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## NEWS

### It's Avalanche Ranch

#### New Hanover Church transforms itself for Vacation Bible School

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Sporting cowboy attire, Caleb Sanford, 8, works on a suncatcher during Vacation Bible School at New Hanover Presbyterian Church. Photo By: BRUCE PARKER

By MARTI COVINGTON  
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF  
WRITER

The sanctuary at New Hanover Presbyterian Church was dim, drawing attention to the wall where a video showed children singing and dancing to the lyrics "Our God is an awesome God."

In the pews, 70 little faces were turned toward the video, straw cowboy hats on their heads, singing along and following the motions.

The children were enjoying the start of their last night at New Hanover's Vacation Bible School, a high-energy opener of live musical accompaniment and Bible verses.

Most of the Mechanicsville church was transformed into the Wild West for the weeklong event, which started June 25. About 300 children participated in the morning and evening sessions, according to Gaylia Nichols, director of children's ministries.

"It's a unique way of presenting to these children, in a visual, multisensory way, the Bible story," Nichols said.

New Hanover's colorful setup showed that VBS has made some changes. No longer do children sit quietly in neat rows while a minister lectures from the Bible for a few hours.

These days, Bible schools are often elaborate, high-tech productions that combine easy-to-understand lessons with the razzle-dazzle of a child's favorite toys and cartoons. It takes an army of volunteers, time and money to put on the show.

"It's not about one person doing the job, it's about a lot of people doing a lot of the jobs," Nichols said. She and her staff started planning the Bible school last August, working through a long list of tasks that take months to complete.

During Bible school week, banners of characters hung in the sanctuary windows; the stage featured a huge painted backdrop of a mountain range and the fencing posts of a dude ranch. In the foyer was a miniature log cabin with a wooden chair and lantern inside. A hall made to look like a stone tunnel led to the drama room, where adult actors played out Bible stories and blue cloth ran along the floor to simulate a river. Western memorabilia decorated every inch of the walls. This wasn't New Hanover -- it was Avalanche Ranch.

Christian publishing companies sell VBS starter kits that come with a ready-made theme, such as Avalanche Ranch from Group Publishing. The kits also include guides, workbooks for every grade level, craft samples and a suggestion book of ways to make the theme come to life with props and scenery. Each kit runs from \$60 to \$300, depending on the subject matter and publisher, with additional money spent for copies of the materials for every child.

The Resource Center, an ecumenical Richmond organization that provides ministry tools to churches, holds a VBS curriculum fair each year in early February, when publishing houses put out their latest kits, according to the Rev. Judith Bennett, executive director. The three-day fair features material from at least 20 publishers. It draws hundreds of people.

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"Younger generations need to be entertained," Bennett said. "They don't need to sit still. These curriculums meet children where they are."

The cost of purchasing kits and copies is often a part of the church budget. Churches rely on donations from the congregation to pay for extra supplies. Some, like New Hanover, also create networks with other churches to share kits, props and materials and cut costs.

Some churches charge small registration fees. New Hanover, for example, suggested a \$10 donation per child.

But neither the publishing houses nor churches make money from Bible schools, Bennett said. "Nobody is getting rich off this stuff."

But making money is not the goal, Nichols said.

"It's not about money," she said. "People come back year after year because they want to change lives."  
Contact Marti Covington at (804) 649-6822 or [jcovington@timesdispatch.com](mailto:jcovington@timesdispatch.com).

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