GUIDE

When church giving is flat, size the VBS shirt order from registration forms, not last year's crowd.

A shirt budget that has not grown buys about 96 shirts where it bought 100 last year. The registration form decides which 96.

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Lifeway Research's fall 2026 survey of Protestant pastors found that the median church's giving did not change over 2025, while consumer prices rose 3.7 percent. For a Vacation Bible School director, that means the shirt budget was cut without anyone voting on it: the same dollars buy about 96 shirts where they bought 100. An order sized from last year's headcount ignores that cut. An order sized from confirmed registration forms fits inside it, and in a small church, leaders who wear the shirts they already own hand the difference to the kids' week.

Flat giving and 3.7 percent inflation shrink the VBS shirt budget to 96 shirts

When giving stays flat and prices rise, the VBS shirt budget shrinks even though no committee voted to cut it. Lifeway Research surveyed 1,004 Protestant pastors by phone from September 8 to 30, 2026. The median church reported no change in giving over 2025, the average church reported a 1.24 percent rise, and the Consumer Price Index was up 3.7 percent as of September 2026. A shirt budget held flat through that buys about 96 shirts where it bought 100 in 2025.

Take a church that drew 100 children last summer. A volunteer at the door counted 9 children who arrived without a form, and 8 returning leaders already own shirts in the staff color. By the cutoff, 81 registration forms are in.

Forms order: 81 shirts for registered children, plus 9 extras for last summer's walk-ins, plus 2 leader shirts for new volunteers, comes to 92 shirts, 4 under the 96 the budget buys.

Headcount order: 100 shirts for last summer's children, plus 10 leader shirts for 8 returning leaders and 2 new ones, comes to 110 shirts, 14 over the 96 the budget buys.

Whatever a shirt costs this year, the budget covers 96 of them. The headcount order needs about 15 percent more money than the church has, and the overrun comes out of crafts or snacks after the invoice arrives. The forms order leaves 4 shirts' worth of money unspent, and that money goes into the kids' week as craft supplies or a fuller snack table.

The two orders sit 18 shirts apart, nearly a fifth of the budget. Every one of those 18 is a shirt for a child the forms and extras do not account for, or for a leader who already owns one.

Confirmed registration forms set the shirt order, and extras give way first when forms run high

VBS T-Shirt Planning starts with confirmed registration forms, not last summer's attendance. Last year's number is the memory of a good week. It counts the cousins who visited for one summer, the family that has since moved, and the neighbor kids who came on Wednesday and stayed. A confirmed form is a child whose parent wrote down a name, an age and a shirt size for this year. Some years the right order is smaller than last summer's, and that is the plan working.

When forms come in high, the order gives way in a fixed sequence, and registered children are never the part that shrinks. Extras shrink first, and name tags in the group color cover walk-ins. New leader shirts go next, and a new volunteer wears a lanyard in the staff color. A church whose budget buys 96 shirts and whose forms reach 90 has room for 6 more: 2 for new leaders and 4 extras instead of 9. At 104 forms, the church is 8 shirts past the budget before a single extra. Those 8 shirts become the number the director takes to the finance committee before the order goes in. That request is built from names on forms, not from hope.

Counting forms by color group puts the extras in the sizes children will need

VBS T-Shirt Planning counts the registration forms by color group, not as one total. When each grade or age group wears its own shirt color and staff wear a different one, the order becomes a short table: for each color, how many of each size.

Counting by color catches the mistake a single total hides, such as plenty of Youth Medium overall but none left in the preschool color. The extras follow the same table. Split them across the sizes that appear most often in each color group, and the shirt a walk-in gets on Tuesday fits and matches the line that child belongs in. Extras ordered from last year's total land in whatever sizes last year needed.

A church under 50 should reuse the leader shirts it already owns and spend the difference on the kids

A church with fewer than 50 people in worship has the strongest reason to reuse its leader shirts. In Lifeway Research's fall 2026 survey, 31 percent of pastors at churches that size reported a decline in giving. Among all Protestant pastors, 22 percent said giving was below 2025. A small church may run its whole VBS week with a handful of adults, and those adults already own shirts in the staff color. A leader shirt's job is to tell a five-year-old across a fellowship hall "ask me", not to match this year's theme art.

The reallocation has a size. When a budget buys 96 shirts, each leader shirt the church skips returns about 1 percent of the shirt budget. Eight returning leaders who reuse their shirts free 8 shirts' worth of money, one twelfth of everything the church can spend on shirts this year. That money buys theme shirts in group colors, the shirts that go home with the children, or it moves to the craft table.

Shirt color organizes the week best when the staff color stays the same every year. Returning children already know that the adults in navy, or whatever color the church chose, are the ones in charge, and a new leader design every summer resets that signal. When a church does order leader shirts, it can ask for a design without the year printed on it. VBS T-Shirts approves every design before anything prints, and changes are free, so leaving off the year is a simple edit before approval.

The strongest case against sizing from forms is that VBS attendance keeps growing

The strongest objection to ordering from confirmed forms is that VBS attendance is rising, so a church that orders tight will run out of shirts on Monday morning. The evidence for growth is real. Lifeway Research's report on the 2025 Annual Church Profile found that Southern Baptist churches in state conventions that track VBS saw participation grow by more than 9 percent compared to 2024, with more than 1.66 million people enrolled in reporting states. Walk-ins are part of VBS by design. The child a neighbor brings on Tuesday is exactly who the week is for.

The answer to that objection is an extra count built from the church's own records. Growth across a denomination does not tell any one church how many children will come through its doors. Order from the forms, then add as many shirts as the number of children who arrived last summer without a form. If nobody counted last year, the director picks a number, writes it on the order, and has a volunteer tally walk-ins at the door this year, so next summer's extra count is a measurement rather than a guess.

For a child who arrives after the extras are gone, the group color still works without a shirt. A lanyard, wristband or name tag in the group color puts that child in the right line on day one. Nobody is left out, and the budget never paid for a stack of shirts on the chance of walk-ins.

A second objection is about cost: reuse fails the volunteer who outgrew last year's shirt or never got it back from the wash. That volunteer is already on the leader order, which is new volunteers plus anyone whose size has changed or whose shirt is gone. Each name on that list costs about 1 percent of a 96 shirt budget. A full new leader order for 10 adults costs about a tenth.

> When the budget stands still and prices rise, every shirt ordered for a child who never registers takes money from something else the kids would have had.

Lifeway's numbers describe a year a VBS director cannot change: the typical church's giving held still while prices rose 3.7 percent. The shirt order is the part the director can change, and two dates do most of the work. Print a registration cutoff on the form, counted back from the VBS week far enough to leave room for design approval and printing. During the week, have a volunteer at the door tally every child who arrives without a form, because that number is next summer's extra count. Built on confirmed forms, a written extra count and the leader shirts already in the closet, the order shrinks only where no child will notice.

Further reading

1. Lifeway Research, September 2026 phone survey of 1,004 Protestant pastors on how the economy is affecting their churches; the source for flat median giving, 3.7 percent CPI and the 31 percent of small-church pastors reporting lower giving research.lifeway.com/2026/10/22/more-churches-feeling-economic-squeeze
2. Lifeway Research, report on the 2025 Southern Baptist Annual Church Profile; the source for VBS participation growth of more than 9 percent, used in the objection section research.lifeway.com/2026/05/05/southern-baptists-see-attendance-and-baptism-gains-amid-membership-declines

Every source above was fetched and a verbatim phrase confirmed on the page before this essay published. Nothing here is paraphrased from memory.

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VBS T-Shirts designs custom Vacation Bible School shirts for every VBS theme, plus leader and volunteer shirts.