

Trinity Broadcasting Network to Revive 'VeggieTales' This Fall

The story of *VeggieTales*, the beloved Christian cartoon show, can be summed up in a famed line from one of its creators' comedy paragon, *Monty Python and the Quest for the Holy Grail*:

"I'm not dead yet!"

The iconic Christian children's program, which has attracted millions of fans with its mix of Bible lessons, trademark silly songs and, yes, Monty Python-esque humor, is undergoing its latest revival this fall on the Trinity Broadcasting Network.

The Christian broadcaster will air 18 new episodes of *VeggieTales*, beginning with a Christmas special that will debut in late fall.

VeggieTales co-creators Phil Vischer and Mike Nawrocki wrote most of the new episodes and will also reprise their roles as the show's hosts, Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber.

The show's revival came as a surprise to Vischer, who thought his characters' salad days were over.

After acquiring the rights to *VeggieTales* in 2016, NBCUniversal stopped making new episodes for sale on DVD. A Netflix version of the show, *VeggieTales in the House*, had been a disappointment to fans, said Vischer.

He thought his days of playing Bob the Tomato were over.

Then Vischer got a call from TBN, which was in talks to license the show from NBCUniversal. TBN asked if he would be

interested in doing the voice of Bob.

Vischer said no. He wasn't interested in being part of *VeggieTales* unless he had a role in shaping the show.

"Then they asked, 'Would you at least look at the pilot?'" said Vischer.

He did, and was encouraged by how much the pilot felt like a classic episode of the show. As he became further involved, he asked if he could rewrite the script. Before long, he and Nawrocki, who plays Larry the Cucumber, signed on as writers and voice actors.

The new revival, he said, centers on the relationship between its hosts.

"Here's what you need to know about Bob and Larry," explained Vischer, who with Nawrocki invented the duo—and eventually a small media empire—on a computer in his family's guest room in the early 1990s. "Bob wants to help kids. Larry wants to help Bob. That's *VeggieTales*. Now, the conflict comes from the fact that most of the things Bob tries to do to help kids don't work. And Larry helping Bob quite often isn't actually helpful."

Nawrocki said he's also surprised to be working on *VeggieTales* again.

He'd stayed with Big Idea, the company that makes *VeggieTales*, when it moved to the Nashville suburbs after a bankruptcy sale in 2003. When NBCUniversal halted production three years ago, Nawrocki no longer had a role. After more than two decades, he had said goodbye to Larry the Cucumber.

"I had spent the last 25 years becoming really good at being an animated cucumber. So that was a big challenge for me," he said. "It was, OK, God, what do you have next for me?"

Nawrocki started his own creative company—one of his projects

is a new series of kids books called “The Dead Sea Squirrels”—and began teaching film and animation at Lipscomb University, a Christian college in Nashville, where some of his students had grown up on *VeggieTales*.

Many, he said, had fond memories of the show.

Those memories help explain why *VeggieTales* has survived despite a changing media landscape, said Hillary Warren, professor of communication at Otterbein University in Indiana.

The show began as straight-to-DVD video, then moved to feature films, a stint on Saturday morning network television and the series on Netflix.

“One reason that *VeggieTales* has staying power is that the first generation who grew up with the show, who grew up with Bob the Tomato, now have kids of their own,” said Warren. “It’s a show that they know and they feel comfortable letting their kids watch it. “

Parents today can be overwhelmed by how many choices there are for kids’ entertainment. And they can’t screen them all ahead of time.

They’ll let their kids watch *VeggieTales* because they trust it, she said. And *VeggieTales*, while clear about its Christian content, also teaches some universal values.

“Share. Don’t lie. Don’t steal,” said Warren. “Almost everybody can get behind that.”

Leslie Ferrell, senior vice president of the Big Idea Content Group at NBCUniversal, said the new show retains the classic feel and values of *VeggieTales* while updating the animation and feel of the show.

She said the message of *VeggieTales* remains the same.

“Bob and Larry are all about the kids,” she said. “That’s just

what they are. They want to help the kids know God, know they're loved by God and follow God. So that had to stay."

The TBN version's format may remind some of *The Muppet Show*. Set in a theater owned by Mr. Nezzzer, a familiar *VeggieTales* character, each show starts with a question from a kid, which will be answered in a stage show put on by the usual suspects: Bob and Larry, Junior Asparagus, the French Peas and the rest.

Most episodes will be based on Bible stories.

"And once in a while we will break into a silly song," said Nawrocki.

Vischer believes the new shows will have more theological depth—in part, he said, because he and Nawrocki have grown since they first started the show. When they produced the first *VeggieTales* episode, *Where Is God When I Am S-Scared*, he and Nawrocki were in their late 20s. Now both are in their 50s; besides being more experienced in writing, their journey through good and bad times has given more depth to their faith.

Vischer already stars in the *Mr. Phil Show*, a streaming Bible-teaching show for kids, and co-hosts the "Holy Post" Podcast. But most days, he said, he's content to be himself.

Bob the Tomato, however, still has aspirations of filling Mister Rogers' shoes.

"Mister Rogers is Bob's hero. But that's the thing that drives Bob crazy is when Mister Rogers does Mister Rogers, everything goes perfectly. Nothing ever goes wrong on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. And Bob wants that for his show, but he can never achieve it."