

Making a Case For **Summer Education**

One decision most churches struggle with each summer is whether or not to provide Christian education in June, July, and August and, if so, what it will look like. Those in charge of programming decisions realize that the joys of summer and school vacations bring the realities of irregular attendance and a volunteer staff ready for a slower pace. Pastors, educators, and teachers feel guilty about making the decision for anything less than education for all ages, remembering the admonition, "God does not take a vacation from us; we should not take a vacation from God."

Regardless of the challenge voiced in the old adage or the symptoms of the summer season, let's explore some basic questions: Why is Christian education important in the summer? How can congregations offer dynamic educational ministries while dealing with seasonal needs? Are there creative ideas that will uniquely serve a congregation's desire to learn and grow in faith?

A case for Christian education year-round can be made with a simple sermon illustration. Create a visual image of the hours in a week by displaying a bowl of 168 small plastic balls. After removing one tiny ball to portray the average hour of Christian education most people experience each week, ask the congregation to consider the 167 hours remaining. Take the example one step further, removing twelve to thirteen balls to represent the summer Sundays and the significant number of opportunities for spiritual growth and nurture.

When faced with the decision to continue or not continue Christian education throughout the summer months, most people will agree that the body of Christ longs to embrace lifelong learning, regardless of the time or season. Benefits of summer education can be as simple as providing more relaxed contexts for learners to be fully present with one another around an issue, or as powerful as exploring a new model for Sunday mornings, such as weekly intergenerational education. If a church regularly decides not to meet for education during the season of green growing things, it may mean missing a variety of opportunities to look at God's creation and biblical themes through another lens. There is richness in summer Christian educational experiences for all ages just as there is richness in the season!

Creative tools and ideas are available for congregations to provide dynamic educational ministry each summer in the midst of seasonal needs. Churches offering education through the summer months quickly discover that all Christian education does not necessarily take place on Sunday mornings. Vacation Bible schools have long been a tradition in summer. In fact, some say that a one- or two- week Bible school experience for several hours each day, or a weekly "Bible school night," offers

more continuity and impact than a month of Sundays. Presbyterian congregations are reporting a renewal of commitment to VBS programs.

Ideas for quality summer Christian education are endless! When planning for your summer educational ministry, ask: What is unique about the season? How can we do things we do not normally have the opportunity to do? Where is God calling us to grow and learn this summer? Maybe your congregation will lift up the growing season as the most unique asset for summer education. Why not develop an all-church garden project with the produce going to a local community shelter or food pantry? Bible studies to coincide with the summer's weekly garden chores might focus on Scriptures about growth, the fruits of the Spirit, or the stories with seeds or farm images, such as the parable of the Sower.¹ When asking what you can do in summer that you do not normally do, remember to think outside: offer church school on the lawn under the trees, borrow a tent for the season and call your program a "summer camp meeting," or meet each week at a member's home for a backyard "house church."

The case for exciting Christian education in the summer is very powerful. The story goes that one Sunday a church asked each deacon and elder to share his or her experience of faith in worship. Each testimony was different. The officers came to a more mature and searching faith at various ages or through a variety of personal circumstances. However, one theme became very clear: most of these adults recounted a summer of camp, vacation Bible school, or a unique summer Christian education experience that impacted their spiritual formation.

Christian education in the summer. Why not? How? When? And where? The opportunities for growing in faith are as boundless as the summer season!

1. Matthew 13:1-23

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