

Vacation Bible School (VBS) in India

Introduction

“Let the children come to me! Do not stop them because the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to these.” Mark 10:14

Today the Vacation Bible School (VBS) is one of the many ways in which Jesus is seeking to bring children and youth into his kingdom. The initials, VBS, explained concisely mean:

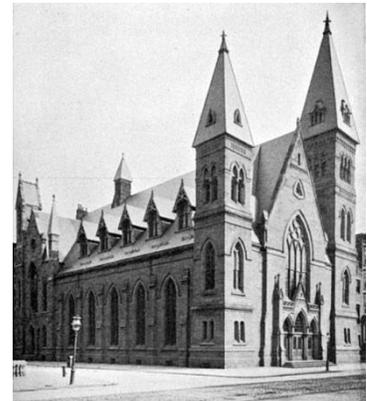
- V- A school conducted during a vacation period.
- B- A school following a Bible-centered course of study.
- S- A school maintaining a regular schedule.



Vacation Bible School Group Portrait. Texas, USA (1951).
Photo by Gildersleeve

VBS History

In summer of 1898, Dr. Hawes and his wife Eliza who had moved to New York to practice medicine sought to reach out to the large number immigrant children in the neighbourhood. A member of the Epiphany Baptist Church, she rented out a hall and offered an "Everyday Bible School" with a program of worship, music, Bible stories and scripture memorization, games, crafts, drawing, cooking, etc. By the time Mrs. Hawes retired in 1901, she was overseeing seven separate schools and her successful program was imitated by many denominations.



Epiphany Baptist Church, New York

In India, the work of the Vacation Bible School, Bangalore began through a department of the South Indian Biblical Seminary (SIBS) (formerly the South India Bible Institute - SIBI), Bangarapet, Kolar District, Karnataka. In 1952, missionaries Mrs. Mary Hamilton and Miss. Margon challenged a few of their SIBS students like Mr. P. Samuel, Mr. Theodore Williams, Ms. Packiathai and others to reach out to children. The first VBS was started in 1952 in a small village, namely Kovilpatty, in south Tamil Nadu with 75 students. The SIBI team consisting of some of the staff and students taught songs and Bible stories under trees and verandahs. First VBS in Kerala was organized in Mallappally in 1956.

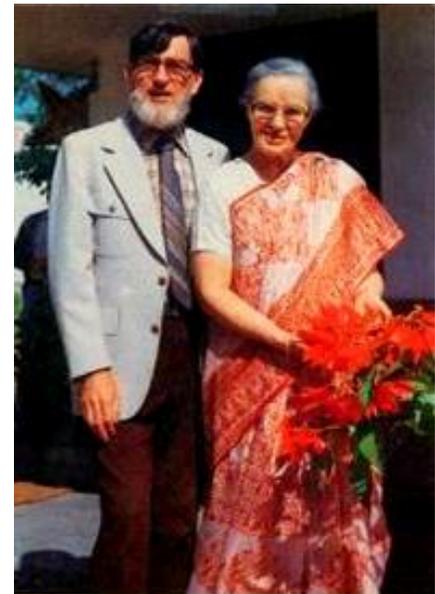
VBS and Mar Thoma Sunday School Samajam

Vacation Bible Schools started in the Mar Thoma Syrian Church as a project to commemorate the Platinum Jubilee Celebrations of the Mar Thoma Sunday School Samajam in 1980.

Rev. Lester John Hamilton and Mrs. Mary Hamilton

The Hamiltons (American Missionaries) arrived in India in 1951 and were given only a brief period of language study before being plunged into the activities of the South India Bible Institute in Bangarapet, Kolar District, Karnataka. But they both continued to learn Kannada throughout their ministry in India, and found themselves quite at home with the language. Rev. and Mrs. Hamilton were teachers in the South India Biblical Institute (SIBI) in Bangarapet, in Karnataka.

In 1952, Mrs. Mary Hamilton was requested to prepare materials for a model Vacation Bible School, and this was so well received that it has grown to become an annual event in many parts of India, and other countries in the world.



Lester and Mary Hamilton
Serving God in INDIA

Lester and Mary began to sense God calling them to work full time with VBS. After 10 years of service at SIBI, the Hamiltons moved to Bangalore. Mary developed VBS curriculum, while Lester designed VBS centers and constructed new ministry buildings in Bangalore. In a 1971 Call to Prayer article, Mary wrote: “The development of Vacation Bible School students into steady Christian leaders is one of the sweet rewards of this ministry.” Just 14 years after the first VBS was held on SIBI’s campus, over 50,000 children were regularly participating in VBS programs.

Even though the Hamilton’s turned over the leadership of the VBS office into national hands, they continued to remain involved with it and gave their time and assistance until they left India. Lester and Mary officially retired in 1986 after 35 years of service in India with WGM. Lester passed away on 29 December, 2009, at the age of 88. Mary passed away on 12 August, 2013, at the age of 89.

They both were highly talented and have enriched the lives of many who came in contact with them. Their many and varied contributions to the ministries of South India Biblical Seminary and the Vacation Bible school movement will not be soon forgotten and we thank God for having brought them to serve in India. The ministry exploded beyond what anyone could have imagined, and today, over two million children are being reached annually, in 13 different languages, throughout India and surrounding countries. Thousands of children have come to know the Lord through VBS.

Read more about [Rev. Lester Hamilton \(1921 - 2009\)](#) and [Mary Hamilton \(1923 - 2013\)](#)