

Be A Good Neighbor

STORY HOUR: Send a volunteer to a local preschool, daycare or elementary school to volunteer to read to the children during their library time. This could be at a public or private school. Follow the school guidelines for book selection. You don't need to read Bible stories for the community to recognize Christ in you. Go to serve. Be sure any literature including the story hour says "volunteers from ____ Church."

Afterschool clubs – we have churches who offer special afterschool clubs twice a week. These clubs cost only \$35 per year (the average cost for an Awana clubber). This is FAR cheaper than daycare or afterschool care. Often, 3 day care is considered part-time, and is offered at a discount. Therefore, the after school club is attractive. The churches use vans to pick up students. They offer a snack and quiet time for the first 30 minutes to allow students to unwind, and do homework. Then, a traditional Awana Club takes place on Tuesday from 3:30-5:30 pm, and other activities (such as choir, Lego club, etc.) take place on Thursday

Also, many daycares look for community partnerships for their school aged afterschool students. They seek out activities such as dance classes, library sessions, sports and more to both allow students to participate in extracurricular activities as well as lower their on campus student-teacher ratio.

Frequently, daycares will pay the annual fee for students to participate in an afterschool club, and provide transportation for students to the church. Parent contact can still be maintained by having the parents pick the children up from the church.

Support a Team – Offer breakfast to the local high school football team, and pray over the players for safety and good sportsmanship. Sponsor signs at cross country or golfing tournaments where families will be participating. Sign up to provide refreshments to the local elementary soccer, basketball or softball league at their orientation or first day of games. Rather than compete with sports, partner with sport organizations.

By developing a relationship with teams, instead of being seen as a competitor, parents will see you as a partner. Also, you will get to know the team coaches and coordinators face to face. Our own local high school changed their volleyball schedule at my request as our church's Awana Journey Director. Both parties agreed the students needed as many positive influences in their lives. By developing relationships, a simple schedule change was accommodated.

School Registrations– Did you know that many schools offer registration fairs? These are especially attended by kindergarten students and their families. At these fairs, you will find representatives from the local library, the girl scouts, boy scouts, and the YMCA. Did you know most state laws requires equal access? That means if a school opens up an event to any outside agency, they are required to include all organizations.

We have several churches who partner with their local schools for registration nights. In fact, in two towns, over 90% of the students attend Awana at one of the 3 churches in town because they simply sign up along with kindergarten registration!

We also have a church that split, and the thriving church fell in attendance to about 25 people. The interim pastor knew the value of Awana, although he knew nothing of marketing. He gathered the people of the church together to pray. Then, he made a flyer to pass out at the school. There were no graphics. The flyer looked like a typical registration form. The pages were sent home on a Friday the first week of school. On Monday afternoon, the principal called the church to say that someone needed to come up to the school. They could not be responsible for collecting money. Money? What money? Most of the families had simply completed the form, along with everything else. The fee collected by the church was \$35 per student, kindergarten through high school. The school had collected over \$3,000 and was not happy about it!

Over 100 new clubbers joined Awana that year, and with only a handful of leaders, the pastor led everyone through the Flight 316, regardless of age. Several came to trust in the Lord. The next three weeks were spent in the Start Zone as again, they didn't have enough leaders to manage the group. Teens were going home and leading their parents to the Lord. This was so prevalent that the majority of both Sunday and Wednesday meetings were focused on baptisms!

The church switched to Awana Truthseekers for the next couple of years as the majority of parents in the church were incredibly new believers and did not know the Bible themselves. They now are adding back in traditional Awana Clubs starting with the Youth and working their way down to the younger clubs.

Host a Booth – at a community festival. Call it Living Water, and give out a free bottle of water to everyone willing to complete a survey (one survey per household/family). Train people to strike up conversations and make connections.

Maybe have a game of chance (such as pull a lollipop from a tree or ring). If the end of the lollipop is marked, they also win a full sized candy bar. If it's not marked, they keep the lollipop, but nothing else. From here, you can talk about how our lives are not left up to chance. We have a Creator God who intentionally made us, and has a plan for our lives, if only we are willing to trust Him.

You can also give out mini-first aid kits (snack size baggies with Band-Aids that already have anti-bacterial ointment, & an individually wrapped cleansing cloth). This is not a first aid station where families would receive care, but a booth where mini-first aid kits are given as a gift. You can talk about how by His stripes we are healed. You can even have children assemble their own kits, including decorating an envelope to store the Band-Aids and cleansing wipes.

Sponsor a fishing booth. You can go big and partner with Cabella, Bass Pro Shop, or the Department of Conservation, to fill a large pool with fish, and allow the children, along with a parent, to cast for fish! You can talk about Jesus and His disciples, fishers of men. Jesus came to seek and to save the Lost!

Sponsor a nursing station, a cooling station (often festivals will have a municipal bus or an air conditioned event tent, paid for by a group (such as your church).

Host a Float – Build a float for a parade. This provides two opportunities – first, have a design that is labor intensive, but does not require great skill (think gluing lots flowers, seeds, tissue paper, etc.). Why, you want families from your church to invite other families to join them in building the float? Then, enlist all said families to walk in the parade. Toss out lollipops threaded through business cards that communicate where you are, and they are invited. “This candy is sweet, but will melt away. The salvation of the Lord is here to stay!” Isaiah 51:6 “My salvation will be forever.”

Host a donut table at the local junior and or senior high school. A parachurch ministry in our community hosts a free donut booth once a week at their school. At that booth, they are able to develop relationships with the students, and also invite them to their weekly ministry.

Host your weekly club outside (if your church can be seen by a main road), or at a park until the light gets dark sooner, or the weather turns cooler.

Host your weekly club at the local elementary school. Sometimes the space will be granted for free, other times, you will need to pay a fee.

Host your weekly club at a neutral space, such as a veteran's lodge, or community hall.

Host your weekly club at an extended stay hotel, a daycare, an apartment complex (many will have a community space), or at a mobile home park. You may need to host your club outdoors until the weather is cool and then move indoors to your church.

If you choose a route where you host your club outdoors and will move into your church facilities at a later date, be prepared to offer transportation assistance if the distance is significant.

Create Family Events – but be creative!

Note – you will better connect with the community if you are in community spaces rather than at your church location. Your goal is to introduce yourself so that the families feel a sense of belonging BEFORE they meet you in your home.

Host a free “Kids in the Park” concert once a month during the summer, with live worship leaders (the music can be live or via CD). Be sure the songs have lots of get up and go, and motions. (Note, you will probably have to rent the space.)

Host a Game Show Night at the Local Community Center or Park Amphitheater, these game shows are simple to put together using power point or poster board. The goal is to foster family involvement and to connect with families in the community.

Host a Scavenger Hunt throughout town. This can be done any time of year. One of our churches put up fliers through town, partnering with stores, libraries, gas stations, hair salons, etc. They chose places frequented by families already and used bright colorful posters. The poster invited the community to a dinner at hall in town, and included all the details – “for children and up to 2 adults per family, all children must be accompanied by a parent or guardian.” At the bottom of each poster was a large number. The families had 1 month to find all the posters and record the numbers. At the dinner, when they signed in, they would write down their name and the number they were able to determine on a piece of paper. These numbers were dropped into a basket. Everyone who had the correct number (because they found all the posters) was entered into a drawing for door prizes. These prizes typically were either a family board game, a Christian movie such as What’s in the Bible, or a Family Resource DVD set from Jumpstart3 (Scripture set to modern music with lots of motions, and a resource for family devotions).

Host a community holiday event such as an Easter Egg Hunt, Hay Ride or Christmas Carol Stroll. These do not have to be extravagant. However, the goal should be to connect with those with whom you do not already minister. Yet, simply hosting an open event to all is not necessarily directive ministry. A

way to make more solid connections with only one visit is to limit your event to those in your Awana ministry, plus 1 person per clubber (plus parents). This does a number of things:

The event becomes a discipleship opportunity for the clubber or youth. They have the opportunity to bring a friend to your church to hear the gospel, and to engage with the church with an opportunity to belong first to Jesus, and then to your fellowship.

Get Personal – Learn their Names! – The first step to connecting with parents is to LEARN and USE their names!

Child Protection – a great way to both learn the names of parents, and to add a step of child protection is to issue name tags to the parents as they drop off their children. This can either be with a printed sticker tag, or a reusable laminated tag. Don't add the children's names to the tag –only the parent's name. The parent must wear the tag to each pick up area. Provide each club a list of the parent names in alphabetical order, along with the name of the clubbers eligible for pick up. When the parent enters the room, a leader greets them and asks "Good to see you Tom, who are you pick up today?" Since the parent must provide the clubbers name to match up with the list, it prevents someone from finding a name tag and picking up whoever is printed on the card.

Recruit a Door Man! Assign greeters to create a positive welcome to every club night. Be sure your greeter is a people person and has a bright, contagious smile! Some of our Awana Clubs have come up with creative ways to make people feel welcomed!

One church's commander holds the door open for every person who enters the church, and gives a high five to every clubber and parent!

Another church has their greeter get completely decked out for every theme night. This greeter is over the top crazy hair, or knee length neon crazy socks. On non-theme nights, this greeter is simply a pleasant and cheerful smile that should be in a toothpaste commercial.

Participate in an Awana Event such as Bible Quizzing, Awana Games or the Grand Prix.

These events are actually the best of both worlds, they provide the opportunity to more effectively engage with the families of those with whom you already minister, and they extend your connection reach to the family and friends of that clubber or youth.

Bible Quizzing also helps your clubber to hide God's Word deeper in their hearts, to have a deeper understanding of who God is, to know Him more, to love Him greater, and to serve Him more faithfully.

Take every opportunity you have to make yourself known as a person, and not just an official in an assigned role. Foster authentic relationships by being you, outside of the church, and connecting with families in an unofficial capacity. A very easy and tangible way to do this is to drop off forgotten items such as hoodies, and handbooks to the clubber's home. Give a quick call to the parent and say "Hey, I've got Justin's hoodie, he left it at church. I'll drop it off real quick." I even message the parent to be sure they are home first, "Are you at home?" The point is to be face to face in a non-authoritative way with the parent. I nearly always do this the next day or simply later in the week. A 2 minute drop off usually winds up in a 15 minute porch conversation. This is where true relationships are built.

Create opportunities for parents to linger, to chat, to develop friendships with those within the church. This is a great role for someone who wants to support Awana, but maybe they just don't want to work with kids, or perhaps they can't get there by opening time!

Testimony from a church:

"We took your advice, and set up a coffee and hot chocolate cart in the large hallway/foyer area off the side door where most of our parents came in to pick up their clubbers. Our club meets immediately after school, the bus drops them off at 3 pm, and the parents pick the clubbers up at 5 pm. The lady, who is gifted in hospitality, wanted to work in Awana, but had to work and couldn't get to the church until about a quarter after 4 pm. She had the coffee and cocoa cart up and had it ready to go by 4:30 each week."

In the beginning, it was slow going, the weather was warm. Maybe we should have served lemonade! However, as parents trickled in, our hostess was warm and welcoming. She chatted socially with the families, keeping things light and friendly, including as many in conversation as possible. The weather grew cooler, the dusk came early, and people really began to look forward to a cup of Ms. Sandy's hot coffee as they entered the building. We had so many parents coming in and lingering, that we had to adjust the way clubbers moved through the building. You see, the parents started coming in earlier and earlier. (Although we were an afterschool club, we have a lot of farmers and ranchers, so the work day is done with the sun goes down, which, in the winter, can be 4 pm).

Flash forward to Easter, as typical, there are more people on this Sunday morning than others. As the pastor was thanking people for coming, and wishing them "Happy Easter," a couple, whom he did not recognize approached him. The church is fairly rural, and most people in the community are fairly conservative, regardless of their faith. Both members of this couple had multiple shades of neon hair,

piercings in every possible place, and tattoos covered both of them. The pastor welcomed them for coming, and the husband said “Well, we are only here for the coffee.”

Confused for a moment, the pastor was silent. The husband continued, “Both my wife and I were saved as children, at different churches, in different towns at vbs. However, no one ever said there was anything more to life as a Christian. We made some huge mistakes along the way. God must have had mercy on us because he gave us two great kids. We thought, VBS was good for us, we liked it. We signed them up for Awana. We would take turns picking the kids up, but then, it seemed we argued over who COULD pick them up. We just really enjoyed talking to Ms. Sandy and the other parents. As the year went on, we realized that we were missing out on so much. We were missing out on not just accepting God’s gift to be good, but to live with God now. We don’t want our children to experience life without Jesus, and we want to be baptized.”

Theme Nights – Use theme nights as a means to connect with families. Assign contact lists (call lists – specifically) to leaders. If each leader listens to 5 clubbers, and you have additional leaders who lead music, games, handle record keeping, and if clubbers have siblings and therefore one call can reach a parent of 2 or 3 clubbers, a calling list can include just 2-3 families per leader!

Call the clubber’s parents to remind them about Theme Nights, award nights, family game nights your church is hosting, etc. Call to invite them to participate in Awana Games or Bible Quizzing. Call to let them know how great their child is and how much you appreciate him/her in your club.

It’s about exposure, even if you just leave a positive, brief message “This is Michelle from Awana, and I just wanted to say that Joe will be earning his rank patch next week. I thought you might want to come a little early to see. Be sure to bring a camera!” you can make a huge difference.

Family Outings– Create opportunity for fellowship amongst the families. However, don’t make it a club wide event. Think of Awana as the church, and think of each handbook group, or age group as a small community within the large group. Have each leader or director to come up with one or two outings a year where families will MEET each other at the event. Avoid providing transportation in these cases as the purpose is really to develop relationships with the parents as well as the clubbers. Instead, try to pair up families to carpool together.

We did this in our inner city, small Awana Club. It seemed as though every clubber was either picked up by a leader’s family, or walked to the church. What happened by connecting families together for

carpooling was a closer knit, over all community with in the Awana family. That's what happened; we became an interconnected family rather than a program in which parents registered their children. Another benefit to small group fellowship is that when 2-10 families gather, a dynamic of fellowship is fostered. In larger groups, there isn't ample time to fellowship with others, and often, you as the leader find yourself managing rather than enjoying the time with your own family and becoming friends with others.

Create Volunteer Opportunities– Be sure to know your churches regulations for volunteers, however, there are SO MANY WAYS you can enlist volunteers from parents to include them in the ministry, and better connect with them. Think about schools and sports teams and how they encourage volunteering.

What ideas can you think of?

Set out and clean up snack for Puggles and Cubbies.

Help organize the Awana Store.

Direct people for parking and entering the church, crossing guards.

Bring a snack or water bottles to Awana Events.

Volunteer as a score keeper or timer at Awana Events.

Make & cut copies for fliers or Cubbie crafts.

Decorate for special events (Grand Prix, Awards Dinner, Christmas Party, etc.)

Set up furniture, or tear down at Awana events in the church (Grand Prix, Dinners, etc.)

Connect via Social Media – Social Media is the mainstream means of connecting.

Create a Facebook PAGE for your group where posts are public and made by the administrator. This is where you post events that are open to everyone, so parents can invite their family and friends.

Create a Facebook GROUP for your leaders to connect and communicate about logistics and planning.

This group can be secret, by invitation only. Nothing can be seen outside of the group, including who is in it.

Create a Facebook GROUP for your families and leaders to engage. This group would be closed. People can find the group, and see who is in the group, but they cannot see what is posted, including comments and photos unless they are a member. A closed group requires that the administrators approve those

who join. This is where photos of clubbers, leaders, and families can be shared, as they are protected within the group.

Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, etc. are also great ways to connect with people, to promote your club, and build relationships.

Be intentional about praying for families–

Before the club year, pray for the Holy Spirit to prepare the hearts and minds of both the clubbers and the parents He will send to your Awana ministry.

Make a list, and pray for the parents, by name. Choose a name a day, or a week. If you are the commander, pray for the parents of Cubbies in September, Sparks in October, T&T Adventure in November, T&T Ultimate Challenge in December, Trek in January, Journey in February, etc. Divide up the families among the leaders. Keep lists, ask for requests.

SEND A NOTE – it could be as simple as a Facebook private message “Just wanted you to know that I prayed for you today!”