run with a handful of volunteers, in whatever setting, with whatever kids show up.

Its Director's Guide has a Small Church Section, a six-volunteer chart, and short-format plans. Many ideas in this pack come from it.

sundayschool.store/products/vbs-camp-courage

Who made this

The Sunday School Store is the small ministry team behind the free resources at Ministry-to-Children.com since 2006. This pack draws on Tony Kummer's ten years directing VBS.

About the quotes. Most come from about thirty children's ministry leaders who answered when we asked how their VBS went, in August and September 2026. A few come from reader comments on Ministry-to-Children. This is informal feedback, not a representative survey.

The article that goes with this pack: ministry-to-children.com/vbs-for-small-churches

You may print and share this pack freely with your church and with other churches.

One last thing. Don't let any picture of what Bible school is "supposed" to be slow you down. If the Lord has put it on your heart, and you have a couple of people on the same page, you can make it happen.