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Vacation Bible School changing with the times

By Rob Marus

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- If you went to vacation Bible school in a Southern Baptist church more than 10 years ago, you might not recognize VBS today in many congregations.

It used to be a fairly standard denominational program that involved thousands of churches across the country -- each sponsoring what amounted to a Bible study day camp with a uniform curriculum, and all held at relatively the same time during the summer.

But today, like many other church structures, VBS is adapting to meet the needs of a society that is both constantly in flux and constantly in need of Jesus.

"VBS is taking all different kinds of shapes," said Beth Yates, a children's ministry specialist with the Missouri Baptist Convention.

"The most obvious change is curriculum," she observed. "It used to be the case that nobody would even consider using anything but Baptist Sunday School Board curriculum.

"But now, some churches won't even consider using SBC (Southern Baptist Convention) curriculum."

Concord Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Mo., is an example of a church that switched to a non-Southern Baptist curriculum this year. Minister of education Pam Bultmann explained how church leaders began the curriculum search process. "We had our two VBS directors look at four different curricula, including the SBC one."

A curriculum from Gospel Light Publishers won out because of its portability. The church needed something that two mission teams could pack up and carry along when they traveled earlier this summer to conduct VBS for churches in Thermopolis and Jackson, Wyo.

Bultmann said the tropical theme -- "Sonlight Island" -- was an eye-catching way to draw children to VBS in an area where most residents are unchurched.

Yates said many Baptist churches now are using Gospel Light materials, as well as VBS curricula from publishers such as David C. Cook, Smyth and Helwys, and Standard Publishing.

LifeWay Christian Resources itself now offers several VBS series. In addition to the traditional Church Series curriculum, which most SBC-affiliated churches still use, the agency now offers two other niche-marketed product lines.

"Giving options is the trend," Yates explained. VBS leaders are shopping for materials at their local Christian bookstores rather than automatically buying or ordering through a Baptist Book Store.

Despite such competition, SBC literature for Bible schools is rebounding strongly since a format redesign two years ago, according to a spokesman for LifeWay Christian Resources, formerly known as the Baptist Sunday School Board.

After years of declining sales, LifeWay Christian Resources posted record sales for vacation Bible school material for 1997 and expects even better sales this year, said Rob Sanders, VBS specialist at the publishing house in Nashville, Tenn.

"Southern Baptist churches are coming back to our materials in droves and our competitors are taking notice," said Sanders.

Yates said many of the new VBS curricula are just as good and just as theologically trustworthy as the traditional Sunday School Board materials. But there are things to look out for when shopping for curriculum from an unfamiliar publisher, she said.

"It should be both biblically based and educationally sound," Yates emphasized. "Make sure that the methodology matches the age-appropriateness of the students you are teaching -- that you don't have 3-year-olds memorizing all the books of the New Testament, for instance."

But Sanders warned Southern Baptist churches against straying to other publishers at all. "People can always trust that our materials are biblically sound," he said. "They know we conform to the 'Baptist Faith and Message,'" the SBC's official statement of faith.

"I think churches really need to ask the question, 'What is their theology?' when making a decision to use another publisher for VBS materials," he said.

A new universe of curriculum options isn't the only thing that is different about today's VBS. "It's harder to get teachers these days, as well," Yates said. "There could be a million reasons -- low commitment levels, lots of excuses."

Generational differences and two-career families make teacher recruitment more difficult every year.

"It's especially hard to get young adults -- young parents who have children in VBS," Yates said. "The older adults say, 'I've paid my dues,' and the younger parents say, 'I'm with my kids all the time, and I need a break from them.'"

"That's why over half of our churches have started doing vacation Bible school at night."

VBS traditionally took place during the morning or afternoon hours. In the old days, Yates said, "It used to be that people had two-week-long VBSes -- and sometimes even longer than that -- and it was always in the middle of the summer."

Today, churches in communities that have year-round public school schedules often will do VBS in the fall or the spring, since there is not a consistent "vacation" time when all students are out of class. Other churches hold Bible schools on the weekend, or over four successive Saturdays.

Another trend is to take VBS out into the communities where unchurched children need it. This year, Concord Church conducted backyard Bible clubs in eight neighborhoods across the Jefferson City area, including a mission chapel at a housing project. The other clubs were conducted in the homes of church members who lived in the targeted neighborhoods.

Teams from Concord went door-to-door in the neighborhoods to invite children to the club. Bultmann said it was less intimidating and more convenient for non-church members to take their children to a neighbor's home than to a church building.

Bultmann said organizers enrolled more children than ever before in VBS, though she didn't know if that figure included a higher percentage of unchurched children than before. "We have talked about doing a traditional inside-the-church VBS next year, and then comparing the two."

Children's leaders see a trend of VBS re-focusing on its original mission as a tool for evangelism and outreach to children and their families. "The positive side of all the changes is that a lot of churches are putting more money into their VBS budgets for promoting it to the community," Yates said.

Nationwide, almost 3.3 million people enrolled in Southern Baptist vacation Bible schools in 1997, reported LifeWay Christian Resources' Sanders. More than 53,000 participants made professions of faith and more than 400,000 names were recorded as prospects for Sunday school, he said.

Margaret Woolley sees evidence of a renewal in VBS focus. The former Missouri Baptist Convention's children's ministry specialist has been involved in Christian education since 1949.

"I think in the early years we gave a lot more attention to what we called 'crafts' -- handiwork; things to take home," Woolley said. "But, as we became more focused on Bible study, we began to see the crafts as a tool for Bible teaching rather than an end unto themselves."

Yates said that distinction is one definite advantage of modern VBS. "One thing I always tell [children's ministry leaders] in conferences is that I remember making this rooster out of colored popcorn when I was in VBS. But I don't remember the Bible story that went along with it! So, I use that to remind them to make sure that the crafts go along with the Bible story in a memorable way."

Those kinds of memories are what many children who come to faith in Christ through VBS recall in their adult years. Bultmann hopes innovations in vacation Bible school will lead to such memories for children who otherwise wouldn't have had them.

"Both of my children made their professions of faith in vacation Bible school," she said, "and it still amazes me to see how many adults I know first made their professions of faith through VBS."

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Photos to accompany the preceding story are available to Baptist state papers by request.

Missouri women celebrate a combined 105 years of VBS

By Rob Marus

HOLT, Mo. (ABP) -- Mary Duncan is so committed to her church's summer vacation Bible school that she hasn't missed one since 1948. She recently was honored for her 50 years of being involved with VBS leadership -- most of those years in her current church home, First Baptist Church of Holt, Mo. The small-town congregation also honored member Temple Mynear, who celebrated 45 years of VBS work.

Duncan started out teaching VBS for First Baptist Church of LaSalle, Ill. "My oldest daughter was a year and a half old when I started," she said. "I worked there until we moved to Liberty (Mo.) in December 1952. Then, I worked at the Second Baptist Church in Liberty until August of 1958."

Then she became a member of the Holt church, and has been involved with their VBS every summer since. She served as the congregation's VBS director for 10 years.

"She's been a trouper to work wherever we need her -- in records, the kitchen, the nursery," pastor Don Wright said. "Basically, everything there is in VBS, she's done it at one point or another."

Mynear has a similar story. "I've done class work, I've been a helper, and I've been in the kitchen several years," she said.

Both ladies no longer are physically able to keep up with the rambunctious children, but they still fill in wherever they can help. This year, they worked in the secretary's office and in the kitchen.

Mildred Lynch was the church's VBS director this year. "I've known them ever since I've been at that church, which has been close to 30 years," she said.

She saluted the women's commitment to VBS. "I think it's just one of those things where they've been committed to teaching the children about the Bible," she said. "Their love for children is so intense it has kept them going for all these years."

Both ladies have fond memories of Bible schools gone by. "We have gone from two weeks down to one week," Duncan said. "Back in the earlier days, we had no kitchen, and we had no water in the church, so there was an old gentleman who would carry water from a residence over to the church, then the older ladies would make the Kool-aid, and then they put sawhorses with boards across them for tables.

"Now we have a modern kitchen, and three women work in it."

She also recalls the days when VBS always would start with a parade down Main Street in Holt, often led by the local fire department's antique engine. "Later on, we got to putting kids with their fancy little hats in the back of the pick-up."

"There have been a lot of changes, but I still enjoy it like the very first time," she said.

Mynear still likes VBS just fine, too. "I love it!" she said. "I love the children, I love the Lord, and I like to do it. It teaches them fellowship, and how to conduct themselves in church, and it's just a good thing."

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Texas couple describe lessons learned through daughter's murder

By Dan Martin

BELTON, Texas (ABP) -- On Feb. 22, 1991, Dwayne and Bonnie Wheat's lives changed forever.

The Wheats had made the 107-mile trip from Big Spring, Texas, to Lubbock, where Dwayne was to take a test required for teachers in the state.

They talked to their 19-year-old daughter, Charla, about 11 p.m., and went to bed.

About 5 a.m. they heard a knock at their motel-room door.

"A person who identified himself as a police officer told us there was a death message for us," recalled Dwayne Wheat.

Wheat said he was not surprised at first, because he and his wife each had a parent in poor health. When the officer said the death had occurred in Big Spring, they were confused.

"He told us that our daughter was the victim of a homicide," Wheat said. The officer gave them a number to call, and they learned their youngest daughter had been stabbed to death.

The couple said they do not remember much about the drive home. "We were so much in shock," he said. "I don't remember whether we talked or cried. I think we didn't do anything except drive."

When they got home, they learned their daughter and her roommate had been sexually assaulted. Both were stabbed by the attacker, but the other woman survived.

The assailant, who was a neighbor, was arrested, convicted and sentenced to die by lethal injection.

The Wheats shared their painful journey at an annual meeting of Texas bivocational ministers, held recently at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas.

Dwayne, who teaches at the Big Spring State Hospital, and Bonnie, who is a public school teacher, both worked part time as ministers of education in Big Spring when the murder occurred. Both still teach, but he is now bivocational pastor of Berea Baptist Church, a small congregation in Big Spring. They have another daughter, Brenda, who lives in Austin.

The couple took turns describing to an awestruck audience their experiences and emotions as they dealt with the tragedy of their daughter's brutal murder and its aftermath.

At the beginning, both sought comfort in words from the Bible, but its message came to them in different ways. Dwayne said he identified with the passages in Romans 8 that say "the Spirit dwells in you" and "the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit, that we are indeed children of God."

During the drive home from Lubbock, he recalled, "the Spirit said to my heart, 'Dwayne, you have a Heavenly Father who knows what it is like to lose a child violently.'

"That held my world together for many days and gave me something to hold onto until other things could begin to work."

Bonnie, however, couldn't relate to that passage. "That didn't relate to me at all because my identity was more with Mary, the mother of Jesus, but I knew my child wasn't going to come back," she said.

"God gave me a little phrase, 'My grace is sufficient' Somehow we knew that God's grace was going to be sufficient, but I also knew that it had to be, because we didn't have anything else to hold on to. It was God's grace or nothing."

At first, there were questions, Bonnie said. "We asked 'why?' and 'what if?' and all of those normal questions, but we knew that was a trap that would not lead anywhere."

"There comes a point where our minds want to reject something like this and our grief may be overwhelming," Dwayne said. "Part of the healing process is to realize that we cannot reverse what has happened, that it is a fixed, historical event."

"We have to come to grips with the fact that this is something we cannot change and 'why?' is something we will not have an answer to that would ever satisfy us," he said. "It is a meaningless question."

Bonnie said dealing with anger, forgiveness and bitterness was most difficult for her. Many people offered to pray for her, she said, but one friend asked her how she should pray. "I told Nita just to pray that God's grace will be great enough to overcome anger and bitterness," she said.

"During those months, there was a pull on me from the people who said they knew I was going to make it and was not going to be angry, and from those who told me that I was doing too well, that I had anger bottled up inside of me," she said. "I was pulled in both directions."

Sometimes, her anger would come out in unexpected ways. "Once I got a bag of ice out of the freezer to make a glass of tea and I whacked it on the floor to break it up. That felt pretty good, so I just kept on doing it for a while."

Bonnie said she also had to find a new definition of forgiveness. "For me, forgiveness had always been saying, 'Well, okay. It didn't matter anyway.' But that doesn't work when your child is murdered.

"I struggled for awhile, and here is my definition: 'Forgiveness is giving up to God my desire to be angry and to get even.'"

"Several places in the Bible we are told that, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,' but I always thought that meant that God was going to get even for me," she said. "What it came to mean was that God was going to carry the problem that I couldn't handle. I had to let God carry the load of anger and bitterness and vengeance because it was too big for me.

"One counselor told us that God would honor our efforts to forgive. I realize that the Bible says for us to forgive, but all I could say was that I am not there yet."

Dwayne said he fantasized about getting revenge against his daughter's killer, "but within a few days I realized I could never hurt him badly enough or kill him dead enough to make me feel better."

He asked a friend to pray for the assailant, because he was unable to pray for him himself. "When we are badly hurt, one of the things we can do is to enlist prayer for the other person before we ourselves are able to pray."

After the trial ended with a death-penalty verdict, the murderer's father came up to the Wheats heartbroken but unable to do anything. "It gave us no satisfaction to know that his son was going to die, too," Dwayne said.

Another verse that came back to Bonnie was 2 Corinthians 5:7, "We walk by faith and not by sight." "I realized that in a time of crisis we either walk by faith or we don't walk at all, because there certainly is no sight."

They also knew from the start it was important to thank God for the time they had with Charla, Bonnie said. "We did not thank him for her death, but we did thank him for the time we had with her ... for the memories, for his presence getting us through this, and for all the prayer support we had."

Some well-intended comments didn't help, Dwayne said. "Any number of times, people said to me, 'I couldn't have gone through that.' I always have wanted to say, 'We didn't volunteer.' Some comments have made me angry, and that is one that has made me bite my tongue several times."

Over time, the Wheats said they came to rely on God for the strength they needed to cope.

"About a year after Charla's death, we did a study in Joshua, and in that book, God is the resource for whatever comes," Dwayne said. "He never offers Joshua anything other than himself. He said he will be with us, whatever comes."

"We began to realize that God was going to provide all we needed to go through this," he continued. "He was not going to deliver us from it, but he was going to deliver us through it."

He said many Christians misread what the Bible says about tragedy.

"How many of you have heard that God will not give us more than we can bear?" he asked. "Bonnie and I looked and looked and looked for that in the Bible, but it is not there. It doesn't exist.

"What it does say in 1 Corinthians 10:3 -- the passage that frequently gets misquoted -- that there will be 'no temptation' beyond what you can bear. With temptation the promise is in place, but with tragedy, burdens, it is not.

"In 2 Corinthians 1:8, Paul makes a very different statement in regard to this: 'We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.'

"It is not that he will not let things too great for us to bear come into our lives; it is that he will deliver us through those things that are unimaginably difficult. It is that he will carry us when we have too much to bear.

"When I went back to the funeral home before the funeral and saw the bruises begin to show on her face through the makeup and I realized that she had been terribly beaten, I had to be carried. When I read the autopsy report, I had to be carried. When I read the police report, I had to be carried. When we heard the testimony [at the trial] and all the details of what had happened, we had to be carried.

"Please, please, if you go away with anything, never tell someone that God will never lay on them something greater that they can bear. It isn't true. What is true is that he will carry us when our pain and grief are too great to even think about."

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'Hitting Home' the goal of Internet ministry magazine

By Ken Camp

ARLINGTON, Texas (ABP) -- Rene Prindle-Jones believes in rooting for the home team.

That doesn't just mean cheering for her beloved Texas Rangers. It also means team-building through encouraging families to build Christian homes and equipping churches for family ministry.

A member of University Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Prindle-Jones is director of ministries for Hitting Home Ministries and editor of the non-profit organization's Internet magazine. The goal of the Arlington, Texas,-based ministry is to create resources to help churches minister to families.

While all Hitting Home's staff are Southern Baptists, the ministry offers its services free of charge or at cost to any church, organization, or individual looking for a Christ-centered approach to reach and teach families.

Long-range, the ministry hopes to provide speakers on family-related issues for retreats, revivals or conferences and to become a clearinghouse for the research and development of family ministry leadership resources. The first step toward that goal was the launching in January of "Hitting Home" magazine on the Internet at www.hittinghome.org.

Hitting Home, designed around a baseball theme, was the brainchild of John Sisson, the ministry's chief executive officer and former director of family ministry with the Missouri Baptist Convention. He contacted Prindle-Jones, who was Baylor University's outstanding journalism graduate in 1985, to edit the monthly Internet-based magazine.

"The wave of the future is the Internet," said Prindle-Jones, a former missionary and a graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. "I love the feel of holding a book or a newspaper, and we'll never replace that. But we wanted to be on the cutting edge."

Publishing on the Internet also is cheaper than printing a magazine, and it allows for more timely information and interaction with readers, she noted.

The August issue of the magazine, which examines the subject of addiction, offers sermon outlines, facts and articles with specific concerns geared to church leaders who work with adults, youth, children and preschoolers.

Future issues are scheduled to deal with ministering to single adults, parenting and inter-family relations.

As an avid baseball fan, Prindle-Jones said she likes the way the ministry describes its goals in baseball terminology like reaching "home." She uses terms like "Lineup Notes," "Leading Off" and "Batter Up" to allow readers to navigate through the magazine, and "Highlight Reels" to access past issues.

Since going on line, however, she has discovered limitations of the approach.

"Baseball is a good metaphor, but it's not a good worldwide metaphor," she said. "It works here in the United States and in Japan and Latin America, but some of my British friends said it would make more sense to them if it were rounder, cricket or rugby."

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