

100 Years of Vacation Church School in the Philippines United Methodist Church

Reaching more than 200,000 children (and their families) annually

In 2024, The United Methodist Church in the Philippines celebrated one hundred years of vacation church school. I had the privilege of interviewing two wonderful deaconesses: Mary Joyce Villanueva, who is currently serving as the executive secretary of the Philippines Central Conference Board of Christian Education and Discipleship (BCED), and Phebe Gamata-Crismo, former executive secretary until her retirement last year.

In this conversation, Phebe and Mary Joyce share the history of vacation church school (VCS) in the Philippines, how it evolved from “vacation Bible school” to “vacation church school,” what happens at a typical VCS in the local church and community, how the whole local church comes together to launch and support this program, and how its impact is felt beyond the walls of the church and in the community. Here are a few highlights from the conversation:

- In the Philippines, deaconesses usually run and support VCS.
- Vacation church school started in 1924 through a special grant from the Sunday School Union in the United States.
- Methodist Christian educators decided to call it “vacation church school” to make it ecumenical and open to non-Protestants.
- VCS is a week-long (sometimes, ten days) program where children sing songs, learn about Bible stories, and express themselves through art.
- Every year, the Board of Christian Education and Discipleship of the Philippines Central Conference produces resource materials, consisting of several booklets, based on a curriculum in line with the United Methodist Church’s quadrennial theme.
- Launching a VCS program is a whole-church affair: youth and young adults serve as teachers and teacher’s assistants; church women usually prepare lunch and meals for the children and volunteers; men serve as marshals, and families sponsor snacks or meals.
- The church collaborates with community officials and leaders, especially for extension programs and ministries.
- In any given year, the VCS program in the Philippines ministers to about 200,000 children and their families.
- Some challenges VCS and the Board of Christian Education and Discipleship face include shortened attention span of children and youth because of social media, logistics, and finances, and equipping the church to continue children’s ministries beyond the vacation church school.
- Congregations in Asia, the United States, and Spain use the VCS materials developed by the Board of Christian Education and Discipleship.

To learn more about the Board of Christian Education and Discipleship, please visit their website at <https://bcded-umc.org/> or follow them on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/umcbced>.

Here’s the transcript (*edited*) of the conversation:

Mighty: Good morning, good afternoon, good evening, everyone, wherever you are. I’m Mighty Rasing, Director of Central Conference Relationships at Discipleship Ministries. In this video, I am joined by two wonderful and passionate ladies from the Philippines who worked and continue to work with the Board of Christian Education and Discipleship in the Philippine Central Conference of the United Methodist Church. Ms. Phebe Gamata-Crismo (I say former because she has officially retired) is the former executive secretary of the Board of Christian Education and Discipleship, a position she held for many years. She has done a lot of

wonderful ministries in the area of discipleship. Deaconess Mary Joyce Villanueva is the new executive secretary at BCED. BCED stands for Board of Christian Education and Discipleship.

So, Ate Phoebe... ("Ate" means big sister in Filipino, by the way) and Ate Mec, will you talk about your work and background so our Methodist friends from all over can learn about you and your ministries? Can you talk briefly about what it means to be a deaconess in the Philippines?

Being a Deaconess in the Philippines

Phebe: Yes, it's a pleasure to be with you this morning or whatever time it is where you are. To begin with, once you become a deaconess, you are a full-time worker in the church. And by full-time, I mean service to the church in the name of Christ, 24/7. The norm for deaconesses in the Philippines is to be appointed to local churches as full-time Christian education directors and/or kindergarten or preschool teachers. Christian education directors do music ministry, play the organ and piano during worship, and teach the choir. Normally, there are three choirs in any given church: a children's choir, a youth choir, and an adult choir or a chancel choir. So, that's music ministry. Deaconesses also do youth ministry. They also work with the United Methodist Women (in the Philippines, the Women's Society of Christian Service) and other lay organizations.

Deaconesses do outreach ministries, and those appointed outside the church typically work in institutions for specialized ministries, such as ecumenical ministries in the National Council of Churches, the Christian Conference of Asia, the World Council of Churches, and local ecumenical bodies. Some serve in United Methodist educational institutions as teachers, professors, and administrators. I worked a long time in the United Methodist Church, Philippine Central Conference, Board of Christian Education and Discipleship, and I served on the National Council of Churches for twenty-three years.

Mary Joyce (Mec): And if I may add, deaconesses have graduated from Harris Memorial College in the past, but now we also have one deaconess school in Mindanao, SPMCI.

Phebe: Yes, Southern Philippines Methodist Colleges.

Mary Joyce (Mec): Harris Memorial College offers the deaconess program not only for Filipinos, but they have opened it in Asia, and there are graduates from Africa and some other countries.

Phebe: I think we have seven students from Africa. I don't know which countries. There are male and female students studying to be deaconesses and home missionaries.

Mighty: I believe home missionaries are recognized in the United States. I know deaconesses are also considered laypeople, but you see them working hard in many ministries of the United Methodist Church and other ecumenical work.

Phebe: And they preach also.

Mighty: Yes, they are theologically savvy and ministry-ready in many ways. So thank you, Ate Phebe and Ate Mary Joyce, for sharing some of the work of the deaconess. I wanted to ask about that because it's important for the topic we're talking about today, the ministry of the vacation church school in the Philippines or VCS (that's the term I grew up with). In the U.S. and other places, it's also called vacation Bible school or VBS. VCS is the term that's usually used in the Philippines. The vacation church school ministry in the Philippine United Methodist Church celebrated its centennial—a hundred years! Ate Phebe and Ate Mary Joyce, will you share some of the history of VCS in the Philippines?

A Brief History of Vacation Church School in the Philippines

Phebe: Vacation church school in the Philippines started as a daily vacation Bible school. It started here in 1924 through a special grant from the Sunday School Union in the United States. Back then, it was called the Evangelical Union. The Methodist Episcopal Church, the predecessor of the United Methodist Church, played an important role, as our missionaries had been at the forefront of daily vacation Bible school. It grew by leaps and bounds. From 1924 through 1928, tens of thousands of children were reached for daily vacation Bible school.

We produced a centennial book called *VCS Kids Then and Now: Looking Back on 100 Years of Vacation Church School in the Philippines*. It is a collection of one hundred stories and one hundred photographs. The photographs on the cover were taken around 1928 through 1932 and are expertly preserved by our United Methodist Commission on Archives and History. The writers in this book include pastors, deaconesses, lay leaders, university professors, college presidents—people from all walks of life. They talked about what vacation church school has meant for them and their lives. I'm quite proud of that book.

Vacation Bible school was done in two weeks—from 1924 to the 1950s or 1960s. As people got busier and there were more educational opportunities for children, it became a one-week activity. By the 1970s, vacation Bible school was under the auspices of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (back then, it was called Philippine Federation of Evangelical Churches). They produced materials patterned after the United States materials and adapted them to the Philippine setting. The artists and musicians composed songs and created artwork that resonated with Filipino children.

Until the 1970s, Catholic and non-Protestant children liked VBS, but their parents were not comfortable sending their children to school for a Protestant activity. In many churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church back then, reading the Bible was not for children and perhaps not even for adults. The priests interpreted the scriptures. But among Protestants, Bible reading is common. So, the Christian educators determined that calling daily vacation Bible school “vacation church school” would be a better way to attract non-Protestant children whose parents were not comfortable having their children learn the Bible from other sources. That’s how it came to be called “vacation church school.” The children learned about the Bible, life, and how to deal with others.

What Happens in a Vacation Church School

Mighty: So, what usually happens in a vacation church school?

Mary Joyce (Mec): It's like a Sunday school but turned into a one-week or two-week vacation program. In Sunday school, we sing songs, teach Bible stories, and do arts. Our VCS is a two-week program with a theme. We base our VCS theme on the quadrennial theme of the United Methodist General Conference.

I want to add that we celebrated one hundred years of VCS in the Philippines. I think most churches —about 95% — celebrated the VCS centennial in the Philippines. The celebration started last April 3, 2024, at Central UMC. We had about seven hundred people from Luzon, Visayas, Mindanao, Manila Episcopal area, Baguio Episcopal area, and Davao Episcopal area participate in our centennial celebration of VCS. We also held centennial celebrations in Bicol, Davao, on a separate date.

Phebe: It became a big fiesta. There were parades complete with floats and balloons. Some had their drums and lyre. You can find them on YouTube. VCS is the single most awaited activity for children in any given year. It's more popular than any other. The Board of Christian Education and Discipleship produces new material every year.

Mighty: Every year?

Phebe: Every year, yes. Complete with a songbook, a theme song, art materials, and, of course, the teacher's guide and a poster calendar.

How Local Churches Launch Vacation Church School

Mighty: So, when a local church implements it, what happens, and who gets to participate in the VCS?

Phebe: First, we have the Christian Education Committee planning process. A church would have at least two classes, one for the church children and another for children outside the church—those who go to other churches or don't go to any church at all. Around seventy to eighty percent of vacation church school children are not United Methodists. They are children from the community.

The young people, children, and youth from ages twelve through eighteen or twenty serve as teachers. They go through a week-long training to be teachers. When a child reaches the older elementary level in VCS, the next thing to do is serve as an assistant teacher and later on as a teacher. It's always like that, and it's so much fun. So, what happens in the classes? Well... those are just like any other school, except more fun. When children arrive, they meet new friends. They register and get name tags. They all gather in a general assembly to sing praise songs and acquaintance songs, and then they have a devotional.

Next, they are sent to their age-level classes for a one-and-a-half to two-hour session on the theme, the Bible, and music. They do creative and expressional arts. We call it ABC: Arrival, Bible time, and Commitment time. After the singing and dancing, they do a deeper study of the scriptures or have a Bible storytelling session. Then, they do expressional activities to implement what they have learned. The session usually ends with a commitment time or worship time.

Children don't want to go home. Many children in rural areas bring their lunch to eat there. But churches always provide snacks for children. The *merienda* (snack) ranges from *lugaw* (congee) to biscuits to spaghetti. Or there is *ano tawag dito* (what do you call this) and *malabnaw na* juice (very diluted juice). The juice is flavored water or sweetened water.

As the days progress and near the end of VCS, the juice becomes tastier, more like apple juice or orange juice. And then the *lugaw* becomes spaghetti, sometimes even a Jollibee sandwich—a burger. (*Jollibee is a fast-food chain in the Philippines.*)

Mighty: So, Ate Mary Joyce, what is the usual age range of the kids participating in VCS?

Mary Joyce (Mec): We cater to kids eighteen and below. Sometimes, we have children, ages one and two, with their parents. In my local church in Bulacan, we have nine extension VCS programs. Around fifty or sixty young people teach vacation church school in these nine areas. This is a collective ministry. When young people teach, the UMYAF (young adults), WSCS, and UMM (United Methodist Men) participate by sponsoring meals during VCS. We offer lunch to teachers and sometimes transportation because some areas are far from the church. Most of the time, the WSCs or the women's group prepares lunch and meals. Sometimes, United Methodist Men serve as marshals, which is good because we extend ministries to the barangays (village government unit) and communicate with the barangay officials about areas that can be used for VCS classes.

It's a collective ministry. I once considered it a youth ministry or activity. But now, I realize the whole church works for our VCS program. Some other churches hold classes for two weeks because of the many extension areas they serve.

We are talking not only about United Methodist members. In our book, Bishop Alberto Ramento talks about a sermon where he tells the crowd that he got his earliest theological training from the Methodist Church in Guimba, Nueva Ecija, where he grew up. He said, "I learned my theological ABCs from the Methodist church." He's the bishop of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (*Philippine Independent Church*).

Phebe: Do you know how he got into VCS? He said that every summer when he was growing up, he and his elder brother would get a whipping every day for two weeks because they would leave their house freshly dressed in white shirts in the morning and then go home with the fronts of their shirts soiled. Where did they get all the dirt? He said they would go to the back of the Methodist Church, and his elder brother would lift the barbed-wire fence so he could crawl in. After getting under the fence, he did the same for his brother. When they went home, they did the same thing. So, they would get home all sweaty and soiled, and they got whippings. But they continued this again and again until they graduated.

The Impact of Vacation Church School in the Community

Mighty: That's wonderful that it's not just a church project but a community project. It's a ministry for the children, the youth, and the young adults who usually serve as teachers. And the men and women of the church prepare the snacks. The ministry also happens outside the church, involving community leaders. It is a witness to the community, which means that our faith is lived out in the community. People see how the church cares for the little children, as Jesus commanded us, and how it brings people together and teaches the kids.

In college, I attended a church in Marikina: God is Love United Methodist Church. There were a lot of kids during the day, and they would have snacks and lunch. Then, they would go home in the afternoon and return the next day. It wasn't just the kids who were affected. So were their parents. One of the parents once said, "Because of what you're doing here, our kids asked us to pray before dinner." It's a simple gesture, but it's a recognition of the impact of faith and teaching on these kids.

Mary Joyce (Mec): It's a school. After ten days, we have a culminating activity or the VCS graduation. The day after the VCS graduation, children will say, "Teacher, do we have VCS?" I think that is also a way for us to invite them into the church because they're asking for more. They don't want to stop attending classes. This is really a good ministry. I have several classmates in my program, and whenever I introduce myself as a United Methodist deaconess in charge of VCS, they say, "I'm a product of VCS, but I'm not a Methodist." Several of my friends and classmates who are not United Methodists testify about the goodness of VCS.

Mighty: That's amazing. Could you estimate the number of children participating in VCS in the Philippines in any given year? For example, last year, how many children were impacted by VCS?

Phebe: One year, the Baguio Episcopal Area reported 76,000 children in the whole area. That is just one episcopal area. Back then, it had seven conferences.

Mary Joyce (Mec): I think it's almost 200,000 for the Philippines. That's a rough estimate.

Phebe: In Mec's local church, they have 1,500 children in a given year. They have seven or six classes, so 1,500 children is not a big number.

Challenges and Changes

Mighty: The VCS as a ministry continues to be a powerful force that impacts the lives of hundreds of thousands of kids every year. That's amazing. Given the scope of the ministry of VCS, the Philippines, its population, and the number of kids, what are some challenges BCED and VCS face in providing this type of ministry?

Phebe: During the COVID pandemic, when children were cooped up in their homes and spent more time doing social media activities, they got hooked on social media. It's very difficult to break that. It's like an addiction. Whatever they do, they have their cell phones. Everyone is into social media, so personal interaction takes a backseat. But in VCS, they have been freed from that. They come to VCS, but social media is a big challenge. Their short attention spans impact the effectiveness of VCS.

Another problem is logistics. How are we going to feed so many children? Because the food is also a major part of VCS because many children need it. They go to VCS without having breakfast in many communities. The church children don't usually need the merienda because they bring their own, but children in the community do. Young people have other commitments elsewhere, so they have shortened their volunteer time.

Mighty: In a hundred years of VCS, there are bound to be changes, and these are some of the changes and challenges for this generation. Ate Phebe, to your point about children's attention spans, that's a worldwide phenomenon we're facing with kids and young people in general. I also wanted to lift this up. Because of the reality of poverty in the Philippines, many kids might not have breakfast and would have a very meager lunch, especially in poor urban areas. It's an opportunity for the church to be present and feed the kids spiritually and physically. Recall the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew. It helps if you feed them first.

Phebe: You would be surprised to hear that many people give out of their pockets. The budget is always inadequate. But mothers and elder sisters say, "I will sponsor one lunch for the teachers." My neighbors are not Methodists, but the young adults come to the house and say, "Tita, Tita. I'm going to sponsor one day's snacks." So they provide snacks for eighty-five children plus ten teachers. It's inspiring to know that children who grew up in VCS remember. One person said recently, "When I have children of my own, I'm going to send them to VCS." They're not Methodists.

Mary Joyce (Mec): I think this is an opportunity for churches. We know that VCS is held during the summer vacation, but what happens to the children and the ministry after VCS? A challenge for BCED is to provide and promote the mission and outreach programs or materials so we can keep having vacation church school and extension ministries.

Mighty: It's supporting the church in carrying on the fruits from VCS. One of the metaphors we've used with youth ministry is "lighting a fire." If young people attend Christmas Institute, a Christmas camp for young people, then a fire is lit in young people. The light dies without a candle to catch the fire when they return to the local church. The same is true when kids hunger for connection, community, and spiritual nourishment because of VCS. Hopefully, the church will be ready to handle and support the follow-ups after that.

Phebe: BCED is struggling to maintain and upgrade the services it offers. A big challenge for BCED is producing better services and more exciting materials. You have to up the ante all the time. When children enjoy VCS for one year, they expect more the next and the next. People ask me, "Where do you get all these ideas? What do you do?" Sometimes, when you've been doing something for so many years, it is challenging to develop newer and better materials. We need writers who will take time to produce these materials. It's important to cultivate a pool of writers, bringing in younger people with fresh ideas, especially about how to reach out to youth.

Mighty: Thanks, Ate Phebe. That's the importance of an institution to the life of the church. An institution provides continuity and infrastructure support so the ministry continues. There's material every year. There are new ideas. There's training that supports the church in doing this ministry. With many challenges around the

world and within the church, the work of discipleship continues. The work of community engagement continues. This is an opportunity for the church to be the feet and hands of Jesus in our community. VCS, I believe, has been that for at least one hundred years now.

Phebe: Yes, 101 this year.

Hopes for Vacation Church School

Mighty: As we wrap up our conversations, what are your hopes for VCS in the coming years? Maybe in the next one hundred years?

Phebe: Oh, I surely hope it goes on. It may take on other forms, but I hope it continues to inspire children and bring out the best in them. To many children, VCS is the only time they get to hear the Word of God. And for many children, it's the only time they get affirmed as good children. It's a place and experience where they can develop hope for the future. It is important that VCS continues to bring hope to the children, aside from cultivating faith in God and living a life of faith and joining the faith community.

Mary Joyce (Mec): My hope for VCS is to double the number. If we have 200,000 this year, then double it and work in unity with other churches and the community. Providing a follow-up session after VCS is important so the ministry will continue.

Mighty: That's wonderful. There are many things to hope for in the next one hundred years of VCS. I'm sure there will be changes, but one thing is sure: the love our churches and members have for the kids in the community will continue to be felt many years later. Ate Phebe and Ate Mary Joyce, thank you so much for sharing the story and ministries of vacation church school in the United Methodist Church in the Philippines. If people want to learn more about your work, BCS, BCED, or other things, where can people find more information?

Mary Joyce: We have a website (<https://bced-umc.org/>), but it's a work in progress. We also have a Facebook page for the Board of Christian Education and Discipleship (<https://www.facebook.com/umcbced>). You are welcome to visit our training online or our VCS. Just inform us ahead of time so that we can accommodate you. You can visit our office at 900 United Nations Avenue, Manila.

Phebe: We do online training that we perfected during the pandemic. We did vacation church school online.

Mary Joyce (Mec): I want to add that we have provided online training to our UMC church in Spain for two years now. Some of our deaconesses are scattered. They're in the Middle East, U.S., and Canada. So they're requesting online copies of our materials and using them for their vacation church schools. Our curriculum is used not only in the Philippines but also in churches in Asia, the U.S., and Spain.

Mighty: Wow. Maybe other United Methodist congregations around the world would be interested. If you are interested, then get in touch with Ate Mary Joyce, Ate Phebe, or me. The wonderful thing about a worldwide connectional church is the ability to share resources and trade stories from all over the world. My hope, too, is that whether between the U.S. and the Philippines, maybe Africa and Europe, we share and trade stories and resources (to borrow from the General Board of Global Ministries) from everywhere to everywhere. We share and work together. Not just one country provides all the resources. There is this big exchange of lessons learned, of cultures, of God's love being felt all over. So again, some dreams, some hopes.

Ate Mary Joyce and Ate Phoebe, again, thank you so much for sharing the ministry of vacation church school. From Discipleship Ministries and other regions of the church, we hope that the ministry of VCS will grow and that we get to learn from one another worldwide.