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Catch & Release

EDUCATION: Across the country, public-school students are going to Bible studies—and it's entirely legal

by Jamie Dean

GREENVILLE, S.C.—In a small classroom on the second floor of Mount Calvary Baptist Church (MCBC) in Greenville, S.C., eight little girls are learning about God's holiness. A poster on the wall colorfully illustrates the Bible story underscoring the lesson: Moses, the burning bush, and the piece of land that God called "holy ground." A cheerful teacher asks the attentive group of second- and third-graders: "Do you remember what holy means?" With a little help, the young voices answer: "separate." Though that's more than some adults might know about the biblical term, this isn't Sunday school, and these kids don't go to this church. Instead, these are public-school students who often don't attend any church but leave school early once a week to learn about the Bible from a distinctly Christian perspective.

This is no clandestine effort: The program is thoroughly legal and enthusiastically endorsed by Cherrydale Elementary School and many of the dozens of other public schools—from elementary level through high school—allowing similar programs in several states around the country. It's part of a concept called Released Time Education, and the idea is simple: Parents give their children permission to leave public schools for Bible instruction at local churches during the school day. Volunteers arrange to transport the children to and from school, and private donations cover the program costs. Bible teachers can use the curriculum of their choice.

Though the idea is simple, participants say the effects are far-reaching.

School officials say the program emphasizes good character traits and provides needed help for sometimes-overstretched schools. Pastors say it's a substantial opportunity for churches to serve their communities and reach young people with solid biblical teaching.

Robert Vincent—pastor of outreach at MCBC—estimates that two-thirds of the 50-plus children enrolled in his church's Released Time program don't



regularly attend church. Even so, on a recent Wednesday afternoon, the nine children in Vincent's class of fourth- and fifth-grade boys listened intently as the pastor recounted the story of David fleeing from Saul in the book of 1 Samuel.

The boys have just arrived with the other children from Cherrydale Elementary on a church bus. Some 25 church volunteers help oversee and teach the program's five classes: one for first-grade boys and girls, and separate classes for boys and girls in grades two and three, and four and five.

In Vincent's class, the boys have been learning about David, and they quickly offer details from past lessons: David was born Bethlehem, he had seven brothers, and his father's name was Jesse. The children happily groan when Vincent ends this week's story with a cliffhanger: Saul entering the cave where David and his men are hiding. The suspenseful narrative resonates with these lively boys, but they also listen carefully to Vincent's simple application: "David is a young man who talks to God, and he is learning to listen to God when people around him aren't."

That's a lesson Vincent hopes these children will absorb. Most of the students in the program live in the surrounding neighborhood, a low-income area with high rates of single-parent homes. He says more than half of the children have learning disabilities and need extra help with homework, a service volunteers provide after Bible instruction.

In the nearby classrooms, Bible instruction takes lots of forms: First-graders dress up and act out the story of Moses' birth. Fourth- and fifth-grade girls sing a song to learn the New Testament books. Each grade learns a series of Bible verses that begin with each letter of the alphabet. (A fourth-grade boy recites the first verse: "All we like sheep have gone astray. . . .")

Beka Bixby teaches second- and third-grade boys with her husband, Ben, and says they quickly realized that some students know very little about the Bible. They must explain terms like sacrifice and ark and sanctification. R'Darius—a fourth-grader in another class—talks about what he's learned from the Bible that surprised him: "I was surprised that God came down and got on a cross."

For this 800-member church, Vincent says Released Time fits well with broader outreach efforts. Church members already know many of these children from regular contact through Saturday morning Bible clubs in the neighborhood. Adding the Released Time ministry in 2004 allowed the church to deepen its connections with children and their families, says Vincent: "Little by little, God has knit our hearts to theirs."

It's also forged a connection with the local school, a relationship that began tenuously: Cherrydale Principal Scarlet Black chuckles when she remembers her initial opposition to the program: "Hesitant is an understatement." The principal worried that the program would burden the school's resources and detract from academic programs, but she agreed to try it when Vincent promised the volunteers would tutor the students for an hour.

Five years later, she calls the arrangement "an outstanding relationship" and adds: "I can't tell anymore where we leave off and they pick up." That's partly because the church members volunteer for other projects: helping with the school's fall festival, making gift bags for teachers, and helping with literacy week. "When we need some extra hands, they're the first ones to show up," says Black.

Vincent says "adopting" the school has allowed the church to serve the community while "showing love to people in tangible ways on the road to giving them the gospel." He adds: "There's nothing in our community that unites as many homes as a school, and if God gives you a door there, it's a huge door."

That's a door that dozens of churches are finding, according to Kenneth Breivik, executive director of School Ministries, a nonprofit organization that helps local groups organize Released Time programs. Breivik estimates as many as 500,000 public-school students nationwide participate in some form of Released Time, though Breivik's organization works mostly with about a dozen programs in South Carolina. (The organization is also helping groups in Ohio and Florida.) Breivik says his group operates from a Christian and evangelistic perspective: "This is really to help expose students to the opportunity to have a personal relationship with God." For those wondering about the

legality, he points to a 1952 Supreme Court decision that explicitly allows such programs. (Other religious groups—including Jews and Catholics—have separately started their own programs, too.)

It's a wide-open opportunity for churches to craft their own programs and curriculum, he says. Some groups have used materials like Charles Colson's *How Now Shall We Live?* Others have created their own courses.

Breivik admits it does take "some muscle" to start a program, and his organization helps groups understand the process of requesting permission from local school boards, developing a program, and abiding by state laws. (For example, programs must take place off-campus and entail no school funding. Some high schools have additional requirements.)

For volunteers in one district of nearby Spartanburg County, the muscling began 10 years ago when a middle school in Boiling Springs and one in Chesnee began offering Released Time programs. Ailena Geddes, director of the Spartanburg District 2 Released Time Program, says those efforts blossomed: 300 students participate in Boiling Springs and another 145 are enrolled at the middle school in Clemmons.

A smaller group met for the first year (2008-2009) at Chesnee High School, where one morning class included devotions with a local youth pastor who talked about the cost of following Christ. Teacher Marie Montieith distributed Post-it notes for prayer requests before 11 students played a Bible-review game.

After class, Ella Mae Colbert, a long-time volunteer at the middle school program in Chesnee, talked about the changes she's seen in students over the years. She's seen plenty: Colbert is 93.

The spry senior citizen serves as a substitute teacher at the middle school, and she volunteers every week for a full day of Released Time. "My business is kind of snooping around, trying to keep order," she quips. The retired elementary school teacher says students today know less about the Bible but talk more freely about their problems: "They'll tell you they're hurting on the inside."

Colbert says she's thankful that Released Time exposes students to the Bible and to Christians who care about them, and she hopes the program expands. "I've noticed that young people are troubled, and they don't really know why," she says. "And whoever gets to them first, that's what they take to."

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