

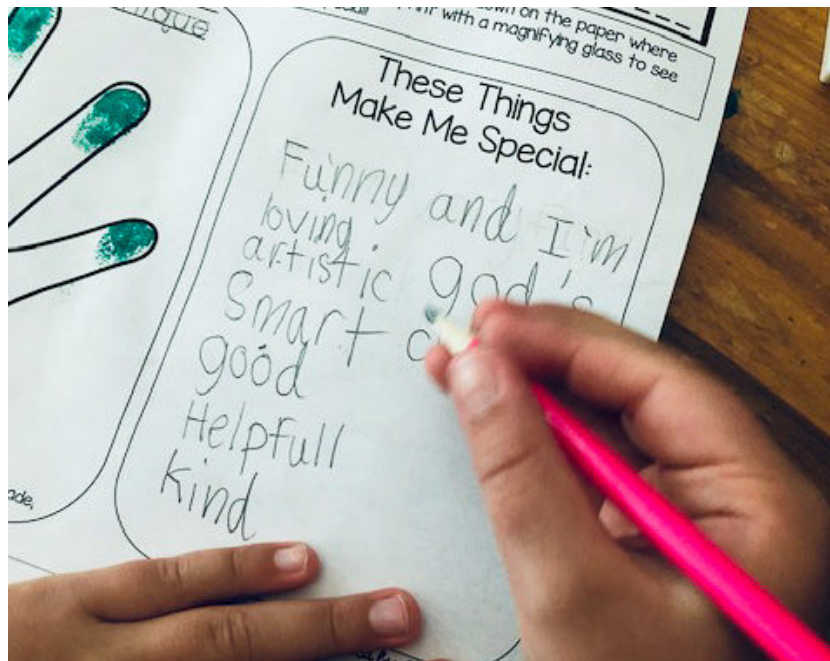
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Churches Adapt to Changing Environment with Virtual VBS

Here's How Lakewood and First UMC Bentonville Found Success Through an Online Platform

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According to the **latest information from the CDC**, children are less susceptible to infections by the COVID-19 virus. However, that doesn't mean there is no risk, which is why many United Methodist Churches are opting out of in-person Vacation Bible Schools this year, and are instead focusing on making a virtual, at-home experience just as fun as the rowdy and high-energy event that children's ministers plan for all year.

At Lakewood UMC in North Little Rock, their annual VBS is well-known in the Central District for being big and bombastic, attracting kids from all over the Little Rock/North Little Rock area.

But this year, like everyone else, the Children's Ministry team was forced to consider a new way to gather together for worship and, of course, fun.

Jill Dillman and Rochelle Gray, Co-Directors of the Children's Ministry at Lakewood, got the idea for their virtual VBS from a previous event they held called Breezeway Buckets.

Breezeway Buckets are take-home buckets that are filled with snacks, activities, and other knick-knacks for kids. According to Dillman and Gray, they started filling Breezeway Buckets in March, the week that schools were forced to shut down in Arkansas because of the pandemic.

"We had packing parties at the church to fill these buckets. We included activities and labeled them for different age groups. And we saw a response right away. I mean, people were coming to pick up the buckets as soon as we put them out," Gray said.

The buckets were put together as a way to give kids something to do while they were stuck at home finishing up the school year. They also aided parents who were now challenged with being school teachers to their kids for the remainder of the year.

The Breezeway Buckets gave Dillman and Gray an idea: What if we could do the same type of thing for our VBS this year?



Lakewood put together about 150 of these take-home packets for their Anchored VBS, but quickly ran out due to high demand in the community. Photo provided by Lakewood UMC.

Lakewood's VBS theme for 2020 was Anchored, an ocean-inspired VBS that could be done on a weekend instead of a normal weeklong event.

Because they had a lot of the supplies already available from the Buckets, Dillman and Gray just incorporated what they were doing previously into the new VBS plan. A few changes were made here and there, such as changing up the activities and devotionals to fit with the theme, as well as making the snacks ocean-themed.

"We had shark teeth, fish and octopus, and other fish-themed snacks made from candies or crackers that we could buy. Snack time is often one of the things that kids look the most forward to, and we wanted everything to fit the theme of our VBS," Gray said.

For the VBS to work, everything had to be planned out ahead of time. The weekend VBS lasted two days in June, and Lakewood organized the days into two individual folders. Each folder had the day's schedule of events, as well as a devotional, songs, and activities that needed to be completed on that day. There were even links to [videos for things like skits or sing-a-longs](#).

"We didn't want to overload kids with too much screen time though," Dillman said.

"Because they are on screens all day at home now, we wanted to do as much as we could without screens involved."



Volunteers at Lakewood show off some of the packets for their Anchored VBS. Photo provided by Lakewood UMC.

For the parts that did need screens, however, volunteers from the church filmed skits to go along with the theme. Everyone involved made sure to follow social distancing guidelines, so many of the skits were filmed using members of the same household, or filmed separately and put together.

Kara Chapman, one of Lakewood's worship leaders, helped with the music, and was filmed singing and doing the motions for all of the VBS songs.

"She was the star of our VBS last year and we're so happy we got to use her again!" Gray said.

Backdrops for the videos were also hand-built by volunteers, and in some cases, such as in the music portion, a green screen was used to give the video an underwater look.

Altogether, Lakewood made about 150 take-home bags for kids, and they ran out instantly. Interest was so overwhelming that Dillman and Gray said they had to put together about 40 extra bags because they ran out of their original amount.

In the Northwest corner of the Conference, Sadie Stratton Wohlfahrt, Minister to Children and Families at First UMC Bentonville, was putting together her own version of a **virtual VBS**.

Wohlfahrt is used to coming up with new ideas for VBS every year; she is known for her made-from-scratch VBS's which she has been creating with her team at Bentonville for the past four years.

This year, however, posed a different challenge: finding a way to stay connected while we're apart, and reaching new people that the church hasn't been able to reach in the past.

Bentonville First's theme for VBS revolved around the Affirmation of Faith that the church uses in their once-a-month family worship, called Children First.

"Since there are typically four days of VBS and four parts of any affirmation, we decided to design a four-day virtual experience, with each day of VBS focused on learning about one of the statements," Wohlfahrt said.


"We made this decision because we knew that this year had the extra opportunity of being seen by many unchurched people, via the magic of the internet; our message can spread much farther than a typical VBS year, so we wanted to use this opportunity to teach people the basics of our faith," Wohlfahrt said. "We also knew that we wanted to teach the families of our church, that the church is not the building. We are the church, and we can be together, apart."

about nine small groups in total.

VBS DAILY SCHEDULE


JULY 13 - 16

9AM




A new interactive video will be released at 9am each day. Click on the VBS tab at fumcbentonville.org to watch.

3PM



Join us daily for Communion LIVE on the FUMC Facebook page.

4PM



Zoom small groups take place. Check your email for sign in instructions.

“Our leaders were trained on ‘Holy Listening’ earlier this month, which is a spiritual practice of holding space for children to share their thoughts and feelings, be validated and affirmed for those thoughts and feelings, and be prayed over. The leaders light a candle and have kids take turns sharing what is on their hearts using ‘Holy Listening’ shapes,” Wohlfahrt said. These Holy Listening shapes were created by the Rev. Dr. Leanne Hadley and more info can be found on her website, leanne-hadley.com.

Although this year’s VBS drew only about half of the more than 225 kids that usually enroll, Wohlfahrt said being online has given them a better opportunity to reach far more than that number of kids.

“We won’t know the exact impact we have — we just pray that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of whoever views it. As I tell my team: we do our best, and God does the rest!” she said.

As case numbers continue to rise in Arkansas and surrounding Conferences, virtual learning and experiences are becoming the norm.

And as Lakewood UMC and First UMC Bentonville, as well as hundreds of other Arkansas churches, have shown this summer, VBS can be just as fun, energetic and powerful online as it is in person.