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On: 07 January 2015, At: 05:32

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/urea20>

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Published online: 10 Jul 2006.

To cite this article: Robert G. Boville (1907) Summer Bible Schools for Children, Religious Education: The official journal of the Religious Education Association, 2:2, 64-68, DOI: [10.1080/0034408070020204](https://doi.org/10.1080/0034408070020204)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0034408070020204>

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Summer Bible Schools for Children

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The religious education of the nation's childhood, is the most fundamental obligation of the church. The strongest guarantee for the continuance of free Christian institutions is to be found, not in national documents, however venerable, but in the hearts of children, trained to limit personal liberty by due regard for the rights of others.

By religious education is meant, not the inculcation of denominational tenets, but the creation of fraternal relations with man, and filial relations with God. For the first class of relations the state holds itself, in a measure, responsible, and, it is safe to say, that the American public school is applying the most civilizing and humanizing educational process to be found in any land. In the pedagogical training of teachers, in the school curriculum and discipline, it is giving fuller recognition to character, as a necessary end to be sought. It is teaching the children of all races to live in harmony under one flag—a great moral achievement.

In the attempt to fulfill this broad and binding obligation, we touch on a serious limitation that exists, viz.: that of time. Is it possible, in the fifty-two Sundays of the year, to provide adequate religious instruction? Hence the origin of the recent movement for the closing of the public schools on Wednesday afternoon, so that opportunity may be given for a weekly session of sufficient length, devoted to the religious education of the young. This movement, however, has not yet reached the stage at which we can expect school boards to give it serious consideration. But if religious bodies were as deeply impressed as they should be with the fact that the religious education of that large part of the population, which belongs to the child or adolescent period of life, overshadows in importance all the preaching that can be done, in later years, not only would Sunday and Wednesday afternoons be utilized, but also every other opportunity available.

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* The Board of the National Federal of Churches has appointed Dr. Boville National Director of Dally Vacation Bible Schools. The work is now being introduced in many large cities. Resolutions passed by the national committee state that "It shall cooperate with all societies the purpose of which is to make the religious education of the young more efficient."

There is in our cities, if not in our towns, an opportunity for the religious education of children of a specially valuable character—the summer vacation. In July and August there are sixty-two consecutive days, free from school attendance, waiting to be utilized by the church, and apparently overlooked. Here is, in one sense, the greatest opportunity of the year, because it is possible to follow up the teaching day after day. The Sunday school suffers, because a week's interval works ravages in the memory and interest of children. But when instruction is given, not only line after line, but day after day, by all pedagogical laws the elements of success are multiplied. Here, in these two months, is the equivalent, in time, of a whole year's sessions of the Sunday school, and more than the equivalent in continuity and effectiveness. The failure to use this summer opportunity is one of the most striking cases, not only of religious oversight, but also of religious waste and neglect. Jacob Riis, speaking of the New York streets crowded with children, in the summer, and the closed church doors, says "The churches standing dark and silent, are a constant arraignment of our little faith," and W. H. Maxwell, Superintendent of Education in New York, looking at this fact, from a different point of view, says "There is no financial waste, that I know, in our city, comparable with that, which arises from having the schools and churches closed, during the summer, and during Saturday and the evenings." To how few of the populous centers of this nation do these statements not apply!

The conviction that the summer vacations is the greatest opportunity of the year for Christian bodies to reach vast numbers of children, by means of daily Bible schools, is the outcome of six consecutive summers' work, on this problem, in New York City. The experience thus gained has shown that, from the child's point of view, there is a social need for such work, at least in our large cities. After fresh air societies, churches, and other philanthropic bodies, have done their utmost, there are still multitudes of children in our cities, doomed by the pressure of poverty, to pass the summer in the streets. The vacation, with all its rural and sea-side attractions for more fortunate children, is for them a pathetic experience, when the novelty of the first week of freedom from school has passed, the charm of

the vacation is over. To play from morning till night, all through the summer, on the hot streets with their traffic and noise, affords plenty of excitement, but eventually it becomes monotonous and wearisome. Public school oversight is withdrawn, the churches are closed, parks are not always accessible, and the only public guardian available is the policeman, whose appearance does not promote holiday enjoyment. The children themselves demand something to furnish a change in the monotony of their life. They welcome employment in a daily vacation school, and still more the sympathy and friendship of cultivated, resourceful college men and women, whose religion is unconventional. There is no atmosphere of formality or repression about a daily school, even though held in a church building. Bible stories and lessons attract, when manual methods of teaching are employed, and when allied with music lessons, sewing lessons, hammock lessons, first aid lessons, and even basket ball, the Bible becomes to the child a very living and human book. This sounds like mere theory; it is more, it is theory and fact combined. Crowds of children gathered at the doors of our Daily Vacation Schools, long before the doors were opened, during the past six summers attest the fact. Thus the child's social need, and the church obligation point in the same direction and meet in the Vacation Bible School.

There is needed, however, a fresh equipment of loving, resourceful and efficient personality for this service. Church staffs in our great cities are too exhausted to undertake it in mid-summer, with any hope of success; it would be inhumane to expect them to do it. But there is a polarity in the ways of Providence that brings demand and supply together. For just at this season, the great seats of learning are closing their doors, and thousands of the choicest young men and women, with the inspiration of Christian and College life in their faces, and filled with the vision of social service, are turned adrift. Is it economic for philanthropists to endow these same seats of learning, that they may impart Christian culture, and then leave the students to become, in many cases, waiters and canvassers, during the summer? Is it sufficient for learned Faculties to inculcate the claims of social service, and, at the same time show little interest in their realization? Is the study of sociology to be completed in

the lecture-room, or, at best, by a visit to the Bowery and Blackwell's Island, without some closer contact with the stern realities of life? The Universities and Colleges of the United States owe it to the Republic to contribute their share toward the betterment of civic life, and especially child life. In them we have a great power-house of energy, that should be applied to civic progress, and especially in summer ministry to childhood. There is no ministry that college men and women more intensely enjoy than ministry to children; there is no type more welcomed and worshipped by the eager children of our streets, than the alert, cultivated product of the colleges. Neither is this theory; the experience of six summers has established it beyond a doubt. Last summer's work will suffice as illustration.

Under the auspices of the Federation of Churches, twenty-three church buildings of seven denominations were opened last July as Vacation Bible Schools. Twenty of these were in Manhattan, two in Brooklyn and one in Jersey City. Seventy-five men and women, representing thirty-five Universities and Colleges, chosen out of three hundred applicants, constituted the human equipment. Three students—one man and two women—formed the average staff of each school. After a week spent in preparation and visitation, they gathered off the street, into the schools, six thousand, six hundred and ninety-six children, during the session of the schools. For every child brought in there were over seventy still playing on the streets, sufficient to engage the energies of seventy times the number of students employed. The children were of all races and religions, and their teachers of all denominations. To take these children off the street, and keep them busy each morning, was, to say the least, good social service. But these college men and women did more; they were the teachers and friends of the children in the school, and on the street they organized games and settled quarrels. Despite heat and storms and picnics, they maintained a daily average of 1,847 from July 9, when the schools were opened, till August 23, when they closed. The method during the school session was natural.

The first morning hour was devoted to opening exercises, a Bible story, calisthenic drill and a short music lesson. The Bible stories were selected with the object of touching on as

many vital moral problems of childhood as possible. They were illustrated by sand-table, stereoscopic and blank-book work. The music was intended to train the voice, eliminate shouting, and through the voice tone and influence the child nature. The second hour was devoted to manual and group work, varied by talks on health and first aid, games and weekly social events. This hour afforded opportunity for the personality of the teachers to come into the closest contact with the children, and for the study of individual characters and needs. The enthusiasm of the children for work was a revelation; they often preferred it to games. The boys completed over four hundred hammocks, one school alone completing sixty-four. At the close of each morning session, after a song, the children repeated as a benediction the words, "Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven," and then marched out to the accompaniment of music. The Commencement Exercises were attended by over eighteen hundred children, and the exhibition of work, the music and the Bible exercises, gave proof of the value of the student work among the children, and the possibilities of the summer vacation, as the greatest opportunity of the year for the church to impart religious education and render social service. The students gave much, but they received more. It is safe to say that they carried back to thirty-five colleges at least, a deep and lasting sympathy for the struggles of childhood, and a greater desire to have a share in the spiritual and social ministry of the world.

New York may be an extreme case, as applied to the problem of child life in our cities, but in the other great centers of the Republic, the need for such work is, in proportion, as great, and the supply of college material just as accessible and just as good; whoever connects Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston and a dozen other cities, with the unused energies of our universities and colleges, and gives to the children of these cities, during July and August, such companionship, such religious influence, such wealth of affection, as the children of New York enjoyed last summer, in the daily Bible Schools, will be a benefactor of high rank, not only to the children, the cities and the colleges, but to the cause of liberty and religion, which, in the hearts of children, will shape the republic of the future.