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Jacksonville First Turns Sunday Morning Worship Into A Churchwide Vacation Bible School

Intergenerational worship is the goal of this year's VBS

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Jacksonville First UMC's sanctuary decorated for the To Mars and Beyond Vacation Bible School, which is taking place during morning worship for five Sundays this summer.

By Caleb Hennington

Digital Content Editor



Vacation Bible School is one of the hallmarks of summer vacation for kids, but oftentimes it takes place outside of the traditional church service, leading many parents and church members unaware of the wonderful ministry taking place inside their church. That's why Jacksonville First UMC decided this year to make Vacation Bible School and Sunday morning worship one and the same, integrating a typically week-long VBS into a 5-week Sunday morning worship experience.

"For the next five Sundays, we're going to have Vacation Bible School as an entire congregation, rather than just a segment of our congregation, which is usually just the kids," said the Rev. Nathan Kilbourne, senior pastor at Jacksonville First UMC.

Kilbourne said that the idea for an integrated, intergenerational VBS came about earlier this year during planning meetings with Stephanie Dunn, the Christian Education Coordinator for Jacksonville First.

He and Dunn had thought about doing an at-home VBS last year when the pandemic was still spreading quickly through their community, but ultimately, the decision was made to forego VBS in 2020. So when planning for the 2021 VBS came about, and they saw that infection numbers were down and it was safer to gather, they were itching to do something in person again.

"I was in the middle of my sermon planning at the same time and thinking about all that we've gone through over the course of the past year and asking, 'what could Vacation Bible School look like this year?'" Kilbourne said.

"The desire to be together as a church family was kind of driving a lot of this, that what if instead of doing a normal VBS, we said the entire church gets to participate this year, whether you're an infant or you're 100 years old, and we'll all get to do this together."



The Rev. Nathan Kilbourne dresses up as a space explorer during Vacation Bible School at Jacksonville First UMC

The planning team settled on a multi-week VBS, with each “day” of VBS taking place on a different Sunday morning throughout the end of June and into July. Instead of four or five days in the middle of the week, Jacksonville First’s VBS would take place during Sunday morning worship.

The theme of this year’s VBS at Jacksonville is To Mars and Beyond, said Dunn. It’s the same theme that was produced in 2019 by Cokesbury but is being reintroduced this year to a new audience.

Dunn said that each day of VBS will operate just as it normally would during a week-long VBS.

“We are doing the opening assembly and closing assembly of Vacation Bible School, along with Rev. Nate’s preaching around the Bible story that’s told each day. And we’re also doing the music portion during worship,” Dunn said.

The entire sanctuary has been decorated with the To Mars and Beyond theme, complete with a red and white rocket ship next to the lectern, streamers and celestial decorations hanging from the ceiling and on the walls, and quirky robots on the stage.

Kilbourne said that his Sunday morning sermon will be related to the story that corresponds to that day of VBS.

“It’ll be geared more toward kids. So, you know, like Vacation Bible school typically has a storytime where they learn the Bible story for the night. I’m taking that and modifying it a little bit to make it for everybody but still with a bent toward kids,” he said.

For music time, the songs that kids typically learn during Bible School will also be taught to everyone in the sanctuary during morning worship, complete with corresponding arm motions and silly sound effects if necessary.



A rocket ship and more space-themed items decorate the stage at Jacksonville First UMC.

Game time, craft time, and snack time are the only portions of each day that won't take place in the church sanctuary, according to Dunn. But if anyone from the church wants to join in for those activities as well, they are welcome to do so in the church's gym immediately following worship.

Both Kilbourne and Dunn said that the most important thing they hope both the congregation and kids get from this experience is a deeper appreciation for the importance of intergenerational ministry.

"Churchwide, it's important for the children to be in participation with adults and vice versa. I think it's also important that the kids see the rest of our church taking on a program that they loved so well and enjoying it just as much as they do," Dunn said.

Kilbourne said that being separated from each other for the past year has really affected everyone at their church, and this Vacation Bible School also gives the congregation a chance to be together in fellowship again.

"By doing crafts together, doing recreation together, doing science together we're hoping to bridge those generational gaps to help us see the family that we have in God," Kilbourne said.

“One of the things we’ve also said is we’ve had enough difficulty over the past year, we just want to have fun and as a congregation, we just want to enjoy one another’s presence and to let loose a little bit because we’ve had a lot of serious stuff happen. We want to inject some joy into our entire lives together as well.”

Jacksonville First UMC’s first VBS was on Sunday, June 20. It will continue for the next four Sundays, June 27, July 4, July 11, and July 18. For more information, contact Stephanie Dunn at dunn.stephaniem@gmail.com.

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