



FACILITATORS GUIDE FOR HOSTING THE ABUNDANT LIFE GARDEN PROJECT® VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL

Digitally and at home offered by Episcopal Relief & Development

Dear VBS Director,

Welcome to The Abundant Life Garden Project® VBS offered by Episcopal Relief & Development. We are so honored that you have chosen this curriculum for your VBS program! In this packet you will find many tools to help you launch this project successfully over a digital platform and within homes. Our prayer is that this material will help children and their families celebrate the many ways abundant life in God is possible.

May you continue to grow in grace,

– Jerusalem Jackson Greer and the Episcopal Relief & Development team

In this guide you will find:

- How to host the various sessions online or and in homes
- List of supplies needed
- Communication strategies
- Timeline
- Adaptations for hosting online



Making the Project Come Alive

The Growing Schedule

One thing we have learned is that families are feeling a digital fatigue, especially when it comes to adding something new to an already stretched schedule. Yet we know their desire to help their kids experience faith and joy in fresh ways is real and active. For that reason, we are recommending the following modified schedule for an at-home digital based Abundant Life Garden Project VBS:

Five days, 1-2 hours total per day

Session 1: Large Group Gathering Online from GATHER zone– 15 minutes

Session 2: 1 Digital Activity from the DO or LISTEN zones – 15-25 minutes

Session 3: 1 Home-led activity from LISTEN or DO zones – 15-25 minutes

Session 4: 1 Home-led questions from GO zone – 15 minutes

Recommendations for the Garden Plot

Choosing your gathering and learning spaces.

One of the very first things any gardener or farmer must do is to assess the needs of their crops or livestock, then they must work hard to choose from the options available to them, and the best location to meet those needs. The same is true when determining how to best host your VBS outside of the church building.

For The Abundant Life Garden Project® we suggest the following space accommodations for VBS:

Choosing your Digital Gathering Venue

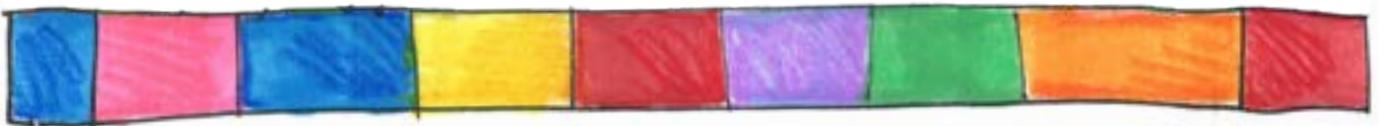
When you can't gather within the walls or on the grounds of the church building consider the following ways to host a common space:

A Dedicated Digital Meeting Platform Link: This option requires you to set up a semi-permanent link to a meeting room within your chosen digital learning platform (such as Zoom or Got to Meetings) that will remain static throughout your VBS experience. By using the same link for all your gatherings, you will cut down on confusion about when and where you are meeting. Platforms such as Zoom also allow for breakout rooms and other ways to host small group gatherings. We recommend creating a registration form that will allow households to register for VBS and receive the link safely.

A Dedicated Private Facebook Group: Since many adults visit Facebook frequently, this can be a convenient way to post links, reminders, videos, and live messages in one central place. This option also provides a way for families to post photos of their activities or to share stories and ask questions. Members are also able to choose the type of notifications they would like to receive from the group.

Another Dedicated Social Network Group: We understand that Facebook is not a good fit for all organizations or families, so you may consider using another platform network such as Mighty Networks. These may come with subscription cost for the host organization.

A Dedicated VBS Blog or Website: This option allows for you to post daily, or to batch-post all your links and content for the week in one central location. You can also create space for user interaction – from comments on a blog post to a gallery of user submitted photos – depending on how the site is set up.



The Four Sessions

Zone #1: GATHER – Opening

Using the materials from the GATHER section of each lesson, host a daily meeting that launches everyone into their VBS activities and reinforces that day's theme. Here are some options for how to host these gatherings:

- **Host a group gathering on your digital meeting platform:** This option allows for all participants to see each other, pray together and respond to questions in real-time.
- **Pre-Record Opening and Closing Sessions.** This option allows for the leaders to pre-record these sessions and send them to families in a variety of ways – via a newsletter, blog, closed FB group or on a digital webinar platform.
- **Facebook or YouTube Live on a Dedicated Page or in a Group.** This option (if offered on a public Page or Group) allows provides an easy way for members to share and invite friends to join. These links can also be embedded into websites and blogs.

Zone #2: LISTEN

For Stories from the Field

Each *Stories from the Field* lesson comes with a video option and a storytelling option. Here are some ways to share them and the accompany questions:

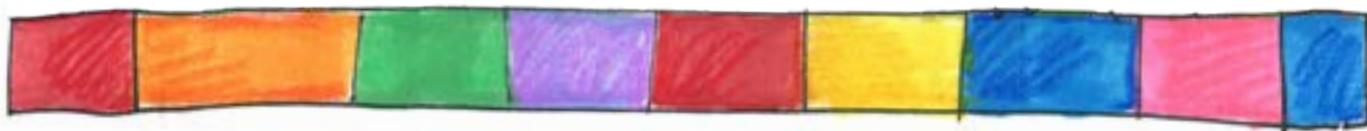
- **Host story time over a platform such as Zoom:** Using the “share screen” function you can share videos over most digital meeting platforms. For this option we recommend that you host story time immediately following your opening session.
- **Send links:** Since all of the video options are online, you can send a daily email with the links to the videos, or with the videos embedded into your communication platform. Just make sure to send the reflection questions along with the links.
- **Post links:** You could post the links to the videos on your social media platforms or on your dedicated website/blog. For the website/blog you could add the reflection question and details into the post. For social media we suggest posting each question as a comment on the link-post itself.
- **Enlist great storyteller:** If you decide that the written stories are a better fit, engage a great storyteller to record the stories, or to tell them live over your digital learning platform.

Additionally, there is a complete *Stories from the Field* booklet that can be sent to families digitally (or in hard copy form) that they can use each day to choose their own video link or written story.

For Stories from our Faith

The *Stories from Our Faith* options do not contain videos and are formed around stories from the Old Testament scriptures, New Testament scriptures, and the Book of Common Prayer. Here are some options for sharing these stories:

- **Pre-record Stories:** Who are your best storytellers within your congregation? Consider asking them to record themselves (cell phone quality is just fine) telling one of the stories shared in the *Stories from Our Faith* booklet. Make one or two videos (there are three story options per lesson) for each day of VBS. Share these videos either on your chosen digital gathering platform or via email.
- **Sharing Stories Live:** You may choose to enlist the help of participating families, church members and your clergy to tell the stories live during either a Facebook Live event or over a digital meeting platform such as Zoom.



- **Storytelling in the Home:** Instead of offering this session digitally, ask families to consider telling the stories around the dinner table or at bedtime. You could also suggest that children act out the stories or draw what they are hearing while caregivers and older siblings read the stories. For this you will want to make sure everyone household has a copy of the *Stories from Our Faith* booklet, a Bible, and a copy of the Book of Common Prayer.

Zone #3: Do – Activities

These are the more hands-on activities of the curriculum. We recommend that you offer 1-2 of these activities daily. You may choose to offer a separate emphasis each day.

- **Nutrients (aka Snacks) Activity**
 - Options for this Zone are:
 - Send snack recipes to families and ask them to weave as many as they can into the week.
 - Drop off snack-packs at the beginning of the week that have the ingredients for one of the recipes, and/or other theme-inspired snacks.
 - Have a church member that loves to cook? Consider asking them to host a “cooking show” tutorial, either live or recorded, over your Digital Gathering Platform to help guide families through making one or two of the snacks.
- **Learning, Creative, Contemplative and Garden Growing Zones**
 - Take a look at each of the activity options for each day. Consider which would be the easiest for families to accomplish at home with minimal supplies.
 - Consider offering one pre-recorded instructional video for each day (this doesn’t mean it has to be you in the video – look to who might be the “experts” in the various areas – scientist, art teachers, local gardeners, beekeepers and the like.)
 - You can send the same category of activity each day (for instance you might send instructions for the Creative session for each day) or consider sending one of each over the course of the week: Monday could be Learning, Tuesday could be Creative, Wednesday could be Contemplative, and Thursday could be Garden (or however you would like to arrange it.)

Zone #4: Go – Closing the Day

This is how we wrap up the day, reflecting on the lessons learned, and reading the Abundant Home Life handout for further contemplation.

Preparing the Garden Plot:

When The Abundant Life Garden Project® VBS is held in person we suggest outfitting and decorating the following spaces in certain ways and providing certain items to each child. Here are the modified versions of these ideas:

GATHER ZONE

Supplies for The Greenhouse - The large gathering space

- Part of the opening of each gathering is the creation of a large sticky-note mosaic called the Garden Wall. To do this for your digital VBS, you could:
 - Ask each household to create their own Garden Wall (or Garden Door) at home during the week,
 - Create one virtually by asking parents to send in pictures of what their kids draw and write.
 - Create one yourself on the wall behind where you film.
- Each opening also requires the leader to have a large clear bowl and a series of elements that you will add to the bowl.
 - You will need one extra-large clear bowl and the objects for each opening session yourself.
 - You may want to ask families to have a bowl on hand at home, and either gather the daily objects or send them to each family, so that they can participate in a tactile way at home.

Items Needed Daily by Children:

- **Garden Journals** – Each child will need a small notebook for the week, either purchased or pre-made. You can use small notebooks from dollar stores, or make your own out of construction paper, copier paper and staples.

Supplies for Activities – VBS -in-a-Box

This is a quick overview of some of the more hands-on/supply-heavy portions of each day. You may want to create a VBS-in-a-Box, delivering to each participating family a kit that would allow them to participate from home.

In this box you would place:

- One notebook for each child
- Items for the Gathering Bowl
- Any craft or snack supplies needed from the list of activities below (we recommend only choosing one-two of these activities per day as to not overwhelm families.)

Stories from Our Faith, Stories from the Field, and Contemplation Activities are not included in this table as they do not require supplies.

Day	Garden Options	Snack	Creative	Learning	Songs
Water	Watering Rain Barrel Irrigation	Apple Boats Ocean Water	Water Filter	Water Walk	Deep and Wide River of Life Peace Like a River
Soil	Soil prep Soil testing Worm Farm	Dirt Cake Cups	Erosion Experiment	Gardner /Farmer Interview	Thank You God for Water, Soil and Air This Pretty Planet For the Beauty of the Earth
Seed	Seed starting Garden markers	Nuts and Seed Dippers	Bird Feeder	What should we do with Seeds?	For the Fruit of All Creation God's Got the Whole World in God's Hands (insert different types of seeds at each verse) This Pretty Planet All things Bright and Beautiful For the Beauty of the Earth
Animal	Animal fertilizer Animal visit Beekeeper Visit	Animal Cracker Safari	Making Butter	Gifts for Life Playing Cards	God's Got the Whole World in God's Hands (insert Farm Animals for the verses) All Creatures Great and Small Old Saint Isidore Had a Farm (to the tune of Old Macdonald) *St. Isidore is one of the patron saint of farmers. Arky Arky
Harvest	Harvest Garden Commercial Taste Test	Veggie or Fruit Pizza	Produce Painting	Veggie peeling	For the Fruit of All Creation: God's Got the Whole World in God's Hands (insert different types of food at each verse)



Tips for a Successful Digital VBS

Director note: The following information will be helpful for both you and members of your team. Please review thoroughly then make copies for your team members as needed.

Planning Timeline for Digital VBS

The truth is that sometimes we cannot have the time frame that we prefer. The following suggestions are based on a compressed timeline; however, you should feel confident in creating your own timeline based on your resources.

6-9 Weeks Ahead

- Begin praying for your VBS program with your clergy and staff
- Choose your dates and time for your VBS and put them on the church calendar; if you are planning to include a Harvest Celebration, with liturgy and/or agape meal, put it on a separate day or in the evening of Day 5.
- Choose a VBS Director
- Share the The Abundant Life Garden Project® VBS Digital Version offered by Episcopal Relief & Development materials with the Director

3-6 Weeks Ahead

- Set a budget for your VBS program
- Recruit leaders – folks willing to record stories, craft tutorials and more
- Begin publicity for your VBS
- If you will be hosting your daily gatherings and instructions on a blog/website go ahead and build that now

2-3 Weeks Ahead

- Put together lists of supplies you'll need
- Plan and hold a VBS team meeting – bringing together all those who will be participating in creating resources
- Open online registration
- Begin recording videos

1 Week Ahead

- Check your registration and order any extra supplies you may need.
- Begin putting together VBS-in-a-Box or other supply kits
- Write daily emails that you will be sending with updated links

4 Days Ahead

- Send reminder for registration
- Begin delivering supplies to families

Sunday Before

- Commissioning Liturgy for VBS (we suggest [this](#)) adjust for doing this during your online service.

Week Of:

- Pray daily for God to move in the hearts of your children and for the work of Episcopal Relief and Development.
- Send daily emails/Social Media alerts
- Check with key leaders each day to see how things went.
- Have FUN!



Working with Children

Here are some simple tips for working with kids that you can share with your volunteers.

- 1. Always interact with children from a place of love.** All children, regardless of age or appearance, need to feel wanted and accepted. Make sure to welcome kids warmly each day, and always be ready with smiles, giggles, encouraging words.
- 2. Work hard to learn names.** When you call a child by his or her name, you are validating their identity as beloved. If you can welcome children by name, even online, that will mean a lot to them.
- 3. Use active learning.** The more children can actively be involved in their learning, the more connected they will feel.
- 4. Dress the part.** Make sure that you are in comfortable clothes that reflect that summer garden feel. If you are a storyteller consider dressing in character. All other leaders and helpers should consider dressing in “gardening duds” such as overalls, garden aprons, straw hats, etc.
- 5. Be rooted in your Baptism.** Make sure to interact with all adults and children in a way that follows the apostles teachings, humbly repents of mistakes, proclaims by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, strives for justice and peace among all people, respects the dignity of everyone, and seeks and serves Christ in all persons, all with God’s help.
- 6. Pray.** Once a day, leaders should gather for prayer online – you can even offer this to parents and caregivers. (You may want to use Prayer 46, page 829, for your opening prayer and a prayer of thanksgiving after your closing.) You may also want to divide up the names of your children and prayer for them individually.
- 7. Be aware of age-level needs.** With younger children, activities need to be hands-on, concrete, short, and simple. Older children love to talk and are processing and questioning information. Make space for these needs during online gatherings and help guide parents and caregivers with these expectations.
- 8. Call out the good!** Children generally rise to the level expected of them, so call out to their better natures. Verbalize that you believe that they are capable of learning, listening, and engaging.
- 9. Be prepared** – Read through your lessons, any training information, ask questions if you are unclear, and prepare materials for which you are responsible ahead of time.
- 10. Remember to encourage the caregivers** – Give all those adults at home who are helping lead their family VBS encouragement and shout-out. Consider offering to do a check-in each evening or morning to see what questions or concerns the adults have.



Communication Strategies

Clearly communicating the fun that children and volunteers will have at **The Abundant Life Garden Project® VBS offered by Episcopal Relief & Development** should be an essential part of your VBS planning strategy. Here are a few tips to help you get started.

- **Early and Often:** Begin communicating registration for children and volunteers early – as soon as you are settled on your dates. Repeat your communication efforts weekly until the last four weeks, then go to twice weekly. This can be via social media, church newsletter, email blast, etc.
- **Tell the kids:** Make sure to message the kids as well as adults. Talk about VBS with kids during Sunday School, Children’s Chapel, Youth Groups and by sending postcards.
- **Group texts:** Send registration reminders to parents and volunteers with a link, then daily reminders during the week of VBS.
- **Word of mouth is key:** Ask everyone who is participating to tell five people about VBS.
- **Go Local:** Local papers, online groups, and boosted Facebook posts are helpful when inviting the larger community.
- **Tag, Your It!** Invite members to promote your VBS on their own social media accounts, making sure to tag the Church.
- **#VBS:** Establish social media tags that your members can use and share.
- **Online Registration:** Google Forms or other programs are available to create easy to use online registrations. If possible, set up a computer or iPad station in the church lobby or outside Sunday School classrooms to help register kids on Sundays.
- **Your Website!** Remember to use church website to clearly and cohesively post registration, information, forms, contact numbers

Thanks to VBS experts Emily Slitcher Given and Lisa Brown for the use of these great tips. More of their tips can be found on [their webinar](#)

Safe Church

Please follow your churches Safe Church plan when hosting your VBS. If you need additional information on how to create a Safe Church plan for VBS we recommend beginning with [this article](#) and following through with the Safeguarding Online courses.



Behind The Abundant Life Garden Project VBS

Jerusalem Greer is a writer, speaker, and lay Episcopal minister. Jerusalem has authored two books, “A Homemade Year,” and “At Home in this Life,” and a host of faith curriculums. With her husband Nathan, she has two sons, and together they live on a hobby farm in rural Arkansas where they are attempting to live a slower version of modern life. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. To learn more visit jerusalemgreer.com

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