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## Awana Together: Empowering Parents as Spiritual Mentors for Their Children

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BETHEL UNIVERSITY  
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AWANA TOGETHER:  
EMPOWERING PARENTS AS SPIRITUAL MENTORS  
FOR THEIR CHILDREN

A THESIS PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY DEGREE  
IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

BY  
SARA-JANE SOSA  
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA  
MAY 2019



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## GLOSSARY

**Awana Together.** A version of the traditional Awana program for kids that has been reformatted to fit a family structure. This ministry is an original creation of Plymouth Covenant Church, with the blessing of Awana Clubs International, but it is not officially affiliated or owned by Awana Clubs. The Awana Together ministry uses the same curriculum as the traditional Awana program for kids.

**empower.** To teach in such a way that the learner applies the learning with confidence.

**faith community.** The church family in which individual families participate.

**family.** The researcher takes a wide view of family to include single families, adoptive families, grandparents, foster families, and other expressions of family that lie outside a traditional definition of two parents and their children.

**family ministry model.** Ministry programming designed for families to experience together for the purpose of developing faith in individual members as well as the whole family.

**parents.** The researcher uses this term to refer to biological parent and/or custodial guardians (step-parent, foster parent, grandparent, etc.).

**pathway.** A practical road map for spiritual milestones that gives both direction and markers for spiritual mentoring in children.



**post-Christian.** In seeking a definition for “post-Christian” that adequately captures the reality of the ministry context of this research project, the following description is accurate: “A post-Christian society is not merely a society in which agnosticism or atheism is the prevailing fundamental belief. It is a society rooted in the history, culture, and practices of Christianity but in which the religious beliefs of Christianity have been either rejected or, worse, forgotten.”<sup>1</sup>

**spiritual mentor.** A person who guides and directs the spiritual growth of another individual.

**spiritual mentoring.** The process of guiding and directing spiritual growth in another individual.

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<sup>1</sup> John O'Sullivan, “Our Post-Christian Society.” *National Review*, December 15, 2013, accessed June 12, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2013/12/our-post-christian-society-john-osullivan/>.

## ABSTRACT

The post-Christian culture in the United States presents a significant challenge to the spiritual growth of adults and children. Surveys conducted point to the growing number of people who are removed from the Christian faith of previous generations. The Christian church has realized its past error in taking the role of spiritual mentoring of children away from parents. Ministry leaders from various denominations sought to change this trend by focusing on family ministries. They endeavored to call parents to reclaim their roles as spiritual mentors for their children. Several ministry models were developed and employed toward this goal.

At Plymouth Covenant Church, ministry leaders recognized that young parents often lacked a biblical foundation. Many did not feel competent to lead their children spiritually. These parents needed a vibrant personal faith as well as good role models. As a result, ministry leaders designed a more effective way to empower parents as spiritual mentors for their children. After evaluating various ministry programs, the decision was made to build a new ministry that would provide personal faith development for parents, a supportive faith community, family-focused programming, and solid biblical teaching. This new ministry was a family version of Awana that they called Awana Together.

This project used an intrinsic case study approach.<sup>1</sup> The project evaluated whether the Awana Together ministry provided a pathway for a better partnership between the

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), 99.

home and the church in raising kids to have lifelong faith. Research included evaluations of biblical passages and current scholarship, surveys of past and present Awana Together participants, focus group discussions with ministry leaders, and in-depth questionnaire responses from three different families. The research revealed that Awana Together was successfully designed to meet its goal of empowering families to grow together in their faith in Jesus and invite others to do the same.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the joys of parenting is watching children put into practice what they have been mentored to do. From the developmental milestones of sitting and walking, to the emergence of language, to the discovery of gifts and abilities, the accomplishments of children are tremendously rewarding to those who have been their primary teachers. For the Christian parent, witnessing a child's choice to put his/her faith in Jesus is also significant. Yet this spiritual milestone rarely gets the same level of intentionality and priority as developmental milestones receive. In a post-Christian culture, the parental role of spiritual mentor to children is accepted with hesitation, if accepted at all. How can Christian parents be empowered to embrace their role as spiritual mentors for their children? What is the role of the faith community in the spiritual mentoring of children?

These are important questions to ask and answer. In a time when increasing numbers of people are moving away from the church,<sup>1</sup> the need to re-think how the church equips families is crucial. Many Christian parents seem to know that God intends for them to serve as spiritual mentors for their children, but they lack confidence in their ability to do so.<sup>2</sup> Many churches in the United States have recognized the need to shift their role in the faith development of children. Research reveals that parents have much

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<sup>1</sup> James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 14.

<sup>2</sup> Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide*, (Loveland, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 86.

more impact on their children's faith than the church does.<sup>3</sup> This understanding, combined with guidance from Scripture on the role of the faith community in the passing of faith from one generation to the next, calls for a change in the way churches have been ministering to children and their families.

If parents are God's plan for the first and best influence on faith formation in children, and current research supports that truth, then the church needs to re-evaluate its role in the faith process. Now more than ever parents need the help of the church to be equipped and empowered in their role as spiritual mentors for their children. The church is uniquely positioned to do just that. As parents are called to their role, encouraged and equipped for the task, the result will be children who benefit from spiritual mentoring in the home and at church. The shared story of the family of faith will become their story. The goal for churches should be to create a true partnership with parents that seeks to empower them as spiritual mentors for their children.

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<sup>3</sup> Orange: A Division of the reThink Group, *The State of the Church and Family Report: How Parents are Rethinking Their Connections with Churches*, (Atlanta, GA: Orange, 2010); Fuller Youth Institute, *The Sticky Faith Research*, accessed on November 17, 2017, <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/stickyfaith>.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM OF EMPOWERING PARENTS AS SPIRITUAL MENTORS FOR THEIR CHILDREN

### **Presenting the Problem**

Children's ministry in the church in the United States is making a significant and necessary shift. Two decades ago, the church focused on the spiritual growth of children with the assumption that their lives already possessed a Christian worldview as a foundation. Most of the children present in church ministries came from families possessing a faith in Jesus that found expression in everyday routines and rituals. In today's post-Christian world, this is no longer the case. Many children come from families whose parents are loosely connected to a faith in Jesus, if at all. The church is realizing that children's ministry must become family ministry.

The problem that this project addressed was the need for a family ministry model at Plymouth Covenant Church that fostered a partnership between the church and families that empowered parents as spiritual mentors for their children. The response to this problem began with an exploration of God's intent and design for the passing of faith from one generation to the next, as spoken through Moses shortly after receiving the ten commandments (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). The theological basis for the research problem considered the importance of shared story as taught by Asaph to the gathered faithful at the Feast of Tabernacles (Psalm 78:1-8).<sup>1</sup> Then it concluded with a unique look at Jesus'

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<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch: Studies in the Psalter, III*, (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 22, 109, 177, 195, 207.

familiar instructions to his disciples shortly before he ascended to heaven (Matthew 28:18-20). In all, these three passages built a solid foundation for the response to the research problem.

In addition to the theological study, the researcher consulted relevant and contemporary literature regarding ministry to children and families. This area of research yielded competing ideas and models for what experts in the field felt was the best way to build faith in families. Combined with the results gleaned from various surveys regarding faith formation in families, this exploration of relevant literature provided convincing arguments for a change in focus in how churches partner with families in the spiritual mentoring process.

These insights gathered by the researcher were then used to help identify a pathway for parents to spiritually mentor their children. This pathway needed to be aligned with God's message in his word and it needed to account for the post-Christian culture in which churches provide ministry. The researcher looked to identify key spiritual milestones that built a platform for the partnership of the church and the home. The response to the research problem needed to define a new role for the church in ministry to families so that parents and primary caregivers of children would embrace their role as spiritual mentors for their children. A pathway was determined, and the researcher chose the Awana Together ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church in Plymouth, Minnesota as a potential solution to the research problem.

The final piece of the response to the problem was to evaluate the Awana Together ministry to look for ways that it strengthened or hindered the church's ability to build a pathway for parents to be empowered as spiritual mentors for their children. The

researcher conducted surveys and interviews of past and present participants of the Awana Together ministry, as well as church leadership, to identify the elements of the ministry that adequately provided a pathway that parents could use to develop and live into their role as spiritual mentors.

### **Clarifying the Problem**

The field of research in ministry to children and families contains many theories that are influenced by the interpretation of various Scripture passages, the developmental sciences around cognitive and spiritual growth, and sociological studies that address the influence of economics, ethnicity, income, and education on children and families. Uri Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory gives a comprehensive look at how many of life's variations each person must navigate as they age.<sup>2</sup> There are different elements to be considered when evaluating what contributes to faith formation in families. For the purposes of this project, it was important to narrow the focus to four specific areas.

First, the scope of the research was limited to the ministries serving the families of Plymouth Covenant Church, where the researcher currently ministers. This provided a known and understood environment for studying the effectiveness of children and family ministry. The size of the church provided a good study sample and was able to inform both the strengths and the weaknesses of children and family ministry as the researcher endeavored to provide a pathway that families could use in their faith formation.

Second, the research was limited to three specific biblical passages that provided direction for spiritual mentoring of children. These passages were: Deuteronomy 6:4-9,

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<sup>2</sup> Psychology Notes HQ, *What is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory?*, November 3, 2013, accessed July 7, 2018, <https://www.psychologynoteshq.com/bronfenbrenner-ecological-theory/>.



Psalm 78:1-8, and Matthew 28:18-20. While there were other passages of Scripture that provided instruction on how families should live and grow in faith together, these three passages provided a mandate for the passing of faith from one generation to the next, as well as a method for how that could be accomplished. These passages also came from three different genres of biblical literature: history/law, poetry/wisdom, and Gospel/mission.

Third, this research was limited to the study of contemporary theories of faith formation within families. The shift over the past years in the United States from a Christian to a post-Christian context means that more adults lack the biblical foundation and active faith that their parents had.<sup>3</sup> A new generation of parents is present in church that is not rooted in the biblical narrative and not connected to a Christian community. Older theories of faith formation in families assume a biblical knowledge, a connection to the church and spiritual mentors who demonstrated what a mature faith entailed. This is no longer the context for post-Christian parents. The result is the need for the church to re-think how it approaches ministries to families and children.

Fourth, the research was limited to evaluating the Awana Together ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church. This ministry was created and implemented by the church to empower parents as spiritual mentors for their children. While there are many good and useful models for creating a partnership between the church and the home, this research project was only focused on evaluating the Awana Together program that exists at Plymouth Covenant Church. The goal was to assess its effectiveness in building the partnership with the church that parents and their children need.

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<sup>3</sup> James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 131-133.

### **Researcher Assumptions**

In the same way that this project needed specific focus, it was also important to name the assumptions made by the researcher in approaching the project. The first assumption was that the Bible describes specific methods, instituted by God, to insure the passing on of faith from one generation to the next. No time was spent in the project on proving the validity of Scripture as God's word to us. It was assumed that the Bible had direct teaching and guidance for both parents and the faith community that would impact the project.

The second assumption was that families living in a post-Christian context do not have the same role models and support for faith formation that previous generations had. The researcher provided scholarly references to studies that underscore this assumption. The focus, however, was not on proving the lack of a faith foundation for parents in a post-Christian context.

The third assumption was that God's plan for the transmission of faith across generations requires a partnership between the family and the church. This was seen in the biblical passages included in the research for the project, but it was not exhaustively researched or reported.

The fourth and final assumption was that parents who have faith in Jesus want to raise their kids to have faith in Jesus as well. During this project, it was evident that the parents who participated in the research really did want to pass their faith on to their children. While this desire was not measured by any of the instruments used in the project, it was assumed in the willingness of parents to enroll in the Awana Together program as a faith-growing ministry for their family.

### **Focal Points of the Research**

The researcher broke the larger theme of the project into smaller, researchable focal points called subproblems. The first subproblem was to explore God's instructions regarding faith formation as it related to the roles of parents and the faith community in spiritual mentoring of children. This was the substance of the biblical and theological discussion of the three Scripture passages that served to ground the project: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Psalm 78:1-8; and Matthew 28:18-20.

The second subproblem was to evaluate contemporary literature on spiritual mentoring in families. This exercise allowed the researcher to build a framework which, when coupled with the biblical-theological discussion, provided a scholarly voice that informed the development of a pathway for spiritual mentoring. It also contributed to the evaluation of the Awana Together ministry.

The third subproblem was to identify a pathway for parents to be spiritual mentors for their children. Throughout the project, the researcher looked for a system or a pathway that parents could use to pass their faith on to their children. This pathway relied on the wisdom of the biblical and theological discussion and the voice of scholars from the contemporary literature. The pathway was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the Awana Together ministry as a tool for parents to spiritually mentor their children.

Finally, the fourth subproblem was to evaluate the Awana Together program at Plymouth Covenant Church to discover how it helped or hindered the process of spiritual mentoring in families. The researcher was looking to determine if the Awana Together ministry provided the pathway needed to establish a helpful partnership between the

church and parents so that parents would feel empowered as spiritual mentors for their children.

### **The Setting of the Project**

The setting for the research was Plymouth Covenant Church in Plymouth, Minnesota. Plymouth Covenant Church is part of the Evangelical Covenant denomination. The church is located just west of the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area. Weekend worship attendance at Plymouth Covenant Church averages around 1250 people across three worship services. Many of the families that attend Plymouth Covenant Church live in the cities of Plymouth and Maple Grove. In this area, the expectations for excellent education, elevated standard of living, and employment success are high. Census data showed that the median household income has not changed dramatically over the past five years (moving from \$86,730 in 2012 to \$88,378 in 2016).<sup>4</sup> The percentage of people with a bachelor's degree or higher also had not changed much (moving from 56.4% of the population in 2012 to 57.5% in 2016).

What has shifted in the past five years is the ethnic make-up of the population. There was been an increase in Asian families both in the community and at Plymouth Covenant Church. Primarily, the growth has been in the number of first-generation Chinese, Korean and Indian families in the Plymouth-Maple Grove area. Census data shows an increase among these people groups within the surrounding community. The number of Asian people increased from 4,797 in 2012 to 6,541 in 2016, with the largest growth among Indian, Chinese and Korean families.<sup>5</sup> In speaking with some of the Asian families at

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<sup>4</sup> American Fact Finder, *Community Facts: 55446*, accessed July 9, 2018, [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community\\_facts.xhtml](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml).

<sup>5</sup> American Fact Finder, *Community Facts*.

Plymouth Covenant Church, the researcher found that what attracted them to the Plymouth-Maple Grove area was the excellence in education and the employment opportunities in the technology, science and medical industries.

To complement the population growth in the Plymouth-Maple Grove area, there has been a significant increase in new home construction. This growth in the community impacted and fueled Plymouth Covenant Church's desire to update the church's identity and technology to be relevant to this affluent population, thus drawing them to Plymouth Covenant Church and toward a life-changing relationship with Jesus. The church added new staff positions that reflect the growing needs in the church (immigrants, young adults, and young families). The creation of a communications team helped to manage the new brand and focus the message in ways that connected with the people they served, as well as those they sought to attract.

Within this affluent context, the researcher observed that most parents wanted to bring their kids to church to be instructed in the faith and guided through certain faith milestones. Because they were used to the service of professionals in other areas of life (sports, music lessons, academics, etc.), they assumed the professionals at church were best equipped to teach their children about a life in Christ. Many were looking for excellent children's and youth programming to accomplish these tasks with little to no involvement on their behalf. Parents seemed to have an idea that it is their responsibility to pass on their faith to their children, but they looked for outside resources to accomplish that task. Family schedules work against this endeavor, as does the post-Christian culture in which they live.

When confronted with the idea that they need to be more personally involved in the spiritual mentoring of their children, there was little disagreement from parents, but much anxiety. Many parents did not have a solid spiritual/biblical foundation and they lacked role models in their lives for how to nurture faith together as a family. The researcher found that parents wanted to accept the role as spiritual mentors for their children, but simply did not know what that meant or looked like.

The researcher observed that the starting point for faith development with families was not the same as it had been in previous generations. The church is seeing the rise of a generation of parents whose own parents did not prioritize going to church, practice faith as a family, or develop their own personal relationship with Jesus. In the absence of a generation eager to pass its faith on to the next, the church must begin with nurturing the personal faith of parents, first. Then it can come alongside parents with support as they seek to be spiritual mentors for their children.

Plymouth Covenant Church has spent the last four years responding to this need within families. It endeavored to create ministries that help parents develop their own personal relationship with Jesus, so they would be able to model that for their children. The church implemented many different ministry models through the years that sought to come alongside families on this spiritual journey. It was the creation and development of a brand-new program that the church called “Awana Together,” that finally produced a ministry capable of accomplishing the goals of nurturing and empowering parents as spiritual mentors for their children.

### *Importance of the Project to the Researcher*

The researcher understands the vital importance of the passing of faith from one generation to the next. Studies have been conducted that highlight the likelihood of teenagers walking away from the church as soon as they are out from under the care of their parents.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, United States census information has documented the rise of a category of people referred to as the “nones.”<sup>7</sup> These are people who, when asked, will state that they have no religious affiliation. While the majority of “nones” describe themselves as religious, they are not interested in being part of a church or other religious institution.<sup>8</sup> The researcher has been pondering how the church can reverse this trend. In what ways can the church equip and empower families so that lifelong faith is fostered and nurtured in children in such a way that they will stay committed to a life in Christ beyond their teen years?

Various ministry experiences at Plymouth Covenant Church over the past decade produced a longing to see the church do a better job of coming alongside families in their faith journey. In past models, Christian churches in the United States allowed families to drop off their children for spiritual teaching and mentoring, effectively isolating parents from the process and allowing them to stagnate in their own personal faith. Endeavoring to reverse that trend in ministry, experts have developed ministries that seek to return the role of faith development to the home. Products have been designed that parents can use in the home to help lead kids. The researcher found that this new generation of post-

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<sup>6</sup> White, *Rise of the Nones*, 13-15.

<sup>7</sup> White, *Rise of the Nones*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> White, *Rise of the Nones*, 17.

Christian parents lacks the confidence, the time, and the discipline to put these tools for the home into use.

Believing that there is a better way to partner with parents, Plymouth Covenant Church developed a ministry to walk alongside families with a combination of modeling and equipping that trains parents, even those with no Bible knowledge or background, and empowers them to pass on the Christian faith to their children. This research project is the evaluation and presentation of this ministry tool called Awana Together.

#### *The Importance of the Project to the Ministry Context*

This research project examined all the background pieces that went into creating Awana Together. It outlined the need for such a ministry, the theological discussion that was the catalyst for its creation, and the process through which it developed. This project created a narrative that could be shared with the wider church to draw more families and churches into the unique partnership that Awana Together offers. It created a way for the church to call families into relationship with Jesus by providing a pathway that they could walk with other families and with church leaders. In doing so, the church would be living out the biblical truth that raising the next generation for Christ is of the utmost importance, and that the responsibility of doing that is shared by the parents and the church family. This research project showed that Awana Together created a true partnership between the church and the family that empowered parents to be spiritual mentors for their children.

#### *The Importance of the Project to the Church at Large*

This research project was anticipated by several leaders on the national stage. The researcher collaborated with leadership at Awana Clubs International. There were two



site visits to Plymouth Covenant Church by Awana staff members. The most recent visit was in March 2018 when the Chief Executive Officer of Awana, Valerie Bell, was part of a group of leaders who came to Plymouth Covenant Church to see Awana Together in action. The researcher also had two meetings with Awana leaders, most notably Matt Markins (President and Chief Operating Officer), Larry Fowler (formerly the Executive Director for Global Networking for Awana and Kidz Matter, currently the founder of The Legacy Coalition) and Chris Marchand (Vice President of Partner Solutions). These meetings took place at Awana headquarters in Illinois with the purpose of sharing the ideas behind Awana Together, as well as to secure permission to use the Awana name for a program. These leaders are waiting for the completion of this research project so that they might consider the outcome of the research.

Additionally, the researcher collaborated with Steve Burger who leads adult, children, family, and intergenerational ministries for the Evangelical Covenant denomination. Steve was instrumental in thinking through various aspects of the Awana Together concept. At his invitation, the researcher presented two workshops at denominational gatherings to share about Awana Together as a ministry model that other churches might consider. There were several churches that contacted the researcher to learn more about Awana Together and its ability to create partnerships with parents and empower them as spiritual mentors for their children.

This research project sought to bring to conclusion a four-year process of creating a ministry that is useful and reproducible in other ministry settings. It evaluated Awana Together's potential to be implemented in a wider church setting and considered its possible development as a new ministry product for Awana Clubs, providing reach

outside of the researcher's denomination as a viable tool for churches to come alongside families in a faith-growing, life-changing way.

## **The Research Methodology**

### *Nature of the Research*

This project was qualitative in nature. It employed intrinsic case study as the prominent method of research, with elements of grounded theory included. The primary tools used in this project were ministry documents, surveys, focus group discussions, family questionnaires, and field notes. It included the use of both primary and secondary data.

### *Data*

#### **Primary Data**

Primary data included (a) survey responses from participants in the Awana Together ministry, including those who had left the ministry, (b) on-site focus group discussions with Children's Ministry leaders, (c) in depth questionnaire responses from three participating Awana Together families, and (d) personal observations recorded in field notes.

#### **Secondary Data**

Secondary data included (a) biblical, theological, and secular literature dealing with issues relevant to the problem of this project, (b) data accessed from surveys conducted by the US Census Bureau, Barna Research Group, Fuller Institute, and Search Institute as it related to various aspects of the problem, and (c) historical program documents.

### *Project Overview*

Successful completion of this project required methodical and strategic steps. Several of these steps overlapped and each was an important part of the research process. In alignment with the delimitations and assumptions listed earlier in the report, there were four distinct steps that were developed over the course of this project.

The first step was to review the scriptural and relevant literature related to the study to determine (a) how the biblical narrative informed the goal of spiritual mentoring of children, (b) how the post-Christian context affected spiritual mentoring of children, (c) how the faith development of and place of children within the faith community influenced spiritual mentoring of children, and (d) how various family ministry models in the church shaped the spiritual mentoring of children,

The second step was to review the historical Awana Together documents to determine how the Awana Together ministry developed as a potential pathway for the partnership between parents and the church in the spiritual mentoring of children.

The third step was to conduct focus group discussions, surveys, and a questionnaire with Awana Together participants, church leaders, and those who left the Awana Together ministry. The purpose was to hear their stories as they related to the Awana Together ministry and its influence on the spiritual mentoring of their children.

The fourth step was to collect, organize, analyze and synthesize all the data gathered to evaluate the effectiveness of the Awana Together ministry as a pathway for the partnership between parents and the church in the spiritual mentoring of children.

### *Subproblem Treatment*

Each of the four subproblems was addressed as part of the steps to complete this project. The development of each subproblem helped to create the pathway that was needed to evaluate the Awana Together program to see if, in fact, it was a ministry that empowered parents as spiritual mentors for their children. The treatment of each subproblem included the securing of acceptable data from a variety of sources. The analysis and interpretation of this data was also part of the development of each subproblem's response.

#### **God's Instructions for Faith Development**

The data needed for this subproblem treatment included the scholarly insights, observations, and conclusions of Bible scholars as well as the researcher's own exegesis of Scripture as it related to the research problem.

The data gathered for the development of the biblical and theological framework was from the New International Version of Scripture, Bible commentaries, journals, and the internet. These resources were obtained from the Bethel Seminary Library (and its affiliates), through search sites on the Internet that were recommended during the Thesis Proposal Workshop at Bethel Seminary, and the researcher's personal library.

Once the data was obtained, it was evaluated and systematically organized to inform the researcher's understanding of the role of parents and of the faith community in the spiritual mentoring of children.

#### **Contemporary Scholarship**

The data needed for this subproblem's treatment included the scholarly insights and research in the field of contemporary literature as it relates to the roles of parents and

the faith community in the spiritual mentoring of children. Acceptable data included information obtained from the work of recognized scholars who could inform the main themes of this research project.

The data was in books, peer-reviewed journals, research reports from reputable research companies, dissertations, and the internet. These resources were obtained from the Bethel Seminary Library (and its affiliates), the researcher's personal library, and through search sites on the Internet that were recommended during the Thesis Proposal Workshop at Bethel Seminary.

The data was evaluated and systematically organized to inform the researcher's understanding of the role of parents and of the faith community in the spiritual mentoring of children.

### **Pathways for Spiritual Mentoring**

The data needed for the treatment of this subproblem were the insights, observations, and conclusions from the body of literature that relates to the research problem. Acceptable data included that which came from acknowledged scholars in the field of children and family ministries, peer-reviewed journals, and research reports from reputable research companies.

The data were in books, journals, dissertations, survey reports and the internet. These resources were obtained from the Bethel Seminary Library (and its affiliates), as recommended through the Thesis Proposal Workshop at Bethel Seminary.

The data was secured on loan from the Bethel Seminary Library, electronically through the internet, of from the researcher's personal library.

The data was evaluated and systematically organized to inform the researcher's understanding of a pathway for parents to be spiritual mentors for their children.

### **Awana Together Research**

The data needed were the responses from Awana Together participants, church leaders, those who left the Awana Together ministry, and historical Awana Together ministry documents. The data was deemed acceptable because (a) the information came from those who personally experienced participation in the Awana Together ministry and/or church leaders at Plymouth Covenant Church, (b) appropriate permissions were secured for the collection and use of the data, and (c) the historical Awana Together ministry documents were properly collected and archived.

The data was in the minds of Awana Together participants and church leaders. Data were also contained in the historical Awana Together ministry documents.

The data was secured through face-to-face interviews and focus groups, electronic data collection through survey responses, and by accessing the historical Awana Together ministry documents from the past five years that were archived on the researcher's work computer.

The data was analyzed and interpreted to evaluate how the Awana Together ministry helped or hindered the process of spiritual mentoring in families.

## CHAPTER TWO: GOD'S PLAN FOR SPIRITUAL MENTORING

### **Faith in Family and Community**

In studying the best ways to build lasting faith in individuals and families, an exploration of God's call to faith formation, as revealed in Scripture, was vital. His design for family and for the faith community provides the best context for empowering people to live with a kingdom mindset. This project sought to provide a pathway for empowering parents to be spiritual mentors for their children. The search for that pathway began with an exploration of key passages in Scripture regarding faith formation. The goal was to look for insights that would help to create a biblical foundation for the project. Of the passages consulted, three specific texts stood out to the researcher as most instructive.

The first passage was a signature passage on spiritual mentoring within the context of the community of faith. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is a biblical text that describes God's design for the transference of faith from one generation to the next. Because of its direct references to the role of the faith community and of parents in the spiritual mentoring of children, it is often considered a foundational passage for family ministry. It affirms and shapes the identity and faith of the people of God, both Jewish and Christian, for generations.

Where the Deuteronomy 6 passage focuses on the call and format of spiritual mentoring, the second passage of Scripture included in this project focuses on the content

of that spiritual mentoring. Psalm 78 captures the story of the people of God and reveals how important that story is to the flourishing of faith. Exploring the themes of shared story and storytelling, Psalm 78, particularly the first eight verses, presents an urgency for knowing and repeating the story of God as individuals and as a faith community. It is this shared story that provides the content for spiritual mentoring within families.

The third passage this project analyzed was a passage that is not usually connected with spiritual mentoring in families. The Great Commission, found in Matthew 28:18-20, has often been referenced as a call to evangelism and discipleship. Fueling many efforts in the fields of mission and outreach, the Great Commission is the passage that draws believers into the world in search of those who need to hear the good news of the Gospel. During the study of this passage, the researcher found that the Great Commission builds on the Deuteronomy 6 passage, which describes spiritual mentoring in the home, and moves beyond it to encourage the spread of the gospel message outside the home.

Each of these passages represents a different genre of literature from the Bible: history/law, poetry/wisdom, and Gospel/mission. Together, they move the reader from the Old Testament to the New Testament, highlighting the consistency of God's call for spiritual mentoring within families and the larger faith community. The three passages also focus on the why, how, and what questions of spiritual mentoring: Why is spiritual mentoring important? How can it contribute to the growth of personal and communal faith? What needs to be passed on to subsequent generations? In the biblical review, the researcher found compelling answers to these questions.



### Deuteronomy 6:4-9

The Deuteronomy 6:4-9 passage has become foundational to the family ministry movement in churches today. Leaders in the field of family ministry, such as Reggie Joiner and Brian Haynes, have advocated for the importance of family as the center for faith mentoring, citing Deuteronomy 6:4-9 in their work.<sup>1</sup> This passage speaks to the heart of the partnership between parents and the church in raising the next generation to have faith in God. The first two verses of the passage establish Israel's identity as the people of God. This covenant identity required obedience. Those who were faithful to accept God's design for the spiritual mentoring of younger generations, as described in verses six through nine, would receive his blessing.

#### *The Setting*

The words of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 are preceded by the call to hear and obey God's decrees contained in the first three verses of the book. As the Lord's spokesman, Moses gathered the entire assembly of Israel for this moment of instruction. The setting was the wilderness, prior to the Israelites entry into the promised land. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. He received the Ten Commandments from God and proclaimed them to the Israelites (Deut. 5). Then the assembly received a strong teaching on the importance of obedience. The reason for this lesson in obedience is compelling:

so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you,

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<sup>1</sup> I reference here the foundational work of these leaders in the field of family ministry but will share a deeper review of their contributions in Chapter 3 of this report. Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide*, (Loveland, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 52-70; Brian Haynes, *Shift: What it Takes to Finally Reach Families Today*, (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009), 33-36.

and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you (Deut. 6:2-3).<sup>2</sup>

The key ideas in this teaching are obedience and blessing. If God's people obey his commands, he will bless them with long life in a place that provides all that they need, one that is "flowing with milk and honey." The promise was for the current generation as well as the ones to follow. God gave his people all the guidelines they needed to prosper. They had his commands, laws and decrees. The way was set and the structure for living was clear. The message was for all, for the entire assembly of Israelites, and it set them apart from surrounding pagan communities.<sup>3</sup> God offered a blessed, long life as a reward for the obedience of his chosen people.

### *Covenant Identity*

With the promise of blessing and long-life resonating throughout the community, Moses proceeded to remind the gathered Israelites who they were and who they served. The words "Hear, O Israel" (Deut. 6:4) called everyone to attention, followed by the reminder that the God they serve, the same God who brought them out of Egypt, was the one and only God, unique among other gods.<sup>4</sup> Each person hearing this message, regardless of age or marital status, occupation or social standing, was expected to lean in and hear what God had to say. God, through Moses, was calling a people together and

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version* (Colorado Springs, CO: International Bible Society, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *The Anchor Bible: Deuteronomy 1-11*. Vol 5. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 337-343.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 186-189.

giving them a mission. This call to covenant identity would shape the faith of generations to come.

Known as the Shema, the words of Deuteronomy 6:4-5 remain an important part of the Jewish faith today. They serve as a daily reminder of the relationship between God and his chosen people.<sup>5</sup> The recitation of the Shema became a declaration that God was their God and that he was the only One worth serving. Over time, the recitation of the Shema would solidify the Israelites' covenant identity, but initially its purpose was to focus their attention away from the pagan gods surrounding them. God was not only giving them a shared identity, he was also calling them to obedience. Daniel Block points out that "the question that concerned Moses was whether they would remain exclusively devoted to Yahweh who had rescued them from Egypt and called them to covenant relationship with himself or be seduced by and commit spiritual harlotry with the gods of the land of Canaan."<sup>6</sup>

### *Total Devotion*

In response to the affirmation of their identity as the children of God, the Israelites were called to total devotion: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5). The command was to love, and the rest of the verse describes a total, personal devotion. Block explains the depth of these qualifying words with keen insight:

Literally, *lēb* denotes "heart," but more often than not it is used metaphorically for either the seat of the emotions or the intellect or both. Biblical Hebrew has no separate word for "mind;" one's *lēb* is both one's "feeler" and "thinker." In this

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<sup>5</sup> Weinfeld, *The Anchor Bible*, 349-351; Block, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 181.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel I. Block, "How Many is God?: An Investigation into the Meaning of Deuteronomy 6:4-5," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 2 (2004): 208.

context, we do not need to choose between the two, for both are in mind; the word serves comprehensively for one's inner being.<sup>7</sup>

The devotion to which the Israelites were called was all-encompassing. Essentially, their complete identity would be affirmed by their obedience to God. Edward J. Woods asserts, "The call to love God is the appropriate response to all that verse four implies about the uniqueness of Yahweh himself, as this related to Israel, both past, present and future."<sup>8</sup>

### *Living the Faith*

Following the call to total devotion, the Israelites received instruction that described how faith in God would inhabit daily life. A multi-generational faith, it was intended to produce the obedience God required. It was a shared responsibility that would bind individuals together in the community of faith. This faith had a personal application, a family application, and a public application.<sup>9</sup> Moses' exhortation was for all of Israel to keep the commandments of God on their hearts. This required knowing both the words and the works of God, allowing them to shape the choices of everyday living.

The command to "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5) was a personal command. Each person needed to look to their own relationship with God and choose to place him above everything else in life. Only then could faith be passed on to the next generation. Michael S. Lawson points out, "The passionate, all-consuming love for God expected in the *Shema* cannot be impressed on any child without first residing in the parent."<sup>10</sup> Faith

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<sup>7</sup> Block, "How Many is God?", 203.

<sup>8</sup> Edward J. Woods, *Deuteronomy*, (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 136.

<sup>9</sup> Block, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 184-185.

<sup>10</sup> Michael S. Lawson, "Old Testament Teachings on the Family," in *A Theology for Family Ministries* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 83.

would begin with the individual's ability to know and embrace their identity as a child of God, leading to a deep love for God's presence in life. A personal devotion to God would be the faith foundation for generations to come.

The natural outflow of such devotion was to encourage the same devotion in others, beginning with one's family. Block points out that this "covenant commitment is to be a family matter."<sup>11</sup> The Israelites were told to "impress" these commandments on their children (Deut. 6:7). In every aspect of the day, God's story was to be shared and his commands were to be obeyed. Moses highlights the natural rhythms of family life as perfect opportunities for instruction: "Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deut. 6:8). In every moment of every day, whether in the home or away from the home, there was opportunity to teach children about God. This constant focus on the stories of God would lead to the devotion that came from loving God with all one's heart, soul and strength. The repetition of the message would produce identity, commitment and obedience in the present generation and those to come.

The community was an extension of communal living, beyond the individual and the family. God's instruction through Moses spoke of carrying faith so that one's allegiance to Yahweh would be apparent to all. "Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deut. 6:8-9). The faith of God's people was not to be hidden away. It was to be on display for everyone to see. The public, community aspect of faith was a vital part of maintaining devotion and obedience to God, especially as the Israelites moved into places

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<sup>11</sup> Block, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 184.

where other gods were worshipped. Block wrote “within the context of covenant relationship, Israel’s love for Yahweh is to be absolute, total, internal, communal, public, and transmitted from generation to generation.”<sup>12</sup> By the end of the Second Temple period, as an outward expression of faith, Jewish people adopted the use of phylacteries and mezuzahs to keep the words of the Shema near to themselves and apparent to those around them.<sup>13</sup>

### **Psalm 78:1-8**

The Deuteronomy 6 passage reveals the call and the structure of spiritual mentoring, but it is Psalm 78 that describes what the content of that mentoring should be. As the second longest of the psalms, it highlights God’s faithfulness to the Israelites as it tells the story of God and his people from their time of slavery in Egypt up to the reign of King David. For modern day readers, Psalm 78 is a condensed version of hundreds of years of history that displays God at work and his people in rebellion. It lays a foundation for what adults should be teaching their children. Psalm 78 is all about story. Specifically, it highlights the importance of God’s story, the collective story of the people of God, and the personal stories of those in relationship with God. As in the Deuteronomy 6 passage, the personal, family, and community aspects of spiritual mentoring are highlighted in Psalm 78.

### *The Setting*

For this research project, the primary focus within Psalm 78 was the first eight verses. Historians note that this psalm would have been part of a liturgy used during the

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<sup>12</sup> Block, “How Many is God?”, 212.

<sup>13</sup> Weinfeld, *The Anchor Bible*, 342-343.

Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>14</sup> This feast, celebrated in the fall, was a time to mark both the stories of God through the events of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings, and to celebrate God’s provision through the harvest.<sup>15</sup> The Feast of Tabernacles was one of three feasts that called all Jews to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem. During the eight days of the festival, people lived in temporary shelters (tabernacles) to commemorate their ancestors who lived in the wilderness for 40 years. It is noteworthy that the Feast of Tabernacles was meant to include gentiles alongside Jewish people (Deut. 31:12).<sup>16</sup> The collective telling of the story of God was for everyone to hear.

Psalm 78 opens with the words “A maskil of Asaph.” Mark D. Futato in his commentary provides the following explanation of the word “maskil”:

The term *maskil* occurs for the first time in [Psalm] 32:Title. Given that the same root is used in the same stem (hiphil, meaning “to guide”) in the same Psalm (32:8), the same sense (“guide/instruct”) may be involved: A *maskil* may be a didactic poem. Such a sense would be quite appropriate in 32:Title and 78:Title, but not all *maskil* psalms are explicitly didactic (e.g. Pss 42, 45, 89, 142).<sup>17</sup>

The suggestion that Psalm 78 is a teaching psalm fits its context. The psalmist, Asaph, was the one who spoke not only for the king, but also for God.<sup>18</sup> He called the Israelites to listen as he taught. (Ps. 78:1). “I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things from of old” (Ps. 78:2) These are words that hint at a deeper significance to the story about to be shared. “Hidden things”, also translatable as “parables” or “riddles,”

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<sup>14</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of Asaph and the Pentateuch: Studies in the Psalter, III*, (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 22, 109, 177, 207.

<sup>15</sup> International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, *Feast of Tabernacles*, accessed December 1, 2017, <https://feast.icej.org/about>.

<sup>16</sup> International Christian Embassy, *Feast of Tabernacles*.

<sup>17</sup> Mark D. Futato. “The Book of Psalms,” in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, vol. 7, ed. Philip W. Comfort, (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 7.

<sup>18</sup> Goulder. *The Psalms of Asaph*, 130, 316.

were words that pointed back to the wise instruction indicated by the psalm's label *maskil*.<sup>19</sup> The psalmist reminds the audience that this teaching is about “things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us” (Ps. 78:3). It is a tribute to the importance of shared story in the development and flourishing of faith.

### *The Importance of Story*

As the psalm unfolds, Asaph points out that this wise teaching is for all generations (Ps. 78:4). The audience's attention is called to the presence of God in the past, the present and the future. What Asaph reveals is a description of the greatness of God and his action on behalf of his chosen people (Ps. 78:4). The language used by the psalmist is strong and descriptive. Words like “praiseworthy,” “power,” and “wonder” are meant to create a sense of awe. They provide an opportunity to be fully present while God is honored for his unfailing love toward his people. These saving acts of God are meant to be remembered, celebrated and shared with one another and with coming generations. It is through the personal and communal stories of God's people that their covenant identity in him will extend to future generations. Asaph declares, “We will not hide them from their descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done” (Ps. 78:4).

Next, Asaph reminds the gathered assembly that God's law is a guiding force in life and a necessary component of passing faith to the next generation (Ps. 78:5). His words emphasize that this shared faith is God's design for his people. God has “decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children” (Ps. 78:5). These words recall Moses' words in the Deuteronomy 6

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr. *Psalms*. (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 363.



passage, “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children” (Deut. 6:6-7). Asaph’s teaching reminds God’s children across generations that faith begins in obedience to God and finds its power in shared story. Because these are God’s commandments for his people, passing faith in him to subsequent generations is not optional, it is imperative.

The “why” of this teaching is clear when Asaph says, “so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children” (Ps. 78:6). Four generations of God’s children are described by the psalmist: ancestors (the past), those who were gathered (the present), the next generation, and the next generation’s children (the future). John Goldingay points out that, “Perhaps it is significant that three or four generations are (ideally) the constituents of a family living together.”<sup>20</sup> His observation is a reminder that the message of this psalm was for entire households as well as for the gathered community. Asaph’s teaching reaches through the centuries to today’s family of faith and serves as a strong reminder of what God desires from his followers.

### *The Warning*

The first eight verses of Psalm 78 end with Asaph describing why collective memory is important. With the words “that they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands,” the psalmist’s exhortation is a call to obedience and trust that fosters hope for the future. He draws a connection between failing to remember the “praise worthy deeds” of God and the rebellion of “their ancestors” (Ps. 78:8). Their stubborn hearts led to a failure to love and obey God. Walter

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<sup>20</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 486.

Brueggemann says, “The recital of the memory is so that they should *set their hope in God* (Ps. 78:7). It is odd, but true, that our capacity to hope is precisely correlated with our ability to remember.”<sup>21</sup> Additionally, this remembering serves as a safeguard against the wrath of God. Christine Jones presents the idea that the psalmist’s message “seems to deal with God’s anger toward previous generations and more specifically the Ephraimites/Israelites.”<sup>22</sup> These themes are additional answers to the questions of why spiritual mentoring is important and what spiritual mentoring should include.

The idea that the failings of God’s children belonged to the past, serves as encouragement to avoid such mistakes in the future. Asaph’s teaching specifically elevates the importance of sharing the stories of God, both personally and communally. Shared story begins in the Deuteronomy 6 passage where God is setting the parameters for a life lived in him and for him. It finds its full description in this Psalm 78 passage and will continue into the New Testament as well.

In the transition from the God of the Old Testament to the Jesus of the New Testament, the words of the prophet Malachi capture the warning that Deuteronomy 6 and Psalm 78 teach: the negative consequences of failing to pass faith to future generations through the family. Malachi records these words just before Israel enters a 400-year period of silence from God, “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the

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<sup>21</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Family as World-Maker,” *Journal for Preachers* 8, no. 3 (Easter 1985): 11.

<sup>22</sup> Christine Jones, “The Message of the Asaphite Collection and Its Role in the Psalter,” in *The Shape and Shaping of the Book of Psalms: The Current State of Scholarship*, edited by Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, 71-85, (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 73.

land with total destruction” (Mal. 4:5-6). Notably, these words are found again in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel as the angel Gabriel speaks to Zechariah about the coming birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:17). The consequences for neglecting to share the powerful stories of God are carried right into the New Testament narrative.

### **Matthew 28:18-20**

The final piece of Scripture that informed this research project was the familiar New Testament passage known as the “Great Commission.” Found at the end of Matthew’s gospel, these words of Jesus are commonly referenced as the marching orders for his followers both in his day and today. This passage is a call to evangelism and the sharing of the good news of the One who came to save. Often, the words “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19) cause followers of Jesus to focus on people outside of their family. When considered through the lens of spiritual mentoring in children and families, however, the Great Commission takes on a different sense of urgency. The Great Commission does not replace or negate what Wayne Rice refers to as the “First Commission” of Deuteronomy 6.<sup>23</sup> What God set in place after the wilderness wanderings, Jesus affirms in his last words to his disciples.

### *The Setting*

The Gospel of Matthew records the final instructions of Jesus to his disciples. Known since the nineteenth century as the Great Commission,<sup>24</sup> these last words from Jesus are full of meaning and effectively summarize all the major themes from his

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<sup>23</sup> Wayne Rice, *Generation to Generation*, (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 2010), 44.

<sup>24</sup> Ulrich Luz, “Matthew 21-28: A Commentary,” *Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 626.

gospel.<sup>25</sup> In spite of the fact that much of Matthew's gospel seems to be shared material with Mark, Luke and possible additional sources,<sup>26</sup> the Great Commission presents itself as Matthew's own voice. Hagner observes, "The passage as it stands is unique to Matthew."<sup>27</sup> The setting for Jesus' last encounter with his disciples was intentional and demonstrates Matthew's desire to pull the themes of his narrative together. Karl Barth notes, "Significantly, Matthew leads Jesus' history back to the place of its origin (Matt. 4:12-17), to the Galilee of the Gentiles, to the people who walked in darkness and have seen a great light."<sup>28</sup> Matthew is setting his gospel up for the big finale.

Before delivering Jesus' commissioning words to the disciples, Matthew takes time to set the stage. He describes who is gathered, and who is not, when he specifically points out that the disciples are only eleven in number. It is a poignant reminder of the loss of Judas Iscariot from their ranks. Matthew provides insight into the fragile state in which the disciples find themselves. Still unsure of what life with a resurrected Jesus means, the disciples have gathered at the request of their risen Lord, in a location specified by Jesus that would have had specific meaning in their lives. Matthew's observation that "they worshipped him; but some doubted" (Matt. 28:17) accurately

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<sup>25</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 58; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 1269; O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Matthew*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2013), 278.

<sup>26</sup> Donald A. Hagner, "Matthew 14-28," *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 33B, (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995), lxxvii; Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 4; Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Matthew*, (Minneapolis, MN: James Family Christian Publishers, 1978), xxxiii; Luz, *Hermeneia*, 19, 21; Allen, Jr., *Matthew*, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 881.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Barth, "An Exegetical Study of Matthew 28:16-20," in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, edited by Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, 17-30, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 20.

captures the emotional turmoil that would have been their common human experience.<sup>29</sup> It is in this atmosphere that Jesus tells the disciples what he wants them to spend the rest of their lives doing.

As the disciples are gathered on the mountainside in Galilee, Jesus reminds them of what they already have come to know, that he is the Son of God, filled with the authority to rule over both heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). It is the conviction with which Jesus informs his disciples that all authority is his that will empower them to step into the task yet to be revealed. It is precisely because Jesus has embraced the fullness of who he is that the disciples will be willing to lay down their lives for him. Hagner states, “Jesus’ authority (Matt. 28:18) and his presence (Matt. 28:20) will empower his disciples to fulfill the commission he now gives them.”<sup>30</sup> In spite of any doubt or hesitation among them, the disciples can take courage from knowing that it is the resurrected Son of God who stands before them with a task that will usher in a new era of ministry.

### *Make Disciples*

Jesus’s next words are a call to go into all the world, looking for people to lead into a relationship with Jesus just as he, himself, has led them the past three years. The first directive is for them to make disciples (Matt. 28:19). They know something about this. Having traveled and learned alongside Jesus for three years, they have a deep, personal knowledge of what it is like to follow a master. Hertig says, “The goal of making disciples is more personal than preaching and can only refer to the process of

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<sup>29</sup> J. Daniel Day, “A Fresh Reading of Jesus’ Last Words: Matthew 28:16-20,” *Review & Expositor* 104, no. 2, (2007): 377; Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 885; Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary*, 427; Paul Hertig, “The Great Commission Revisited: The Role of God’s Reign in Disciple Making,” *Missiology: An International Review* 29, no. 3, (2001): 345.

<sup>30</sup> Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 886.

transforming into the likeness of Jesus, as demonstrated by Jesus' own example of making disciples. Disciple making is not performance; it is total submission to God's reign."<sup>31</sup> As the disciples know well, the process that Jesus is describing is one that takes time, intentionality, and community. They understand in Jesus' words the command to replicate themselves as they nurture more Christ followers.

It is at this point in Jesus' commissioning of the disciples that he reveals the target audience, "all nations" (Matt. 28:19). At other points in his ministry, Jesus instructed the disciples to focus on God's chosen people, the Israelites. But here, in this commissioning, the circle widens to include non-Jewish people. O. Wesley Allen clarifies, "During his ministry in this locale, Jesus instructed his apostles not to minister to the gentiles but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (10:5-6). But now Jesus returns to Galilee to expand that commission to include making disciples of all the gentiles (28:19)."<sup>32</sup> The change is significant and requires a new openness to the understanding of what Jesus has done in them and what he plans to do through them. Hertig calls this moment "the major turning point of the Bible."<sup>33</sup> The confusion and struggle the disciples must have felt as they listened to their master speak is easy to imagine.

### *Baptize Them*

The process of discipleship captured here in the Great Commission carries with it the importance of being set apart as a disciple. Jesus tells the eleven disciples that the beginning of that discipleship process should be marked with baptism (Matt. 28:19).

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<sup>31</sup> Hertig, "The Great Commission Revisited," 347.

<sup>32</sup> Allen Jr., *Matthew*, 277.

<sup>33</sup> Hertig, "The Great Commission Revisited," 343.

Jesus, himself, set this example when he waded into the waters of the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin, John. It was at his coming out of the water that the Trinity comes together in a powerful way as the voice of God speaks and the Holy Spirit descends to rest on Jesus' shoulder. Likewise, this new process of discipleship will follow the model that Jesus set. The disciples are to baptize people "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (v 19)." It is a theme that runs through Matthew's gospel. Nolland observes, "Matthew's story had been about the action of the Father through the Son and by means of the Holy Spirit. And that is what the baptized are joined to."<sup>34</sup>

### *Teach Them*

Up to this point, Jesus has indicated that this next phase of ministry for the disciples will take time (making disciples), it will have a far reach (all nations), and it will be rooted in the Trinity (baptism). Next, Jesus adds the content of what the disciples are to teach. This teaching, through the long-term process of discipleship, will mark people as set aside for the ministry of Jesus. Bosch points out that, "it is important to recognize that, for Matthew, teaching is by no means a merely intellectual enterprise (as it often is for us and was for the ancient Greeks). Jesus' teaching is an appeal to his listeners' will, not primarily to their intellect; it is a call for concrete decision to follow him and to submit to God's will."<sup>35</sup>

The dedicated nature of choosing to follow Jesus benefits from a concrete starting point. Baptism is the event that marks that a person had chosen publicly to follow Jesus. The content of the teaching, within the context of discipleship, then includes everything

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<sup>34</sup> Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1269.

<sup>35</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 67.

that Jesus did and said while leading the disciples on earth. The magnitude of the commission is taking shape. The importance of Matthew's narrative is also coming into focus. His gospel would help future disciples to remember the teachings of Jesus in such a way that they could replicate themselves. Essentially, Matthew is telling the reader that all that needs to be known about choosing a life in Jesus can be found in his narrative. Hagner affirms that thought by writing, "indeed, the Gospel of Matthew provided the church with an excellent handbook containing that teaching. And it is thus the particular responsibility of the church to hand on that teaching and to see to it that new disciples make it their way of life."<sup>36</sup>

### *I Am with You*

If the disciples stepped onto that mountain in Galilee unsure of the events that had already unfolded and hesitant about their future as followers of Christ, it is not hard to imagine that the task Jesus laid before them felt overwhelming. Having lived with these men for three years, Jesus knew what they needed from him. He reassures them that they will not be alone. In his final words, Jesus promises to be with them, even "to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). The daunting task before them surely reminded them of the importance of community, not just with one another, but also with their Teacher. Richard DeRidder notes that "When Christ said, 'I am with you,' he presented to the believing fellowship and to the world the locus of his presence on earth: his disciples."<sup>37</sup> This would have served to remind the disciples that they had everything they needed to fulfill

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<sup>36</sup> Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 888.

<sup>37</sup> Richard R. DeRidder, *Discipling the Nations*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1971), 184.



the commission they had been given. The discipling, baptizing, and teaching were all things they had received first-hand from Jesus. Through the years of walking with him, they had been given opportunity to put some of these skills into practice. Now, Jesus stood before them, calling them to fully step into their roles as disciple-makers for the kingdom.

Jesus' last words to his disciples gave them clear instructions on how to move forward without him. Sitting around in an upper room was no longer an option. They had a job, a calling, given to them by their mentor, the Son of God. After spending roughly three years with Jesus, the disciples were supposed to bring what they had learned to the rest of the world. Their goal was to make more disciples, baptize people, and teach obedience to the will of God. As Jesus began with his inner circle, so they would begin with theirs. From there, the process of discipleship would ripple out to include all people. In Jesus, the kingdom had come down to earth. Through discipleship, that kingdom would grow beyond anything the disciples could imagine.

### **Theological Implications for Spiritual Mentoring in Families**

The directive in Scripture to disciple others weaves its way throughout the entire Bible. From Genesis through the New Testament, there are many passages and people that can be pointed to as examples of how God wants his story to become his people's collective story. The three passages discussed above stood out to the researcher in their simplicity, their thoroughness, and their urgency. In the Deuteronomy 6 passage, Moses outlined both the goal of spiritual mentoring as well as the pathway to accomplish it. His call to the people of Israel requires total personal devotion to God and to God's place in the lives of his people. Faith, then, begins as a personal relationship, one that requires a

commitment of the whole person: heart, mind, and strength. It is out of this personal relationship with the Creator that believers can then enter the process of nurturing a similar devotion in others.

Through the centuries, the importance of this has not changed. It surfaced in a compelling way through the teaching of Asaph in Psalm 78 where the people of Israel are exhorted to remember the stories of God both in the past and in their present. This familiarity with the works of God fosters covenant identity and devotion among his followers. Again, it is the personal side of faith that builds a foundation for the rest of life. It is the recitation of God's faithfulness through the generations that cements that allegiance and devotion. God is personal. Faith, then, is also personal. The ability to spiritually mentor others depends on a personal willingness to believe in God's story for his people. The absence of that personal side of faith renders ineffective any attempt to transfer faith to others. In a contemporary context, where culture has smothered the desire to remember the stories of God in the past and present, the personal side of faith fades away. Without a personal connection to God, there is no ability to disciple others.

It is precisely a personal faith in the redemptive work of Jesus as the Son of God that sets his disciples apart for the work of the kingdom. The mark of baptism becomes the public declaration of faith and commitment to Jesus, but few people choose it apart from a deep, personal faith in Christ.<sup>38</sup> The Great Commission compels Christ followers to make disciples, to baptize, and to teach others the very things that Jesus taught his own

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<sup>38</sup> A note on the Covenant theology of baptism is helpful here, since the research project took place within a Covenant church. In Covenant churches, both infant and believer's baptism are celebrated equally as valid steps of faith. In infant baptism, it is the faith of the parents that results in the choice to baptize babies, with the promise and commitment to raise the child in Christian faith. In this case, the process of confirmation becomes the child's public declaration of personal faith, apart from his/her parents. In believer's baptism, it is the personal faith of the individual that leads him/her to choose baptism as a public declaration of faith. Both are supported in Scripture and celebrated within the church. Members of the Covenant church do not equate baptism with salvation.

disciples and that they, themselves, have learned. The Great Commission includes parents and their children. The command to love God with “all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” from the Shema is the very command echoed by Jesus when asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Without a personal commitment to Jesus, the Great Commission is handicapped. It is not possible to pass on to others what one does not first possess as his/her own.

The call to personal faith, then, is the pre-requisite for the passing on of faith that God desires throughout Scripture. It is the personal devotion to a God who keeps his promises that inspires current generations to share their faith with future generations. God’s plan for this sharing of faith, this spiritual mentoring, is simple and adheres to the everyday rhythms of life. He admonishes his people to love him with all that they are and then to share that devotion with the children in their midst. He wants that sharing to leave an impression on children. And he reveals that the sharing of faith is an all-day affair. In the everydayness of life, devotion for God should influence each person’s actions when they get up, when they eat, when they are away from their homes, and when they lie down at the end of the day. Keeping the faithfulness and love of God before them, empowered by a personal relationship and commitment to him, is God’s way of spiritual mentoring. Parents are called to this task, and so is the entire faith community.

Where Deuteronomy explains the format for faith formation (its source and how it should be lived out), Psalm 78 gives the content of that faith formation. Again, the simplicity of God’s plan is impressive. As the main vehicle for the sharing of faith, the spiritual mentoring of others, God provides story. Psalm 78 is all about the importance of knowing God’s story in the past, the present and the future. It is about sharing how he

created the world, chose a people, and then guided them through times of both faithfulness and faithlessness. It seeks to remind followers of God of the might and power and love of God. That the stories of Psalm 78 were recited out loud every year at the Feast of Tabernacles shows their importance for people of all ages and backgrounds.

Psalm 78 references the history of the people of God and God's ability to keep his promises. These stories should be shared with people of all ages, both those who already know them and those who do not. Mixed in with God's story is each individual's personal story of how God has been at work in his/her own life. Taken together, the stories of God combined with personal stories become the owned stories of the people of God. People love stories. Children love stories. In Psalm 78, God clearly communicates that story matters. Without shared story, the gift of covenant identity as the people of God is lost.

Jesus' final charge to the disciples, as recorded in Matthew 28, shows what this faith formation process looks like in action. With the example Jesus set through his years of ministry, the disciples understood how personal faith and the stories of God served as a vehicle for spiritual mentoring. They had lived it first-hand! Matthew's gospel convincingly demonstrates what living a life based on the example of Jesus looks like. It starts with that personal commitment to knowing and following Jesus that is punctuated for many by the public act of baptism. It continues with the invitation to share one's personal faith with others, using story (often called testimony), and adhering to the everyday rhythms of a life lived among people. This call to lifelong discipleship would be hollow if it did not lead to future generations growing up strong in the knowledge and devotion of a personal relationship with the Creator of all that is known.

## CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The literature review for this research project examined four different areas of study related to faith formation in families: (1) ministry to families in a post-Christian context, (2) faith development of children and their place within the faith community, (3) family ministry models in the church, and (4) new pathways of empowering parents to be spiritual mentors for their children. Each of these themes helped the researcher identify current thinking in response to these questions: Why is spiritual mentoring important? What needs to be passed on to subsequent generations? How can spiritual mentoring contribute to the growth of personal and communal faith?

### **Ministry to Families in a Post-Christian Context**

Recent studies by research organizations like the Barna Group and Pew Center Research have provided insight to the changing landscape of faith in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Their work has informed and contributed to a shift in family ministry strategies within Christian churches. It was important to define what it means to be living and ministering in a “post-Christian” context. The researcher looked at how this cultural context affected

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<sup>1</sup> Barna Group, *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, accessed June 6, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>; Barna Group, *Spiritual Progress Hard to Find in 2003*, accessed September 21, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/spiritual-progress-hard-to-find-in-2003/>; Barna Group, *What Millennials Want When They Visit Church*, accessed June 6, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>; Benjamin Wormald, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious | Pew Research Center,” Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, last modified April 25, 2018, accessed September 21, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/>.

faith formation, how that formation differed among the living generations, and how cultural trends affected the programs that churches use to minister to families.

### *Defining Post-Christian*

The Barna Group’s team developed a means of defining the term “post-Christian.” In all, sixteen characteristics were identified that described post-Christian people as those who:

- Do not believe in God
- Identify as atheist or agnostic
- Disagree that faith is important in their lives
- Have not prayed to God (in the last week)
- Have never made a commitment to Jesus
- Disagree the Bible is accurate
- Have not donated money to a church (in the last year)
- Have not attended a Christian church (in the last 6 months)
- Agree that Jesus committed sins
- Do not feel a responsibility to “share their faith”
- Have not read the Bible (in the last week)
- Have not volunteered at church (in the last week)
- Have not attended Sunday school (in the last week)
- Have not attended religious small group (in the last week)
- Bible engagement scale: low (have not read the Bible in the past week and disagree strongly or somewhat that the Bible is accurate)
- Not Born Again

Individuals were considered post-Christian if they possessed nine or more of the above characteristics. If they possessed thirteen or more characteristics, they were considered highly post-Christian.<sup>2</sup>

These characteristics were helpful in identifying how post-Christian thinking and lifestyle might impact ministry in the local church. John O’Sullivan describes a post-Christian society as one that is “rooted in the history, culture, and practices of

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<sup>2</sup> Barna Group, *Methodology*, accessed October 13, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/methodology/>.

Christianity but in which the religious beliefs of Christianity have been either rejected or, worse, forgotten.”<sup>3</sup>

The existence of this post-Christian approach to faith and life deeply affects the starting point for ministry to families. The Barna Group summarizes it this way:

It may come as no surprise that the influence of Christianity in the United States is waning. Rates of church attendance, religious affiliation, belief in God, prayer and Bible-reading have been dropping for decades. Americans’ beliefs are becoming more post-Christian and, concurrently, religious identity is changing.<sup>4</sup>

As churches seek to provide ministries for children and families, it must be with the understanding that a significant portion of people coming to church do not have the same biblical foundation that previous generations had. In order to call parents to be involved in the spiritual mentoring of their children, churches must be prepared to mentor the parents themselves.

### *Generational Faith*

In addition to understanding the basic meaning of the term “post-Christian,” it was important to identify how different generations respond to faith in this current religious climate. The research of the Barna Group and the Pew Research Center, along with the writings of James Emery White, were informative in looking at how Elders (those born before 1946), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1983), Millennials (born between 1984 and 2002), and Generation Z (born 2003 to the present)<sup>5</sup> engage the post-Christian influences

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<sup>3</sup> John O’Sullivan, “Our Post-Christian Society.” *National Review*, December 15, 2013, accessed June 12, 2018, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2013/12/our-post-christian-society-john-osullivan/>.

<sup>4</sup> Barna Group, *Atheism Doubles*.

<sup>5</sup> Barna Group, *Atheism Doubles*. The exact dates and names of these generational groups vary slightly among researchers. The ones cited here were used as the basis for this project.

surrounding them. Research indicates that older generations (Elders, Boomers and a majority of Gen X) continue to function with a Christian worldview, whereas the younger generations (some of Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z) tend toward a post-Christian mindset.<sup>6</sup> Barna notes that Generation Z is “the first truly post-Christian generation.”<sup>7</sup>

With the goal of empowering parents to be spiritual mentors for their children, this research project focused primarily on adults who were part of the Millennial generation and their children who fall within Generation Z. Understanding the spiritual needs of these two generations was a necessary starting point. Building on the research of the organizations mentioned above, James Emery White’s work in *The Rise of the Nones* and *Meet Generation Z* brought clarity and understanding from current research results. *The Rise of the Nones* chronicles the growing slice of people in the United States who say they have no religious affiliation, approximately one fifth of the population.<sup>8</sup>

The people who self-identify as “nones” are mostly millennials who have been impacted by the de-prioritization of faith and religion that occurred in their parents’ generation. White notes, “Gen Xers, as they age, are bucking all conventional wisdom and not returning to the religious fold.”<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, while many “nones” choose not to affiliate with or attend services at a religious community, the majority (68%) still profess faith in God.<sup>10</sup> This presents a clear opportunity for ministry to families.

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<sup>6</sup> Wormald, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious.”

<sup>7</sup> Barna Group, *Atheism Doubles*.

<sup>8</sup> James Emery White, *The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> White, *Rise of the Nones*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> White, *Rise of the Nones*, 22.



*Cultural Trends Affecting Families*

Michael Anthony identifies some cultural trends that are affecting post-Christian family structures. He summarizes,

The prominent trends of increasing premarital cohabitation, the increase in gay and lesbian unions, the continuing increase in single-parent families, the rise in blended families, and the attitude among many teens regarding their view of marriage and the family combine to make for a significantly different familial landscape in the years ahead. The postmodern world in which we live works overtime trying to force us into accepting its relativistic values.<sup>11</sup>

Today's parents are navigating a significant amount of change. These changes affect the development of personal faith. They affect the stability that can be achieved in their homes. Freddy Cardoza observes, "In effect, we are ministering to families who are simultaneously being assaulted from without and imploding from within."<sup>12</sup> This post-Christian context, then, was the backdrop against which this research project was conducted.

The voices of Jack and Judith Balswick, respected in the academic community, challenged this research project's definition of family, stretching it to include many non-traditional types of families in its focus. Their work on family systems theory, life cycle stages, and the contemporary landscape for ministry to families provided a lens through which to appreciate the complexity of human family relationships. Their description of the post-modern reality for families frames the conversation of how best to empower parents as spiritual mentors in a unique way. They conclude:

Within the individual, consciousness is fragmented among different spheres of life. The individual must negotiate between the impersonal competition of the

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<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Anthony, "The Morphing of the Family," in *A Theology for Family Ministries* edited by Michael and Michelle Anthony, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2001), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Freddy Cardoza, "Crisis on the Doorstep," in *A Theology for Family Ministries* edited by Michael and Michelle Anthony, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2001), 44.

marketplace and the intimacy of friendship and family, between rationality in the school and faith in the pew, between the fast-paced solutions of multi-media and the routine open-endedness of daily life. Under such circumstances, even the best minds and the most stable personalities can quickly lose a sense of centeredness, a clear grasp of meaning, and reality.<sup>13</sup>

The struggle for clarity and priority of faith in the lives of adults is apparent. George Willard Cochran, Jr. and Brian C. Richardson write, “The relationship between parents and children remains the central powerhouse for animating God’s blueprint for spiritual maturity.”<sup>14</sup> The insight this provides must be considered when seeking to build a ministry that partners with parents.

While much of this research project focused on how to empower parents, their children were also important to the conversation. As noted, the children of millennials are the first generation to grow up in a completely post-Christian context. With parents who are marginally connected to religion, these Generation Z children live in environments where a Christian world view is not necessarily the starting point. James Emery White in his book, *Meet Generation Z*, says it this way, “The heart of secularism is a *functional* atheism. Rather than rejecting the idea of God, our culture simply ignores him.”<sup>15</sup> Barna adds that “the percentage of teens who identify as atheist is double that of the general population.”<sup>16</sup> This presents an opportunity for the church to call children and families back to the heart of the gospel and to community with one another. White notes that in

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<sup>13</sup> Jack and Judith Balswick, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 343.

<sup>14</sup> George Willard Cochran, Jr. and Brian C. Richardson, “Why Your Child’s Brain Needs Family Ministry,” in *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological, Historical and Practical Perspective*, edited by Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 217-18.

<sup>15</sup> James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Barna Group, *Atheism Doubles*.

this counter-cultural mission “the church will have to understand that the key is being ‘counter’ to a post-Christian culture, not a copy of it, or else we will have nothing to offer the world that it does not already have.”<sup>17</sup>

Bonnie Miller-McLemore provides an additional perspective on family ministry within a post-Christian context. She notes the changing attitudes adults have had toward children through the centuries, citing the impact that postmodernism has had on family life. She writes, “If the premodern family portrayed the child as *imperfectible in a fallen world*, and the modern world saw the child as *perfectible in an imperfect world*, the postmodern child is perhaps the most morally and spiritually perplexing: *the imperfect, even potentially volatile, child in an imperfect, volatile world*” (emphasis in original).<sup>18</sup> Her observation identifies the challenges that the current cultural context presents as churches seek to provide ministry to children and their families.

Additionally, Miller-McLemore draws attention to the effects of the loss of a shared Christian narrative on family priorities. “Without sustained attention to religious vocabulary through, for example, Bible study or religious conversation, people cannot talk theologically about the vocation of parenting or about the foundational beliefs that guide how they spend their time, money, or vacations.”<sup>19</sup> This loss of shared story is exactly what Moses warned against in his address to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 6 and what Asaph cautioned in Psalm 78. As the church seeks to address the need for shared story, Miller-McLemore points out, “Often missing in recent efforts to encourage

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<sup>17</sup> White, *Generation Z*, 74.

<sup>18</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Heard and Seen: The Challenge of Religious Formation in Families.” *Concilium*. No. 4 (2002): 49.

<sup>19</sup> Miller-McLemore, “Heard and Seen,” 50.

religious practices in the ‘family as church’ is serious attempt to reconnect families and churches in ongoing, reliable, and concrete co-operation.”<sup>20</sup>

*A Strategy for Ministry to Families*

The thorough scholarship of Diana Garland provided keen insight to the complexities of family systems. Her knowledge of developmental process, her application of the biblical narrative, and her understanding of human psychology and relationships provided an in-depth study of children and their families.<sup>21</sup> In the opening paragraphs of her book, she captured the heart of this research project, “Congregations nurture strong families by instilling values that promote strong family life. . . . Families can find congregations to be communities of support for their daily lives – support that used to be provided by neighbors and relatives living in close proximity.”<sup>22</sup> Her words speak to the partnership between the church and the home that this research project sought to discern in empowering parents to be spiritual mentors.

In 2010, the Barna Group conducted a study in partnership with the leadership of Orange, a Christian organization dedicated to creating discipleship environments where parents are empowered to be the primary spiritual mentors for their children. This study produced “The State of the Church and Family Report,” a collaboration that analyzed the responses of 670 parents in the United States who had children age 18 or younger living at home with them.<sup>23</sup> David Kinnaman of the Barna Group wrote that one of the purposes

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<sup>20</sup> Miller-McLemore, “Heard and Seen,” 51.

<sup>21</sup> Diana Garland, *Family Ministry: A Comprehensive Guide, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Garland, *Family Ministry*, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Orange: A Division of the reThink Group, *The State of the Church and Family Report: How Parents are Rethinking Their Connections with Churches*, (Atlanta, GA: Orange, 2010): 4, 45.

of the research was to provide church leaders “a tool with which to understand the broader national context and for leaders to clarify their assumptions about and goals for ministry to parents.”<sup>24</sup> Richard Ross asserts that, “Leaders by the thousands are waking up to the fact that churches have, for the most part, missed it in relating to families and parents.”<sup>25</sup>

The Barna research outlined several key insights around one central theme: developing and communicating a strategy for how the church can support parents as they raise their kids from birth through college. W. Ryan Steenburg says, “From generation to generation, the concern has been the same: children need Christian training, parents should be the primary providers of that training, but practices of family discipleship have been difficult to maintain.”<sup>26</sup> The findings of the Barna research reveal that parents are open to help with their parenting, but the church does not always come to mind as a resource.<sup>27</sup> The conclusion is that churches need to do a better job of communicating their strategies for empowering parents to be spiritual mentors.

One additional area of consideration regarding ministry to families in a post-Christian context was identifying what millennials and their Generation Z children look for in a church. Barna’s research report, “*What Millennials Want When They Visit Church*,” provided key insights into just how the younger generations have changed in

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<sup>24</sup> Orange, *The State of the Church and Family*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Ross, foreword to *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological, Historical and Practical Perspective*, edited by Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 11.

<sup>26</sup> W. Ryan Steenburg with Timothy Paul Jones. “Growing Gaps from Generation to Generation: Family Discipleship in Modern and Postmodern Contexts,” in *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological, Historical and Practical Perspective*, edited by Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 145.

<sup>27</sup> Orange, *The State of the Church and Family*, 32.

their outlook on religion and faith.<sup>28</sup> Those key insights include the following: millennials generally feel that church is not necessary, many view present-day Christianity as aggressive and critical (52%), and two-thirds of millennials believe that American church-goers are hypocritical. These negative views are often obstacles to younger families choosing to be a part of a church community. On the positive side, two-thirds (65%) of the millennials surveyed said that church is “a place to find answers to live a meaningful life.”<sup>29</sup> This statistic highlights an opportunity for the American church. It was also encouraging to this research project.

Focused on discovering a how to build a true partnership between the church and parents, the views expressed by millennials provided direction and insight. Clint Jenkins, Vice President of Research at Barna Group, summed up the partnership this way,

The fact remains that eight out of 10 young adults say growing closer to or learning about God are the two most important reasons to attend church. And with all the other options open to Millennials, it’s safe to conclude that, when they show up at church for a worship or learning opportunity, they do so hoping there is Someone present to worship or learn about.<sup>30</sup>

This desire to learn about God and to experience worship is the result of a post-Christian culture that has pushed faith in God to the margins, obscuring a biblical world-view. Originally created to be in community with God and one another, people in a post-Christian culture who do not have that community notice that something is missing. As the culture moves away from faith in God and a connection with a vibrant faith community, the opportunity to partner with parents and to provide this sense of community increases.

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<sup>28</sup> Barna Group, *What Millennials Want*.

<sup>29</sup> Barna Group, *What Millennials Want*.

<sup>30</sup> Barna Group, *What Millennials Want*.

In the context of the conversation around empowering parents as spiritual mentors, the urgency of reaching people when they are young stood out. There is a reason why the lack of adult leadership in the spiritual lives of younger generations was concerning. Barna's research reminds us that,

The significance of focusing on the development of children is underscored by findings showing that the moral foundations of children are typically solidified by the age of nine, that lifelong spiritual choices regarding one's faith and one's relationship with Jesus Christ are generally made before they reach age 13, and that a person's religious beliefs are usually worked out prior to becoming a teenager – and that those beliefs rarely change to any meaningful degree after age 13. Unfortunately, “exit interviews” with teenagers reveal that the spiritual foundation laid by families and churches when they were younger is often inadequate.<sup>31</sup>

The decline in participation in faith and faith communities over the past two generations has had serious impact on the faith of subsequent generations. Consequently, Generation Z, more than the generations ahead of them, does not assert a strong religious identity.<sup>32</sup> Barna notes that “the greatest success at seeing young people emerge into mature Christians, rather than contented church-goers, are those [ministries] that facilitate a parent-church partnership focused on instilling specific spiritual beliefs and practices in a child's life from a very early age.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Faith Development of Children and Their Place Within the Faith Community**

This project not only focused on how best to develop and support parents in their roles as spiritual mentors, it was also concerned with the question of how best to develop lifelong faith in children. Considering the characteristics of Generation Z, the researcher

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<sup>31</sup> Barna Group, *Spiritual Progress*. See also 4-14 Window Movement, *Vision and Mission*, accessed October 30, 2018, <https://4to14window.com/movement-profile/vision-mission/>.

<sup>32</sup> Barna Group, *Atheism Doubles*.

<sup>33</sup> Barna Group, *Spiritual Progress*.

studied how basic cognitive and faith development processes shape the growth of faith in children. In seeking to empower parents as spiritual mentors for their children, the spiritual needs of those children became a central focus. There were several key scholars whose work with the themes of child faith development and the place of children within the faith community provided direction for this project.

### *Developing Faith in Children*

Perhaps most influential to the research around both the faith development of children and their place within the faith community was Catherine Stonehouse's book, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*.<sup>34</sup> Carefully citing texts from the Old Testament through the New Testament, Stonehouse concludes, "In our study of Scripture, we saw that children were included in the events of the faith community."<sup>35</sup> With the Bible as guide, Stonehouse strongly advocates for the need for children to be valued as part of the faith community and fully incorporated in it. The themes of Deuteronomy 6, Psalm 78 and Matthew 28 support her conclusion.

Stonehouse then links the need to incorporate children in the faith community with their ability to be included, citing the child development work of Erik Erikson (psychosocial development), Jean Piaget (cognitive development), Lawrence Kohlberg (moral development), and James Fowler (faith development).<sup>36</sup> The theories of these well-known scholars provide the basis for understanding what children are capable of

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<sup>34</sup> Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> Stonehouse, *Joining Children*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Stonehouse, *Joining Children*, 44-62, 73-82, 95-112, 150-166; Bonnie Miller-McLemore writes extensively about Fowler's theory of faith development in her article "Whither the Children? Childhood in Religious Education." *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (2006): 638-643.



accomplishing when it comes to faith and learning. Dawn DeVries points out limitations to the application of theories. Her concern is around their chronological, linear approach to development. She observes,

While developmental theories have certainly been helpful in identifying age-appropriate forms of instruction and communication, they have a dark side: earlier phases of development are taken as relatively less valuable than later phases. Once again, the infant is valuable chiefly for the toddler he will become, the young child for the adolescent, the teenager for the adult. Developmental theories tend to distance adults from children, so that the child is seen as an "other" rather than as a fellow human being.<sup>37</sup>

DeVries celebrates the value inherent in children as they are, not as they will become.

She cautions that adults need to notice and honor children as critical to the faith community, regardless of age or stage of physical, cognitive, moral, or spiritual development.

The benefits of parental influence and that of the wider community remain apparent. Stonehouse observes, “When young and old in the community of faith – the family of God – journey together in commitment to one another led by God, beautiful, enriching spiritual formation occurs for all.”<sup>38</sup> The presence of the full faith community in the spiritual development of children is vital. Patrick Miller writes, “Teaching and learning happen in the community as a whole, but there are explicit indications that the learning of children takes place in the family context especially.”<sup>39</sup> It is in the communal context that faith is both shared and learned.

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<sup>37</sup> Dawn DeVries, “Toward a Theology of Childhood,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 55, no. 2 (2001): 163.

<sup>38</sup> Stonehouse, *Joining Children*, 195.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Miller, “That the Children May Know: Children in Deuteronomy,” in *The Child in the Bible*, edited by Marcia J. Bunge, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 815, Kindle.

*Developing Faith in Community*

While the faith community is a critical part of the faith development of children, the converse is also true. Children are important to the development of the faith community. In this assertion, Stonehouse joins with three other scholars, Scottie May, Beth Posterski, and Linda Cannell, who advocate for the inclusion of children in the life of the church. Together, they demonstrate how children matter in the biblical context, in the faith community, and in families. With direct references to Psalm 78, the authors capture the long tradition that storytelling has had throughout history.

Storytelling is a universal activity. Oral and then written stories are found in every culture. They tell the history of a people. They embody the values and mores of community. They teach, they entertain, they inspire, they encourage, they warn. ... Biblical stories tell us about God's will, works and people.<sup>40</sup>

Her observations support the use of storytelling to grow personal and communal faith.

In *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey*, May and Stonehouse give voice to children and their ability to grasp and interact with faith in God. In sharing the results of their research, the authors note,

The children gave us glimpses of their spiritual potential, how they were at work putting together pieces of theological understandings, how they experienced God, and how their interactions with adults helped or hindered. Listening to the children also highlighted individual differences and how important it is to respect those differences, not expecting children, even in the same family, to respond or develop in the same ways or on a similar timetable.<sup>41</sup>

This perspective was informative when asking the questions of what spiritual mentoring entails, how spiritual mentoring should unfold, and why spiritual mentoring is important.

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<sup>40</sup> Scottie May, Catherine Stonehouse, Beth Posterski, and Linda Cannell, *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 174.

<sup>41</sup> Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 6.

The uniqueness of families directly impacts the ways that the faith community can engage families. Additionally, the reminder that children are often capable of much more spiritual engagement than adults realize was significant.

Miller supports this view when he writes, “It is worth noting that, aside from the fact that the children do not know yet, there really is no difference between the teaching of the child and the teaching of the adult.”<sup>42</sup> He points out that faith formation can be found in the answers to questions that children ask. “The answer to the question is a story, a story of a people and of how by the grace of God they came to be and to be free.”<sup>43</sup> The potential that children have for fully engaging God argues in favor of fully including children in the life of the faith community, highlighting how imperative their inclusion is.

### *Children’s Place in the Faith Community*

Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom and David Bjorlin provide a comprehensive study of the role of children in the faith community that intentionally engages the disciplines of theology, liturgy, Scripture and ethics.<sup>44</sup> The authors argue “children constitute a significant path through which God works in the small to advance the bigness of the kingdom.”<sup>45</sup> Their work advocates for the importance of children as full participants in the faith community and in God’s plan for creation. The authors observe, “When children learn and live in the story and its rituals, they absorb meaning on the level of identity and

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<sup>42</sup> Miller, “That the Children May Know,” 796, Kindle.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, “Teaching the Faith,” *Theology Today* 53, no. 2 (1996): 146.

<sup>44</sup> Michelle A. Clifton-Soderstrom and David D. Bjorlin, *Incorporating Children in Worship: Mark of the Kingdom*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014, Kindle).

<sup>45</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom and Bjorlin, *Incorporating Children*, 12.

character.”<sup>46</sup> This observation captured the heart of the biblical texts for this project and supported the goal of raising up parents as spiritual mentors for their children. Mindy G. Makant supports this view when she writes, “Enabling children to participate fully in the liturgy requires a community of adults (not just a child’s parents) who are willing and able to make space for the questions, the curiosity, the energy, and even the noise, which children bring with them.”<sup>47</sup>

It is not just what children can receive from the worshiping community that has value. Dawn DeVries writes extensively about what the presence of children can give to the worshiping community. She argues that “children are not simply small and deficient adults, and their worth is not to be reduced to what they will become in the future. The child's perception of reality is valuable and provides a necessary corrective to the more measured perceptions of adulthood.”<sup>48</sup> The idea that children not only benefit from the spiritual mentoring of adults, but also contribute to adult spiritual growth, provided a new dimension to the question of “why?” in spiritual mentoring. Much focus has been given to building a lasting faith in children. In the process, the question of what children can offer the faith community is overlooked. Clifton-Soderstrom and Bjorlin observe,

Perhaps many worship services miss the central components of awe, mystery, and wonder that should be part and parcel of the Christian life because children – those people uniquely suited to see the awesome, mysterious, and wonderful – are missing from the larger worshiping community.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom and Bjorlin, *Incorporating Children*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Mindy G. Makant, “Bearing Gifts and Receiving Children: A Theological Approach to Ministry with Children,” *Journal of Childhood and Religion*, vol. 3, issue 3, (November 2012): 16.

<sup>48</sup> DeVries, “Toward a Theology of Childhood,” 167.

<sup>49</sup> Clifton-Soderstrom and Bjorlin, *Incorporating Children*, 37.

These themes provided a strong reminder that there is both give and take in relationships of any kind, especially those between a child (the small) and an adult (the big).

Marcia J. Bunge's theological perspective of the importance of children advocates for the development of a child theology that includes the child as an overlooked and underserved part of society. Bunge notes,

Drawing on analogies to feminist, black, and liberation theologies, child theologies have as their task not only to strengthen the commitment to and understanding of a group that has often been voiceless, marginalized, or oppressed – children – but also to reinterpret Christian theology and practice as a whole.<sup>50</sup>

Her observation of, and call to, children as an important part of the faith community is central to the goal of spiritual mentoring. Acknowledging that children should have a voice is to give value to their place in Christian community.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore's scholarship argues that children are fully capable of deep spiritual experiences and advocates for a renewed focus on the faith development of children. She writes,

Coming out from under the shadow of old paradigms of faith development, recent literature reflects a refreshingly new interest in children and in theological reflection on and with children that has much to contribute to the study of religion.<sup>51</sup>

Miller-McLemore cautions that parents are often ill-equipped to see the faith potential in their children. Without teaching and guidance, the necessary components for faith development in children are unrealized. Her concern for parents as spiritual mentors is apparent when she says, "Congregations assume parents know what to do. Many parents

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<sup>50</sup> Marcia J. Bunge, "The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood." *The Journal of Religion* 86, no. 4 (2006): 554.

<sup>51</sup> Miller-McLemore, "Whither the Children?" 657.

do not.”<sup>52</sup> The truth of this statement explains why parents often look to the church to provide spiritual instruction for their children. Yet research points to the influence of the home as having the greatest potential for lifelong faith. The need for a functional partnership between the two is apparent.

### **Family Ministry Models in the Church**

In discerning how the church can best empower parents as spiritual mentors, it was helpful to study current family ministry models. Understanding how churches approach ministry to families in this post-Christian culture was key to identifying pathways for spiritual mentoring. The scholarship of Timothy Paul Jones, Michelle Anthony, and Reggie Joiner stood out in this area. Jones provides a helpful overview of different family ministry models for the church and Anthony writes passionately about the high calling of what she calls “spiritual parenting,” or helping parents live into their roles as spiritual mentors for their children. Joiner’s influence on the partnership between the church and home has served to orchestrate a shift in the past decade in how the church prioritizes ministry to families.

In *Trained in the Fear of God*, Timothy Paul Jones defines “family ministry” as “the process of intentionally and persistently coordinating a congregation’s proclamation and practices so that parents are acknowledged, trained, and held accountable as primary disciple-makers in their children’s lives.”<sup>53</sup> Noting that “most Christian parents are

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<sup>52</sup> Miller-McLemore, “Whither the Children?” 651.

<sup>53</sup> Timothy Paul Jones, introduction to *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological, Historical and Practical Perspective*, edited by Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2011), 15.

perfectly willing to let their church provide all their children's religious instruction,"<sup>54</sup> Jones states a case for the need for churches to develop better partnerships with parents in the spiritual mentoring of children. Since parents so willingly turn to the church so their children can grow in faith, the church must decide what model it will use to meet parents.

Jones invited three family ministry professionals into conversation in his book *Perspectives on Family Ministry*. They offer three different family ministry models for consideration: Family-Integrated Ministry, Family-Based Ministry, and Family-Equipping Ministry. Each model is presented by the person whose ministry context employs that model for a church-home partnership. The description of the model and its positive qualities is then challenged by a differing perspective from another ministry leader. The resulting back and forth dialogue allowed for a thoughtful look at each model. Studying each of these models was helpful to this research project because it allowed the researcher to discern which model had the most potential for finding a new pathway to empower parents to be spiritual mentors for their children.

#### *The Family-Integrated Ministry*

The Family-Integrated Ministry model was presented by Paul Renfro, Pastor of Discipleship at Grace Baptist Church in Spring, Texas. This model intentionally moves away from age-segregated ministries that many churches offer, seeking to build a church community that is a family of families. All ages worship together, learn together, and enjoy community events together. Children benefit from their incorporation into the full body of activity at church with multiple generations influencing their faith. Training takes place in small group ministries where children are present alongside adults as the adults

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<sup>54</sup> Timothy Paul Jones, *Perspectives on Family Ministry: Three Views*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 16.

learn how to provide spiritual leadership in their homes. Fathers are particularly called to and equipped for this task. This model mirrors the intergenerational learning, presented in Scripture, of entire faith communities gathering for worship, ritual, and traditional celebrations.

### *The Family-Based Ministry*

The Family-Based Ministry model for ministry was introduced by Brandon Shields, Pastor of High School and College Ministries at Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.<sup>55</sup> Unlike the Family-Integrated model, the Family-Based model does not seek to put an end to age-specific programming. Retaining ministries that serve specific age groups, Family-Based Ministry churches “refocus existing age-appropriate groupings to partner intentionally with families in the discipleship process.”<sup>56</sup> This model does not call for a complete restructuring of existing age-based classrooms. Rather, it looks for ways to leverage existing ministries to intentionally include parents alongside ministries for children and youth. Often, this takes the form of additional events that include both parents and their children such as retreats, special ministry nights, and service opportunities. While providing a platform to include parents, it seems that this ministry model still allows the church to take the lead in the spiritual mentoring of children.

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<sup>55</sup> This was his ministry position in 2009. Currently, Brandon Shields serves as the Lead Planter of Soma Church in Indianapolis, IN.

<sup>56</sup> Jones, *Perspectives on Family Ministry*, 99.



*The Family-Equipping Ministry*

The Family-Equipping Ministry model is presented by Jay Strother, Emerging Generations Minister at Brentwood Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee.<sup>57</sup> This model seeks to build a shared partnership between the church and the home. By allowing the church to do what it does best (age-specific spiritual mentoring) and equipping parents to do what they can do best (incorporating faith into the daily rhythms of life), the Family-Equipping model provides a united approach.

Family-equipping churches retain some age-organized ministries but restructure the congregation to partner with parents at every level of ministry so that parents are acknowledged, equipped, and held accountable for the discipleship of their children.<sup>58</sup>

This model seeks to capture a biblical form of spiritual mentoring that leverages parent influence in the home with the nurturing of the larger faith community at church. The description of faith formation in Deuteronomy 6 directly influences this approach.

*Orange: Church and Home*

In keeping with the Family-Equipping Ministry model, Reggie Joiner began a movement in the early 2000s that has become its own recognized philosophy. Joiner's non-profit ministry, the reThink Group, was a "team of innovative writers, thinkers, planners, creators, and doers who are devoted to influencing those who influence the next generation."<sup>59</sup> The Orange movement was born out of the reThink Group's efforts to reshape how the church and the home collaborate in the spiritual mentoring of children.

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<sup>57</sup> This was his ministry position in 2009. Currently, he serves as the Campus and Teaching Pastor of The Church at Station Hill, a campus of Brentwood Baptist Church.

<sup>58</sup> Jones, *Perspectives on Family Ministry*, 144.

<sup>59</sup> Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide*, (Loveland, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 17.

In his book *Think Orange*, Joiner describes how “two combined influences make a greater impact than just two influences.”<sup>60</sup> He points to the partnership between church and the home as the way to empower parents as spiritual mentors. The philosophy uses colors to represent these influences: yellow for the “bright lights” of the church and red for the “warm hearts” of the home. In combination, yellow and red produce orange.

Joiner describes the Orange philosophy of ministry this way:

As long as churches do only what churches are doing, they will get only the results they are presently getting. And as long as families do only what they are doing, they will produce only the outcomes they are presently producing. To experience a different outcome, we have to embrace a different strategy. . . . We propose that the answer is Orange, seeing the potentially revolutionary effect that a true merger between the church and the home could have on the lives of children.<sup>61</sup>

Joiner’s ministry philosophy had a profound impact on the direction of this research project. Drawing support from Deuteronomy 6, Joiner persuasively advocates for a strong partnership between the church and home for the spiritual mentoring of children.

### *Spiritual Parenting*

One more significant voice in the call for churches to build stronger partnerships with parents is that of Michelle Anthony. Her contributions to the conversation have led to books about parents as spiritual leaders, the theology of family ministry, and a pathway to call church leaders to a higher vision of ministry with children and families.<sup>62</sup> Her partnership with David C. Cook produced a children’s ministry curriculum, called Tru,

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<sup>60</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, 24.

<sup>61</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, 24, 25.

<sup>62</sup> Michael and Michelle Anthony, eds, *A Theology for Family Ministries*. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2001); Michelle Anthony, *Spiritual Parenting: An Awakening for Today’s Families*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010); *Dreaming of More for the Next Generation: Lifetime Faith Ignited by Family Ministry*, (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2012).

that was created to be “a spiritually forming, parent-empowering curriculum that equips children, leaders and families to know Jesus and live out a vibrant lifetime faith.”<sup>63</sup>

The focus for Tru on the metanarrative of Scripture brought the phrase “big God story” into ministry conversations. The return to knowing the stories of God, sharing those stories with children, and inviting parents to share in those same stories in the home has its roots in Psalm 78. Anthony writes about the importance of the teaching of that psalm in her book *Spiritual Parenting*.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, Anthony’s work inspired a renewed focus on incorporating the Jewish festivals of the Old Testament into contemporary faith traditions.<sup>65</sup> These “Remember and Celebrate” times are a unique aspect of the Tru curriculum for children. Anthony’s willingness to put into practice the teaching in Scripture around faith formation in children was an early influencer in the focus of this research project. She compellingly addresses the “how,” “what,” and “why” questions of empowering parents as spiritual mentors for their children.

### **New Pathways of Empowering Parents to be Spiritual Mentors for their Children**

The last area of study for this literature review focused on the ministry professionals who have taken the information around ministering in a post-Christian context, aligned it with the faith development of children, and sifted through family ministry models to produce their own pathways to achieving the empowerment of parents as primary spiritual mentors for their children. Among these professionals, five stood out in particular: Mark Holmen, Michelle Anthony, Brian Haynes, Rob Rienow, and Kara

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<sup>63</sup> Tru Ministry, accessed October 1, 2018, <http://www.truministry.com/curriculum/>.

<sup>64</sup> Anthony, *Spiritual Parenting*, 29-31.

<sup>65</sup> Anthony, *Dreaming of More*, 137-150.

Powell. Each of these ministry leaders wrestled with the current post-Christian ministry challenges, studied Scripture to find God's heart for children and families, and developed significant ministries that have enabled stronger partnerships between the church and the home to materialize.

### *Faith@Home*

Mark Holmen developed the strategy that is the basis behind the Faith@Home movement.<sup>66</sup> Holmen describes the Faith@Home movement this way:

The Faith@Home movement is about challenging church leaders to look at how we do ministry from the perspective of the impact it is having on lifestyle behavior at home. This is neither a family ministry program nor a movement just for children's ministry. . . . I also believe that the Bible is quite clear that parents are the ones who are primarily responsible for passing on the faith to their children (see Deut. 6:4-9; Ps. 78:5-8), not the Church. Therefore, the theology of Faith@Home is quite simple: The Church is called to be a lifelong partner (not replacement) with parents to help people *know* God's story, *tell* God's story, and *be* God's story 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, beginning in their homes and extending throughout all aspects of their lives.<sup>67</sup>

The Faith@Home movement encompasses every ministry area of the church. It is not simply focused on children's ministry, but seeks to include ministry to men, ministry to women, ministry to singles, ministry to grandparents, worship ministry, and so on. Each ministry of the church must be refocused to support faith formation in the home.

Under Holmen's leadership, the Faith@Home movement is influencing ministries across denominational boundaries, in large and small churches, and in countries outside of the United States. Holmen attributes the growth of Faith@Home to God, not to himself, and notes that the movement continues precisely because it is not "a program or

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<sup>66</sup> Mark Holmen, *Church + Home: The Proven Formula for Building Lifelong Faith*, (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2010).

<sup>67</sup> Holmen, *Church + Home*, 16, 18-19.

a fad.”<sup>68</sup> From the 2007 publication of his book, *Building Faith at Home: Why Faith@Home Must Be the Church’s #1 Priority*, Faith@Home concepts have been fueling the conversation around how ministries to children and families need to change. Holmen’s work rose in popularity around the same time that Reggie Joiner’s Orange philosophy was taking root and Barna’s research on lifelong faith in children and teens was sounding an alarm.

### *The Big God Story and Tru*

As mentioned in the family ministry model section above, Michelle Anthony’s own research led to the development of the Big God Story concept that was the centerpiece for the Tru children’s ministry curriculum produced by David C. Cook. Anthony’s teaching drew on the same biblical texts and the same exhortation described above to revive the home and equip parents as spiritual leaders for their children. Tru was the first curriculum to offer a parent resource that had a pre-teach function. The idea was that the handouts sent home with children after class would be the material for the next week’s class. With a useful tool in hand, Tru creators hoped parents would take the lead and teach the Bible story at home before their child arrived to learn about it at church. It was an innovative way to put parents in the primary role for faith conversations. The Tru parent app and parent newsletter were additional tools that were meant to empower parents as spiritual mentors for their children.

Anthony’s Tru curriculum was rooted in her understanding of Psalm 78 and the power of story in faith formation. “In Ps 78:2-7 we find a blueprint of God’s grand method for faith replication throughout all generations. He chose to use the family as the

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<sup>68</sup> Holmen, *Church + Home*, 18.

primary place to nurture faith.”<sup>69</sup> Woven into the curriculum is an emphasis on knowing the stories of God and our stories as the people of God. Children love stories. As each individual Bible lesson is taught, it is placed within the larger context of the Biblical story and applied to the personal lives of the children. Building on a partnership with the home, Anthony’s model relies on the power of the Holy Spirit to bring a growing faith to the lives of children and to their families.

### *Legacy Milestones*

In 2009, Brian Haynes released *Shift: What it Takes to Finally Reach Families Today* addressing the goal of partnering with parents.<sup>70</sup> He presented the strategy of building a partnership between the church and the home around spiritual milestones. Haynes identified and developed ministry around seven different milestones: the birth of a baby, faith commitment, preparing for adolescence, commitment to purity, passage to adulthood, high school graduation, and a life in Christ. *Shift* presents the philosophy of celebrating faith milestones as well as what those celebrations look like in the context of ministry at Haynes’ church. The development of this ministry pathway came from asking the following questions:

What if the discipleship process at church and parent’s effort to lead their children spiritually became one simple, common path? What if the church embraced a strategy to equip parents to be the primary faith influencers, giving them motivation, resources, training opportunities, and most importantly a clear path to walk on? What if the church offered Bible study and events that reinforced the parent’s role?<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Michelle Anthony, “Equipping Parents to Be the Spiritual Leaders in the Home,” in *A Theology for Family Ministries* edited by Michael and Michelle Anthony, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2001), 183.

<sup>70</sup> Brian Haynes, *Shift: What it Takes to Finally Reach Families Today*, (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009).

<sup>71</sup> Haynes, *Shift*, 41-42.

Haynes notes that these questions were the start of a strategy that allowed his church and the families they serve to “equip the generations one home at a time.”<sup>72</sup>

The milestones ministry idea is not new. Haynes himself, admits that. It draws on biblical patterns of life and faith that were built around traditions and rites of passage. Many churches through the years have used faith milestones as markers for different events and ministries. Leon M. Blanchette, Jr. wrote an essay entitled “Spiritual Markers in the Life of a Child” that connects the concept of spiritual milestones with the Great Commission and other New Testament texts.<sup>73</sup> In his writing, Blanchette calls out the following spiritual markers: conversion (Rom. 10:9), baptism (Matt. 28:19), communion (Luke 22:19), evangelism (Matt. 28:19a), and service (Matt. 28:20a). While not specifically milestones in the way that Haynes uses the term, these events in the life of a follower of Jesus are ways of marking spiritual maturity.

What Haynes’s contribution to milestones ministry offers is a fresh look at how churches might leverage these faith milestones as natural times to partner with families. Many parents are looking for resources and support at just the time these milestones occur: as new parents, when children begin to ask about Jesus, when children are on the verge of entering puberty, when the high school years arrive and when children move out of parents’ immediate sphere of influence. Haynes led his church to develop parent resources and faith celebrations for the home and for the church at each of these strategic times in family life.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Haynes, *Shift*, 42.

<sup>73</sup> Leon M. Blanchette, Jr, “Spiritual Markers in the Life of a Child,” in *A Theology for Family Ministries*, edited by Michael and Michelle Anthony, (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 125-134.

<sup>74</sup> Legacy Milestones, accessed Oct 3, 2018, <https://legacymilestones.com/>.

Haynes' book, *Shift*, and its follow-up publication written for parents, *The Legacy Path: Discovering Intentional Spiritual Parenting*,<sup>75</sup> strongly influenced the heart of this research project. The intentionality behind what Haynes offered really did cause a shift in the philosophy of ministry to families. At a time when surveys revealed that current ministry strategies were failing to produce lifelong faith in children, Haynes provided a pathway for renewing the partnership between the church and the home that found its basis in the words of Deuteronomy 6, Psalm 78, and Matthew 28.

### *Visionary Family Ministry*

Rob Rienow's Visionary Family Ministry is dedicated to calling families back to the process of discipleship in the home. The mission of Visionary Family Ministry is "to build the church of Jesus Christ through a global reformation of family discipleship."<sup>76</sup> His book *God's Grand Vision for the Home* was released at the same time other family ministry leaders were sharing their ideas.<sup>77</sup> In the introduction, he posed this question: "When your son or daughter leaves your home someday, which one of the following would you want most for them? a) To be successful academically. b) To be successful athletically. c) To be successful socially. d) To be a person of faith and character." His follow-up question asked which of these "gets the best of your time, effort, money, anxiety and planning?"<sup>78</sup> It was a convicting and motivating line of thinking.

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<sup>75</sup> Brian Haynes, *The Legacy Path: Discover Intentional Spiritual Parenting*, (Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Visionary Family Ministry, accessed Oct 3, 2018, <https://visionaryfam.com/>.

<sup>77</sup> Rob Rienow, *God's Grand Vision for the Home*, (Streamwood, IL: Awana Clubs International, 2007).

<sup>78</sup> Rienow, *God's Grand Vision*, 6.



Rienow’s vision for families and how best to come alongside them in the spiritual mentoring of children is drawn from his understanding of the theology of family found in the Bible. In his essay “Building a Theology of Family Ministry,” he points out that “we can see the first commandment from Gen 1:28 echoed here in the Great Commission.”<sup>79</sup>

Table 1 shows a striking parallel between these two texts that demonstrates faith formation from the beginning of creation through to the example of Jesus.<sup>80</sup>

**Table 1. Biblical Mandates for Multiplying Believers**

Genesis 1	Matthew 28
Be fruitful and multiply	Make disciples
Fill the earth	Of all nations
Subdue it	Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you

*Source:* Data from Rob Rienow, “Building a Theology of Family Ministry,” in *Collaborate: Church + Family*, by Michael Chanley, edited by Ross Brodfuehrer, Lisa Griffin, Krishana Kraft, and Sue Ann Hooker. (Louisville, KY: Ministers Label Publishing, 2010), 154.

Rienow concludes “all of Scripture up to this point makes it clear, that the call to make disciples, to win people to Christ and help them grow in faith, begins with the souls of our children and grandchildren.”<sup>81</sup>

### *Sticky Faith*

The research of Kara Powell, along with Chap Clark and the Fuller Youth Institute, produced the “Sticky Faith” philosophy of ministry, also focused on helping to produce a lasting faith in children into their adult years. Their “College Transition

<sup>79</sup> Rob Rienow, “Building a Theology of Family Ministry,” in *Collaborate: Church + Family*, by Michael Chanley, edited by Ross Brodfuehrer, Lisa Griffin, Krishana Kraft, and Sue Ann Hooker, (Louisville, KY: Ministers Label Publishing, 2010), 154.

<sup>80</sup> Rienow, “Building a Theology,” 154.

<sup>81</sup> Rienow, “Building a Theology,” 155.

Project” worked to identify best practices for spiritual mentoring.<sup>82</sup> The Sticky Faith model comprises three areas of personal faith development: internal and external, personal and communal, mature and maturing.<sup>83</sup> Internal and external faith development recognizes the inner emotions and thoughts of teenagers as well as the choices and actions that outwardly point to a faith in Jesus. Personal and communal faith development acknowledges that Sticky Faith is as concerned with the personal nature of faith as it is with the global and local connections to faith communities. Mature and maturing faith development speaks to the faith journey that each person experiences, a journey that shows both spiritual maturity and a faith in process.

The practical ministry idea that came from the Sticky Faith research was the need for each teenager to have five non-custodial, Christian adults speaking into his or her spiritual life.<sup>84</sup> This is the work of the church as it represents and mobilizes the faith community to partner with parents in spiritual mentoring. The difference with Sticky Faith is the emphasis on the role of the church over the role that parents play in lifelong faith. This is not to say that Sticky Faith does not value the contributions of parents. To the contrary, Powell and Clark highlight how their research affirmed that teens named parents as the most influential factor in lifelong faith.<sup>85</sup> Sticky Faith does not seek to replace or refute that idea. Rather, it looks to come alongside parents as additional resource and support for the spiritual mentoring of children.

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<sup>82</sup> Fuller Youth Institute, *Sticky Faith Research*, accessed November 17, 2017, <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/stickyfaith>.

<sup>83</sup> Kara Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 22.

<sup>84</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 93-121.

<sup>85</sup> Powell and Clark, *Sticky Faith*, 23-24.

### A Note About the Research

There is one final note from the researcher regarding sources available for this project. Spiritual mentoring framed as a collaboration between the faith community and parents is not new. That was God’s plan from the beginning. But the rise of family ministry models that return churches and parents to that collaboration is a newer movement. In response to a noticeable and measurable drop-off in faith commitment beyond the teen years for recent generations, professionals involved in ministry to families have sounded the alarm. Churches are paying attention. Much of this shift in ministry focus is taking place right now, leaving a relatively narrow field for scholarly sources but a glut of popular writings that point to key ideas without scholarly research to support their conclusions.

The researcher found it challenging to locate contemporary scholarly sources that spoke to the heart of the project. Dawn DeVries calls out the imbalance when she writes,

In recent years, the literature on children and childhood has burgeoned, fueled in part by the ongoing debate on public policy regarding our children. But until very recently, the field of systematic theology in the twentieth century has been largely silent on the question of children.<sup>86</sup>

Michael S. Lawson notes that his research “revealed many attempts to describe how ancient families actually lived, but few wrestled with the incredible volume of information found in the Old Testament itself.”<sup>87</sup> Paula M. Cooley wrote an article addressing the lack of scholarship in this area saying, “Few scholars attend to the value, status, and role of children in religious contexts as bearers of an emerging religious

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<sup>86</sup> DeVries, “Toward a Theology of Childhood,” 162.

<sup>87</sup> Lawson, “Old Testament Teachings on the Family,” 87.

agency.”<sup>88</sup> She goes on to argue that children are most often seen as an extension of adults, instead of whole persons in and of themselves, noting that, “this omission has serious implications for the study of religion.”<sup>89</sup>

Developing a scholarly view of the theologies of both children and families is a work in progress. Marcia J. Bunge addresses the need by observing,

As congregations and church-wide offices continue to find practical ways to incorporate and engage parents and care-givers in child, youth, and family ministries, they can fruitfully build on and incorporate some of the wisdom within the biblical and theological tradition about parents, children, and faith formation. Until recently, this wisdom was largely untapped because contemporary theologians and ethicists, regardless of tradition, offered little, if any, serious theological reflection on children and parents.<sup>90</sup>

The scholarly conversation in this area is evolving. Bunge highlights this when she writes, “This is beginning to change, however, with the rapid growth of childhood studies in the academy overall, and with the development of both ‘theologies of childhood’ and ‘child theologies.’”<sup>91</sup>

Nevertheless, the academic resources that were available provided the needed insight for the project. Many spoke to a cohesive need for an intentional partnership between the church and the home so that parents would feel empowered to be spiritual mentors for their children. The biblical themes from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Psalm 78:1-8 surfaced in many writings. While Matthew 28:18-20 was rarely referenced as a biblical text in support of the church-parent collaboration, the parallels between the discipleship

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<sup>88</sup> Paula M. Cooley, “Neither Seen nor Heard: The Absent Child in the Study of Religion,” *Journal of Childhood and Religion*, vol. 1, issue 1, (2010): 2.

<sup>89</sup> Cooley, “Neither Seen nor Heard,” 3.

<sup>90</sup> Marcia J. Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and ‘Best Practices’ for Faith Formation: Resources for Child, Youth, and Family Ministry Today.” *Dialog*, 47, no. 4 (2008): 350.

<sup>91</sup> Bunge, “Biblical and Theological Perspectives,” 350.

called for by Jesus and the discipleship needed in the home were intuitive. The need for spiritual mentoring to combine the work of the church with the role of parents in the home was a common theme. Nearly every voice considered spoke toward that goal.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH METHODS

### **Project Overview**

This project followed a series of steps that were organized and intentional. Not all the steps occurred in a linear fashion. Some of them were overlapping, however each step served to move the project along and contributed to producing a viable solution to the research problem. Using an intrinsic case study method,<sup>1</sup> the project sought to evaluate the unique Awana Together ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church for its effectiveness in empowering parents as spiritual mentors for their children, according to a discerned biblical model. The research for this project began with the study of relevant biblical passages and current ministry contexts, then moved on to the vision and development of the Awana Together ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church. The evaluation of the Awana Together ministry involved reviewing historical documents, surveys from former and current Awana Together participants, focus group discussion notes from ministry leaders, and in-depth questionnaire responses from committed Awana Together Families.

### **Biblical-Theological Framework**

The first step in this project was to review the biblical literature related to the study to create a biblical-theological framework for empowering parents as spiritual mentors. It began with a broad survey of biblical passages related to spiritual mentoring, then narrowed to a deeper study of three specific passages. These three passages –

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2018), 99.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Psalm 78:1-8, and Matthew 28:18-20 – laid the groundwork for the role of parents and of the faith community in passing on faith to subsequent generations. These passages were examined for their ability to answer the following questions: Why is spiritual mentoring important? What needs to be passed on to subsequent generations? How can spiritual mentoring contribute to the growth of personal and communal faith?

Study of the Deuteronomy passage revealed a pathway for spiritual mentoring that encompassed both parents and the faith community, taking advantage of the everyday rhythms of life for instructing children in the faith. Psalm 78 spoke to the importance of the story of God and the collective story of the children of God in remembering his love and power in the world. The Matthew 28 passage carried the message of spiritual mentoring from the Old Testament teachings to the New Testament teachings as Jesus taught his disciples how to lead others to a lifelong faith in God.

### **Current Context for Family Ministry**

The second step was to review relevant, contemporary literature in the areas of ministry to families in a post-Christian context, faith development of children and their place within the faith community, and family ministry models in the church. This research helped to frame the conversation in the current context for family ministry in the United States.

The study of the relevant topics led to a review of new pathways of empowering parents to be spiritual mentors for their children that have emerged in the past decade. This allowed the researcher to look for trends and ministry models that might provide a solution to the research problem.

The completion of these first two steps was the focus of the first three months of this project. Together, they defined the current setting for family ministry and provided a framework from which to conduct further research.

### **Awana Together Ministry**

The third step was to evaluate the historical documents of the Awana Together ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church to determine if the ministry accomplished the goal of empowering parents as spiritual mentors for their children. This process began with employing a grounded theory<sup>2</sup> approach to studying how the Awana Together ministry was conceived, designed, and revised over its first four years of ministry. The researcher looked at the meeting minutes, participant surveys, and leadership evaluations that described how the Awana and the Children's Ministry leadership teams of Plymouth Covenant Church decided to pursue the idea of building a family-focused version of Awana.

These historical documents show that the first year of the family Awana program model was presented as a test pilot program. Called "Family Awana," this pilot ran alongside Plymouth Covenant Church's traditional Awana program for kids during the 2014-15 year of ministry. The feedback received from leadership team observations and actual participants in the pilot ministry led to a re-shaping of the Awana ministry for kids. It was officially launched the following year, 2015-16, as a family-focused Awana program, called "Awana Together," that replaced the church's traditional Awana program for kids.

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<sup>2</sup> Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 82.



Additional study of historical documents, archived conversations, and surveys from the first three years of the Awana Together ministry (2015-18) showed how the program was shaped into the version that currently exists. The collection of observations and feedback both during the ministry year and at the end of each ministry year, influenced programming changes that were put in place in subsequent years to make the ministry more family friendly and better able to empower parents as spiritual mentors for their children. This grounded theory approach began with the idea that the Awana curriculum could be used as the center of a new family-focused ministry that had the potential to empower parents as spiritual mentors.

### **Awana Together Survey Design**

The next step in the project was to gather information using an intrinsic case study approach to evaluate whether the Awana Together ministry was accomplishing its goal of empowering parents as spiritual mentors. Two large scale surveys were developed to provide insight to the effectiveness of Awana Together. The first survey was designed to invite responses from families that had registered for Awana Together during its development years (2014-18) but had either withdrawn from the program during the year they registered or had chosen not to re-register for subsequent years. The survey sought to determine what drew parents to the program and what kept them from continuing their participation.

This survey was distributed in electronic form using Survey Monkey and people were invited to participate in the study by email invitation using the Survey Monkey software. One reminder email was sent two weeks after the initial invitation to those who had not responded. All participants agreed to have their responses included in this

project's research. They were also told that they had the option to withdraw their participation, without consequence, at any time.

A second survey was developed to invite response from families that were actively enrolled in the 2018-19 Awana Together ministry year. This survey sought to evaluate the reasons that families registered for Awana Together, the spiritual goals they had for themselves for the year, and the spiritual goals they had for their families for the year.

The survey was distributed in paper form on the first night of Awana Together. Each adult was invited to fill out one survey card while on site at church and to return their card before leaving to go home. Participants indicated their willingness to have their responses used in this research project by writing their initials at the bottom of the survey. Any surveys that did not have initials on them were not included in the research. Participants were informed that they could withdraw their participation in the survey at any time, without consequence. The survey responses were hand-entered in the Survey Monkey software for coding and evaluation. The paper surveys were archived.

### **Selecting Awana Together Families**

The fifth step was to identify individuals and/or groups who could be interviewed for the project. The researcher looked for participants who could represent different experiences and points of view. For this case study, purposeful sampling was important in order to receive focused feedback on the Awana Together ministry and its effectiveness for empowering parents in various contexts.<sup>3</sup> Four sources were identified for this part of the research project: three families actively involved in the Awana

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<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Leedy and Jeanne Ellis Ormrod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 9th ed., (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc., 2010), 212-213.

Together ministry, and the Children's Ministry Leadership Team (CMLT) of Plymouth Covenant Church that is tasked with oversight and evaluation of all ministries to children and their families.

One of the goals of Awana Together is that both parents are involved in the ministry and the spiritual mentoring of their children. The reality is that many families do not fit that model. The researcher wanted to be sensitive to that fact and, consequently, chose study participants who represented different types of families. One family was led by a single mother who had no additional adult support at home. One family attended the ministry with the mother as the only on-site parent because the father was not available to attend with them. And one family attended together with both mother and father. Of these three families, two had been a part of Awana Together since the pilot year in 2014-15. The third family was in its second year of participation in the ministry. One family was Caucasian, one was a bi-racial marriage (Caucasian and African-American), and one was Asian (Indian). These three families were a good representation of the ethnicity and family structures commonly found at Plymouth Covenant Church.

In addition to these three families, the CMLT was invited to participate in a focus group discussion to evaluate the effectiveness of Awana Together in empowering parents to be spiritual mentors. Three members of this team were on the original leadership team that made the decision to create and implement the Awana Together ministry. Four members of the team were involved in the evaluation and refining of Awana Together, even though they were not part of the original leadership team. The remaining four members of the team joined the leadership team recently and were new to the discussion

and evaluation of Awana Together. The researcher is the chair of the CMLT at Plymouth Covenant Church.

All participants in the study were asked for their permission to use the information obtained in the interviews and questionnaires. Confidentiality was assured, and each participant was given the option to withdraw from inclusion in the project at any time, without consequence. Copies of the study results were offered to all participants.

### **Questions to Be Asked**

The sixth step was to develop the questionnaire, interview guide, and protocols for use during the study with the three families and the CMLT. With the family interviews, a face-to-face conversation approach with each family was the goal for the primary method for gathering data. This would have allowed for the researcher to observe non-verbal information in addition to verbal information. Instead, the family interviews were conducted using a questionnaire that was emailed to each family. The parents of the three families were invited to type their responses to the questions on the questionnaire, then email them back to the researcher. After the responses were received, the researcher contacted families as needed to clarify their answers and invite any additional comments. It was helpful that the researcher was known to each of these families.

The focus group was conducted as part of the regularly scheduled monthly meeting of the CMLT. An interview guide was developed to guide the team's conversation. The evaluation of the Awana Together ministry was allotted up 60 minutes of the CMLT meeting. It was audio recorded with permission.

Both the questionnaire and the interview guide contained questions that evaluated program elements and the effectiveness of the ministry in empowering parents as spiritual mentors.

### **Focus Group Discussion**

The seventh step was to conduct the focus group with the CMLT of Plymouth Covenant Church. This team of lay leaders and paid staff provides oversight for ministries to children and families at Plymouth Covenant Church. They meet monthly, frequently engaging in program review and evaluation. The team was invited to serve as a focus group for this project to evaluate the Awana Together ministry's effectiveness in empowering parents to be spiritual mentors. Permission was obtained by each member of the CMLT to participate in the focus group and to allow their responses to be recorded and archived for use both in this project, and in the future development of the Awana Together ministry.

The members of the CMLT were given access to historical Awana Together documents that outlined the goals and development of the program through the years. Additionally, they were given the focus group questions ahead of time so that they could prepare for the discussion and evaluation of the Awana Together ministry. The focus group questions served as the framework for the discussion. Copies of the historical documents were also provided to CMLT members during the focus group for reference. The researcher took personal notes to use alongside the audio recording.

The time designated for the focus group discussion (60 minutes) was not adequate. Subsequently, the CMLT members were asked if they would like to stay beyond the agreed upon time to address the three remaining questions of the interview

guide or if they would prefer to answer those questions on their own time via email. The consensus was that the group preferred to answer the remaining questions via email. The researcher sent an email to the CMLT members the following day that included a brief summary of the discussion from the CMLT meeting, as well as the three unanswered questions. CMLT members were asked to submit their responses to the questions within four days. Two reminder emails were sent to the CMLT members to invite their responses.

### **In-Depth Parent Observations**

The eighth step was to email the questionnaire to the three families that agreed to participate in the study. They were asked to provide some basic information about themselves and their families. Next, they were asked to respond to seven questions in the questionnaire, then return it via email to the researcher. Upon receiving participant responses, the researcher printed the completed questionnaires to make it easier for coding. Follow-up conversations with each family to ensure comprehension of the responses and invite any additional feedback were scheduled as necessary. The questionnaire was used as the framework for the conversation. These conversations were not audio recorded. The researcher wrote notes directly on the completed questionnaires where clarification was needed. Emailing the questions to the three families gave them time to process thoughts and ideas before needing to share them. As a result, the responses were detailed. All three families included thoughts and insights on their questionnaires that were extraneous to the seven official questions.

### **Synthesizing the Data**

The ninth step was to collect, analyze and synthesize the data from each of the sources. The historical data was summarized to produce a timeline of events and a narrative for the building of the Awana Together ministry. The surveys were coded and organized into themes and topics to provide insights for the intrinsic case study. This coding was accomplished using the tools within the Survey Monkey software. The results of the two surveys are included in chapter five of this report. The family questionnaires and the CMLT focus group responses were also coded and organized.

The process for both the focus group responses and the family questionnaires included reading all responses and highlighting the statements that were insightful. Then the researcher wrote the highlighted phrases on individual post-it notes and grouped the notes by question. Each post-it note was evaluated to find common themes and then regrouped into those themes instead of being grouped by questions. This made it easier to see the main themes that rose out of the research. All four types of data (historical documents, surveys, focus group responses, and questionnaire responses) were then analyzed and compared alongside one another for common themes and insight.

## CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### **Overview of Data Streams**

The research for this project was specifically focused on family ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church. The data collected was evaluated to determine if the Awana Together ministry of Plymouth Covenant Church was successful in partnering with families to empower parents as spiritual mentors. There were three data streams included in the research: the evolution of family ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church, the development of the Awana Together ministry, and the evaluation of the Awana Together ministry in terms of its ability to meet the stated goals of the ministry.

First, the researcher sought to discover the narrative of ministry to families by reviewing ten years of historical ministry documents. These documents included notes from leadership team meetings, observations of the ministry as it occurred, emails, program documents (e.g., registration databases, awards lists, and schedules), communication pieces (e.g., promotional postcards and posters, emails, newsletters, and videos), and participant feedback surveys in both paper and electronic form. Additionally, the researcher reviewed two project papers written about the Awana Together ministry during its developmental years that were submitted in partial fulfillment of the researcher's Doctor of Ministry degree at Bethel Seminary in 2015 and 2017.

Next, the researcher focused on how the Awana Together ministry was initiated and developed. The data used in this research was gleaned from historical church documents, including various participant and leader surveys, focus group reports, and



year-end evaluations. These historical records document the spiraling development of the ministry over the course of four years as each of the program pieces were created and refined. The records describe how the growth of Awana Together was both helped and hindered by different ministry pieces.

Last, the researcher sought to evaluate Awana Together to find if it was meeting its goals and to determine if the ministry was a possible solution to the dissertation question. The researcher administered and evaluated surveys, questionnaires, and focus group conversations to discern if the ministry of Awana Together accomplished the goal of empowering parents as spiritual mentors for their children. This third area of research invited input from current and former participants of the Awana Together ministry as well as family ministry leaders in the church.

### **Evolution of Family Ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church**

#### *2008-14*

The researcher reviewed various historical church documents from 2008 to 2018 to discover the approaches taken in family ministry over those ten years. A timeline was created of ministry that specifically targeted spiritual formation within families. Weekend, mid-week, and special event ministries were added to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to see what types of ministries were attempted, how long they lasted, and the overall impact they had on faith formation in the families that participated. This family ministry timeline made it possible to see the progression of family ministry initiatives at Plymouth Covenant Church.

From 2008-14, ministry to families primarily took place as special events surrounding holidays or seasonal programming. Christmas, Easter, and summer were

times when special events sought to equip families through shared experiences and/or family resources given to parents to use at home. Dramatic presentations of Bible stories, interactive events for families, and take-home resources were used to empower parents to create faith conversations around shared experiences and stories from Scripture. In the summer of 2009, Plymouth Covenant Church developed a family track for their annual Vacation Bible School (VBS) ministry.

The summer of 2010 saw the launch of a yearly family mission trip experience to the Yucatán peninsula of Mexico. Children and family ministry leaders at Plymouth Covenant Church embraced an opportunity to set up a shared experience that would impact families through the process of serving together in another culture. The family mission trip has been offered every year since June 2010 and has involved 23 different families with children ranging in age from 6-18 years old.

In addition to special event ministry, there was one school-year ministry called Family Time that was offered to families. In the first two years of this ministry, families came to church once a month to participate. In the third and last year of this ministry, families signed up to receive Family Time kits for use in their own homes. The kits contained lessons and materials parents could use to lead a devotional time. Three separate lessons were provided for families to use whenever it fit their schedule. A suggested framework for how to use the materials was provided. Families who attended Family Time when it was offered at church received hands-on training for using the resource at home on their own.

Aside from special event ministries, there was nothing else during the 2008-12 timeframe that was targeted toward empowering parents to be spiritual mentors. The

weekend Sunday School ministries for preschool and elementary aged children were focused solely on children. In most cases, parents were not involved in the lessons unless they volunteered in their child's classroom. The craft projects and occasional conversations with classroom teachers as parents picked up their children from ministry were the only ways parents knew what their children had learned. During this ministry season, there were no take-home pages for parents that summarized the lessons learned each weekend. There was also no regular communication via email, newsletter or social media that provided a connection between Sunday School and the home.

The weekday ministry, a traditional Awana program for children, did not include parents as a part of the ministry on Wednesday nights. Its curriculum, however, in the form of handbooks children had to work through, did provide a connection to the home. Each week, children were expected to work on sections in their handbooks at home, with help from parents as needed. The handbooks were easy for parents to use since they did not assume prior Bible knowledge on the part of the parent. Children who needed help with reading or with staying focused on the handbook work, benefitted from a committed parent at home to help them through the sections. In the absence of help from an adult at home, children often could not complete handbook sections to show their Awana leaders on Wednesday nights. Once children became self-sufficient readers, they could complete the section work without parent help.

The Awana handbooks were a tool that could be used to empower parents as spiritual mentors in the home. But evaluations of the program at Plymouth Covenant Church show that this often was not the case. Many children, especially those in the upper elementary grades, arrived at Awana each Wednesday with very little handbook

work completed. It was clear to Awana leaders that without an invested parent or other adult, many children chose not to work in the handbooks. This was reflected in the Awana Awards Night programs that showed an imbalance of younger elementary students receiving handbook awards compared to older elementary students. The overall handbook completion rates are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Awana Handbook Completion Rates**

	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12		2012-13	
	Sparks	T&T	Sparks	T&T	Sparks	T&T	Sparks	T&T	Sparks	T&T
<b>Enrolled</b>	59	77	90	92	112	86	126	95	114	101
<b>Completed</b>	42	32	59	31	73	30	81	32	77	45
<b>Rate</b>	71%	42%	66%	34%	65%	35%	64%	34%	68%	45%
	2013-14		2014-15*		2015-16		2016-17		2017-18	
	Sparks	T&T	Sparks	T&T	Sparks	T&T	Sparks	T&T	Sparks	T&T
<b>Enrolled</b>	113	87	86	95	40	43	37	37	45	43
<b>Completed</b>	68	24	66	66	22	15	16	15	25	12
<b>Rate</b>	60%	28%	77%	69%	55%	35%	43%	41%	56%	28%

\*Awana Together pilot year includes traditional Awana children and family Awana children.

On the weekends, children continued to learn in isolation from their parents who worshipped with other adults in the sanctuary while their children attended age-specific programming. But the fall of 2012 saw the implementation of a new curriculum meant to create a partnership with the home that was more intentional. Plymouth Covenant Church switched its weekend curriculum to David C. Cook's Tru curriculum.<sup>1</sup> Using take-home sheets and a parent app for mobile devices, Tru intentionally sought to bring parents into the Sunday School experience by giving them the lesson the weekend before it would be taught in church. The concept was innovative in approach but limited in application. Documents from Plymouth Covenant Church's leadership meetings show parents did not

<sup>1</sup> Tru Ministry, accessed October 1, 2018, <http://www.truministry.com/curriculum/>.

take advantage of the tools provided. Even with the easy-to-use tools, it seemed few faith conversations were happening between Sundays. Classroom teachers reported there was nothing to indicate Tru's pre-teach component was being employed by Plymouth Covenant Church parents.

The following year, Plymouth Covenant Church implemented new curriculum in the preschool classrooms called My First Look.<sup>2</sup> A product of Orange, this curriculum provided parent take-home sheets and an app for mobile devices as well. Unlike in the elementary grades, it was reported the preschool parent resources were well received and used by families. Signs at the child check-in area and easy-to-grab verse reminders kept the main ideas of the weekend teaching in front of parents. Parents said they appreciated knowing what their children were learning in class and having a tool they could use to engage the same biblical truths at home during the week.

The decision to be more intentional in partnering with parents was the result of a book study the CMLT at Plymouth Covenant Church completed in the winter of 2012. An email from the Children's Pastor to team members dated December 5, 2011 states the following:

In addition, I am asking the team to read the book "Shift" by Brian Haynes<sup>3</sup> (I am buying copies for everyone and will put them in your box at church sometime in the next week or so). If you can have the book read by our January meeting, that would be great. It's an easy read and you can skim parts of it and still get what he is saying. Be sure to highlight and take notes. The Pastoral team will be reading the book as well. It is my hope that the ideas in Shift will inform what we want to do and will weave family ministry into the whole fabric of the church.

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<sup>2</sup> My First Look Curriculum, accessed on December 12, 2018, <https://firstlookcurriculum.com/>.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Haynes, *Shift: What it Takes to Finally Reach Families Today*, (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009).

The philosophies contained in the book influenced ministry to children and families in at Plymouth Covenant Church. Both the pastoral team and the members of the CMLT developed ways to be more intentional with ministry to families. The decision to change Sunday School curriculum to something that provided resources for parents was the first attempt at applying the concepts of the book.

On a church-wide level, the influence of *Shift* produced a workshop ministry called Awaken. The idea of Awaken was to offer several different workshops for adults to attend that would provide instruction in the areas of discipleship, parenting, evangelism, and marriage. The book emphasized creating ministry opportunities and resources around spiritual milestones. As a result, some of the workshop offerings sought to equip parents to understand spiritual events like infant dedication, communion, infant and believer's baptism, and family faith formation at home. The Awaken workshops were led by the pastoral team at Plymouth Covenant Church and were offered in the spring of 2012 and the fall of 2012. Turnout for these two events was less than expected and no additional Awaken workshops were offered. Even so, it marked the beginning of a concerted effort on the part of the leadership of Plymouth Covenant Church to be more intentional about equipping parents to be spiritual mentors for their children.

#### *2014-18*

The years leading up to 2014 tell a ministry story at Plymouth Covenant Church that included many attempts to empower parents to lead their children spiritually. Special event ministry, weekend ministry, and church-wide workshops displayed the variety of ways the leadership of the church tried to foster spiritual growth within families. But nothing had longevity aside from the family mission trip. Every other attempt was short-

lived. The reach into the home did not produce the fruit leaders thought they would see. Increasingly, family ministry professionals on a national level pointed to the need for the church to stop taking the spiritual mentoring of children out of parents' hands. The complicating factor seemed to be the church was ministering to a generation of parents who did not know what their role as spiritual mentors looked like.

At Plymouth Covenant Church, the ministry narrative showed parents preferred to bring their children to church to be taught the basics of faith. When the church tried to call parents to their role as spiritual mentors, there was limited response. This was apparent in the Sunday School parent resources that were not used by parents, the lack of attendance at the Awaken workshops, and the short-lived impact of special event ministry. In order to be spiritual mentors, parents themselves needed mentoring. CMLT discussion notes outlined that parents knew they were supposed to be leading their children spiritually, but they did not know how, and their busy lives left faith formation as a low priority among other commitments.

The CMLT at Plymouth Covenant Church devoted much of their monthly meeting times to talking about this problem. They sought to find a way to empower parents as spiritual mentors in such a way that they would prioritize faith formation in their home above other commitments. They looked at various models for family ministry that were gaining influence at the time. In addition to the milestone ministry focus of the *Shift* book, they evaluated the Tru curriculum with its parent pre-teach component and the My First Look curriculum that was built around the Orange philosophy of the partnership between the church and the home. As the CMLT considered these approaches and evaluated ministries that had been offered at Plymouth Covenant Church in the past, they

realized there was one ministry they had not tried to leverage: the midweek Awana ministry.

Heading into the fall of 2014, the CMLT, in cooperation with the Awana Leadership Team, decided to run a family Awana pilot program to investigate how the Awana ministry would work in a family ministry context. The traditional Awana program was designed to minister to children as they completed handbook sections at home, with parent help. At its height, the Awana ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church had grown to just over 250 children aged 3-11 years old. The family Awana pilot was an opportunity to test an idea before fully committing to it. Leaders wanted assurance that a family version of Awana had merit before making any changes to the traditional Awana program.

The CMLT found parent support in the traditional Awana ministry was not consistent. Handbook completion rates pointed to a lack of parent involvement at home (Table 2). Consistently, the lower elementary participants had higher completion rates than upper elementary participants. This seemed to correspond with reading ability. As children gained reading skills and the ability to work independently in their handbooks, parent involvement lagged. Without encouragement from parents, children did not arrive at Awana each week with the same number of completed handbook sections. The CMLT discussed how this trend could be reversed, leading to increased parent involvement at home. The idea to offer a family-formatted version of Awana alongside the traditional children Awana ministry at Plymouth Covenant was developed. Leaders wanted to see how a family Awana ministry would impact spiritual formation in children.



## Development of Awana Together

### *Family Awana Pilot*

During the summer of 2014, the Awana Leadership Team recruited ten families to participate in a family Awana pilot. The Awana Leadership Team spent the year working with the families of the pilot program to hear what was going well and what was not. The following excerpt provides a reflection from the Pastor to Kids and Families of the family Awana pilot year:

It was a good year of learning. We realized that there were parts of the program that didn't work for families the way they did for kids (like gym time). Other parts of the program took on a totally different dimension with parents involved (it was amazing to watch parents helping their kids accomplish tasks in their handbooks and then be the ones to sign off on finished items). We had the opportunity to add new pieces of programming that only made sense in the family context. One of these elements was a time with just the parents that was set aside to teach and encourage them in the parenting journey. At the same time, kids were enjoying some free time together and building friendships as they did. We finished the night with families circled up together for a short song and a family blessing. Family Awana started with ten families and finished with eight (one moved away and the other had to drop out because their younger kids couldn't make it to the end of the night). As the school year ended, we felt that the Family Awana pilot was a success.

As the 2014-15 ministry year ended, the Awana Leadership Team set aside a Saturday morning in June to evaluate the pilot and make plans for the following ministry year.

The evaluation meeting involved reviewing the year-end survey and leader observations of the family Awana program. The result of the meeting was the decision to convert the traditional children's Awana program to a family-formatted one. Included in the conversation was the creation of a mission statement for the family Awana ministry that would guide the development and evaluation of the ministry. The compelling vision of the family Awana model was to "empower families to grow together in their relationship with Jesus and invite others to do the same." The ideas from the family Awana evaluation

meeting were summarized into a document, called “Awana ReThink,” to be shared with other church leaders and with families at Plymouth Covenant Church (Appendix A).

The Awana Leadership Team knew to move forward with the family Awana ministry, they would need the support of church leadership. In June 2015, the Awana Leadership Team presented the family Awana concept to church leadership and received unanimous support. A timeline was developed. Leaders believed the program change would take about three years to successfully build and implement. It was expected some families would choose not to participate in the family Awana model and some families might even leave the church looking for a traditional Awana ministry elsewhere. The team spent hours developing publicity for this new ministry that would allow church leaders to cast vision so that families would want to be a part of the new ministry.

Additionally, the Pastor to Kids and Families secured permission from Awana headquarters in Illinois to pursue a version of Awana that was different from their official brand. There were two site visits over the development years from local and national Awana leadership, including the CEO of Awana, Valerie Bell. These visits allowed Plymouth Covenant Church to share their idea of a family version of Awana. Visiting Awana leaders were able to observe the ministry personally. The result was whole-hearted support for the developing Awana Together ministry. This support was extremely important. The Awana Leadership Team wanted to use the Awana curriculum as the base for the ministry. Their observations revealed the Awana ministry had respect within their church and recognizability in the wider Christian community. They felt they needed the Awana name to give the new ministry credibility.

The name “Awana Together” was chosen in response to feedback from the pilot year. Participants felt the name “Family Awana” was uninviting to families who did not fit a traditional two-parent family model. The name “Awana Together” made room for all types of families. It was inclusive of non-traditional and extended family relationships. It captured the potential of the unique partnership between families and the church. This partnership was explored and taught to families in the development of the theology behind Awana Together.

*Year One: 2015-16*

The meeting minutes of the CMLT and the Awana Leadership Team over the next three years tell the story of the development of the Awana Together ministry. The 2015-16 ministry year was the official launch of Awana Together following a summer of intentional and consistent publicity. Families were encouraged to be a part of the journey of building a brand-new ministry. The Awana Leadership Team worked to build ministry program components that would accomplish their goals. Using all the feedback received the previous year, they developed a ministry that would empower and strengthen families spiritually.

Awana Together was created as a family program, so families stayed together during handbook time. The result was multiple families together in a room with a mix of ages from preschool children through adults. This arrangement worked well in the pilot year, but became a significant challenge and, eventually, a deterrent to attendance in the first year of Awana Together. The crowded classrooms with children of all ages proved to be chaotic for families to manage. Neither the goal of completing handbooks nor of building friendships with other families was realized.

Since the pilot year was small (only ten families), it was enough to have one handbook time frame with three large classrooms to accommodate participants. In the following year, the enrollment for the program was much larger (78 families). The Awana Leadership Team found there was not enough space to have all families in handbook at the same time. The solution was to offer two separate times for handbook. Labeled “Early Handbook” and “Late Handbook,” the separate 30-minute handbook times gave families a choice. Families with younger children were drawn to the earlier time because it allowed them to get home earlier. Families with junior high or high school children chose the latter time because it coincided with the end of both the junior and senior high ministry on Wednesday nights.

The relationship-building piece of the ministry, called Connect, grouped children and parents with their peers for part of the evening. The parent Connect time in the pilot year was a favorite among parents, so it remained part of the programming for Awana Together. The Connect program piece for children needed improvement. In the pilot year, the Connect time had been a quiet activity time for the kids in a classroom because the gym was in use by the traditional Awana ministry. Leaders observed that children missed the benefits of playing games in the gym. Consequently, game time in the gym was reinstated the following year for elementary children. Preschool students were escorted to the preschool classrooms to enjoy some of the components of the Cubbies program from the traditional Awana ministry for kids.

It was important to the Awana Leadership Team to prioritize worship for families, especially since most families did not worship together during weekend worship services. In the pilot year, families worshipped alongside the children of the traditional Awana

program. The next year, families were offered two different worship experiences: one designed for preschool aged children (3-5 years) and one designed for elementary aged children. Each week, families were encouraged to choose whichever worship experience best fit their family. But Awana Leadership Team observed that families were confused by the choice and often did not know which worship format would be best. To avoid the frustration, some families chose to go home early, skipping worship altogether. Table 3 shows the programming elements from the pilot year compared to the first year of Awana Together.

**Table 3. Awana Together Programming for 2014-15 and 2015-16**

<b>Program Time</b>	<b>2014-15 Pilot Year</b>	<b>2015-16 Development Year One</b>
<b>6:00-6:15pm</b>	<b>Handbook</b> Parents with children, multiple families per room	<b>Early Handbook</b> (49 families) Parents with children, multiple families per room
<b>6:15-6:30pm</b>		
<b>6:30-6:45pm</b>	<b>Worship</b> Families combined with traditional Awana children's program	<b>Connect</b> Age-specific programming (preschool, elementary, parents)
<b>6:45-7:00pm</b>		
<b>7:00-7:15pm</b>	<b>Connect</b> Parents together; Children together (all ages)	<b>Worship</b> Separate preschool and elementary worship spaces. Families choose.
<b>7:15-7:30pm</b>		
<b>7:30-7:45pm</b>	<b>Bless</b> (5 minutes) Closing time with families	<b>Late Handbook</b> (29 families) Parents with children, multiple families per room
<b>7:45-8:00pm</b>		

Because the ministry was new, the Awana Leadership Team set a goal of enrolling 30 families in the first year. The framework for the ministry was built on a 30-family assumption. Enrollment opened at the beginning of August 2015 and surpassed all expectations when 84 families signed up for Awana Together (six families would later drop out of the program). With just weeks to go to the launch of Awana Together, the leadership team scrambled to rethink the program components to fit the higher

enrollment. It was logistically difficult and confusing. By kick-off night, all available rooms for handbook rooms were full, leaving no place to put new families who walked in that night to register. Overcrowded classrooms were just one of the challenges that having parents join their children on Wednesday nights would present.

The evaluation of Awana Together at the end of the first year included parent feedback via online and paper surveys, leader observations, and conversations. The feedback received both during and at the end of the year clearly pointed to parts of the ministry that were chaotic and uninviting. The overcrowded classrooms were a perfect example of this. In theory, Awana leadership hoped grouping families together would foster community and friendships. In reality, the classroom environment was distracting, loud, and overwhelming for children and parents alike. Parents struggled to get their children to engage in their handbooks. That struggle left no time or energy to connect with other families in the room.

#### *Year Two: 2016-17*

The second year of Awana Together presented a new version of the ministry that eliminated difficult pieces of programming from the previous year and implemented new ministry ideas. The main ministry components of the new version were family worship, age-specific programming, and the option to complete handbook work either at home or on site at church (Table 4). Each component was designed with the feedback received from participants in the first year in mind, as well as the overall goals of the ministry.

**Table 4. Awana Together Programming 2014-15, 2015-16 and 2016-17**

<b>Program Time</b>	<b>2014-15 Pilot Year</b>	<b>2015-16 Development Year One</b>	<b>2016-17 Development Year Two</b>	<b>Preschool Cubbies Program</b>
<b>6:00-6:15pm</b>	<b>Handbook</b> (10 families)	<b>Early Handbook</b> (49 families)	<b>Early Handbook</b> (28 families)	
<b>6:15-6:30pm</b>	Parents with children, multiple families per room	Parents with children, multiple families per room	Parents with children, 2-4 families per room	
<b>6:30-6:45pm</b>	<b>Worship</b>	<b>Connect</b>	<b>Connect</b>	
<b>6:45-7:00pm</b>	Families combined with traditional Awana children's program	Age-specific ministry (preschool, elementary, parents)	Age-specific ministry (preschool, elementary, parents)	
<b>7:00-7:15pm</b>	<b>Connect</b>	<b>Worship</b>		
<b>7:15-7:30pm</b>	Parents together; Children together (all ages)	Separate preschool and elementary worship spaces. Families choose.	<b>Worship</b> Families together, all ages	
<b>7:30-7:45pm</b>	<b>Bless</b> (5 minutes) Closing time with families	<b>Late Handbook</b> (29 families)		
<b>7:45-8:00pm</b>		Parents with children, multiple families per room	<b>Late Handbook</b> (18 families)	
<b>8:00-8:15pm</b>			Parents with children, 2-4 families per room	
			<b>[Handbook @ Home: 19 families]</b>	

The evaluation of the second year of the Awana Together ministry included leader observations in the field, face-to-face conversations with parents and children, online and paper surveys. The feedback indicated the second year benefitted from the changes implemented after the first year. Family satisfaction with the program adjustments was reflected in the personal feedback and higher participation rate during the year. Some of the program changes were put in place to fix parts of the first-year programming that were difficult to navigate. Other changes were made to bring traditional Awana programming elements back to the ministry that had not been included in the first year.

Among the existing program elements that needed fixing, handbook was a top priority. Families struggled with the crowded, chaotic classrooms in the first year, so the

Awana Leadership Team was motivated to find a solution. The second year of Awana Together retained the early and late handbook options. These seemed to be a good fit for families and continued to provide the flexibility of an earlier program time frame for families with younger children. In place of the overcrowded, assigned classrooms of the previous year, the second year allowed families to choose whether they wanted to do handbook in the comfort of their own homes during the week instead of at church on Wednesday nights.

A second change to programming came in expanding the Connect time from 30 minutes to 45 minutes. This allowed for a better equipping time with parents. The shorter time frame of the first year meant many of the teaching times were cut short because time had run out. With an extra 15 minutes of time, more material could be covered. Parents received more time learning and more time together. The expanded Connect time provided space to accommodate the transition to and from the gym for elementary students, leaving more time in between for playing games. The longer time frame offered everyone more opportunity to connect with peers.

A third change to existing programming took place in the area of worship. In the first year, families had been offered two worship experiences which turned out to be confusing. In the second year, this barrier was removed by combining families together into one worship experience for all ages. The Awana Leadership Team felt families would be positively impacted by experiencing worship as one Awana Together community. To make all-ages worship function well, efforts were made to choose songs younger children could sing. Worship leaders also used concrete lessons that would make sense to preschool children while still holding the attention of the elementary children.



A fourth programming change was the addition of a ministry element that existed in the traditional Awana model but had been phased out in the pilot and first years of Awana Together. Called “Cubbies,” the Awana curriculum for preschoolers taught Bible verses and stories at a cognitive level that was just right for young children. In the first year of Awana Together, Cubbies-aged children were part of the handbook classrooms alongside everyone else. Their short attention spans combined with the lack of tactile learning resources in the classrooms, meant preschoolers were often distracting during handbook time. Unless there was an adult to engage them one-on-one, preschoolers found their own ways to entertain themselves. This frustration was noted several times in the feedback received from families. Consequently, the Awana Leadership Team made the decision to include the Cubbies program in the second year of Awana Together.

*Year Three: 2017-18*

By the third year of the development of Awana Together, many of the difficult and cumbersome pieces of programming had been identified and eliminated or improved. The Awana Leadership Team worked hard to hear what families said they wanted in a family-focused program. They also wanted to stay true to the core of the Awana ministry curriculum. They implemented three changes heading into the third year of Awana Together. These changes helped the Awana Leadership Team feel they had met their goal of developing a family-focused ministry that empowered parents to lead their children spiritually. Table 5 shows how the program pieces of the third year compared to the first two years.

**Table 5. Awana Together Programming 2015-16, 2016-17, and 2017-18**

<b>Program Time</b>	<b>2015-16 Development Year One</b>	<b>2016-17 Development Year Two</b>	<b>2017-18 Development Year Three</b>	
<b>5:45-6:00pm</b>			<b>Handbook @ Church</b> (optional)	
<b>6:00-6:15pm</b>	<b>Early Handbook</b> (49 families)	<b>Early Handbook</b> (28 families)	<b>Preschool Cubbies Program</b>	
<b>6:15-6:30pm</b>	Parents with children, multiple families per room	Parents with children, rooms not assigned		<b>Worship</b> Families together, all ages
<b>6:30-6:45pm</b>	<b>Connect</b> Age-specific ministry	<b>Connect</b> Age-specific ministry		<b>Connect</b> Age-specific ministry (preschool, elementary games, elementary crafts, parents)
<b>6:45-7:00pm</b>	(preschool, elementary, parents)	(elementary, parents)		
<b>7:00-7:15pm</b>	<b>Worship</b> Separate preschool and elementary worship spaces. Families choose.	<b>Worship</b> Families together, all ages		<b>Bless</b> (5 minutes) Closing time with families
<b>7:15-7:30pm</b>				
<b>7:30-7:45pm</b>	<b>Late Handbook</b> (29 families)	<b>Late Handbook</b> (18 families)		<b>Handbook @ Church</b> (optional)
<b>7:45-8:00pm</b>	Parents with children, multiple families per room			
<b>8:00-8:15pm</b>		Parents with children, rooms not assigned		
		<b>Handbook @ Home</b> (19 families)		<b>Handbook at Home</b> (37 families)

The most noticeable change to the ministry was in the way worship was offered. In the two previous years, worship came at the end of the evening. In the first year, families had to choose between preschool and elementary worship offered in two different areas. In the second year, Cubbies were separate from families and needed to be picked up to attend worship at the end of the evening. But Awana leaders reported many Cubbies families simply went home after picking up their children, skipping worship altogether. The Awana Leadership Team valued a family worship experience. To make that happen for all families, they decided to move worship to the beginning of the

evening as the first thing families did together. The result was a corporate beginning to the evening that was fun and exciting for families.

The second program addition was re-instating the welcome/sign-in table in the foyer. As families arrived for the evening, there was a friendly face to greet them. Elementary children could choose between craft or game for the Connect time and families could grab their nametags off the board before heading into worship. The core value of fun was met in welcoming families this way. Additionally, with the sign-in, children began receiving points again for their participation in the Awana program. In the traditional program, points were accumulated and used by children to buy reward items at the Awana Store three times a year. In the transition to the family format, it was thought the Awana Store and points were no longer needed. But children and families said otherwise. With the return of the welcome table, points and the Awana Store became a part of Awana Together again.

The third program addition was returning the Bless program piece from the Family Awana pilot year. Bless was a way to gather families together at the end of the night and provide a short five-minute experience that brought closure to the evening. In the third developmental year, Bless provided a way to bring children back to the sanctuary from their Connect places in the building. It was decided to leverage this short time to reinforce a concept that had been introduced earlier in the night. Sometimes, parents were given the chance to immediately use something they had learned (e.g., how to pray with their children). Sometimes, children were invited to lead something with their families (e.g., saying a blessing over their parents). Bless became an important way to bind families together before sending them home.

The fourth addition was the return of the traditional Awana program theme nights. In the traditional program, each week provided a special theme that children could participate in to receive points (e.g., crazy hair night, pajama night, backwards night). The Awana Leadership Team underestimated the “fun factor” that theme nights brought to the ministry. To make it easier for families to participate in themes, the Awana Leadership Team decided to schedule them monthly instead of weekly. On theme nights, instead of teaching during the parent Connect time, parents were given 45 minutes in the café at church to relax, enjoy some snacks, and connect with other parents in casual conversations. Called “Rest & Relax,” parents loved the down time each month.

The other pieces of the program remained the same. Families could still choose if they preferred to do handbook at home or at church. There was an increase in families choosing the home option. The Connect options did not change, either. Preschoolers were escorted to the preschool area for the Cubbies program, elementary aged children could choose between games and craft each week, and parents stayed in the sanctuary for a time of encouraging and equipping. The Parent Connect Survey given to parents in the first two years of development helped the Awana Leadership Team know what topics mattered to parents the most (Appendix B). The survey was not repeated in the third year, but the results from previous years still served as a guide.

It was during these three development years that the Awana Leadership Team discovered the benefits of having parents sign off on their own children’s handbook sections. With training and direction from Awana Together staff, parents were equipped to work in the handbooks, encourage children who struggled with verse memorization, and set goals for handbook completion that were personal and appropriate for each

child's personality and learning styles. With parents as their checkpoint, children could move as quickly or as slowly through their handbook as was comfortable for them. The pressure to finish their handbook within a year lessened, which led to less stress in the home around handbook work. Families began to value the experience of learning together above simply signing off on a memorized verse.

For some children, the ability to move through the handbooks at their own pace meant they could complete more than one handbook in a year. For any child interested in earning the Timothy award (the highest award for elementary aged children), being able to work ahead was helpful. Awana includes sixth grade in its curriculum, but sixth graders are part of the middle school ministry at Plymouth Covenant. Anyone hoping to earn the Timothy award would need to complete four handbooks in three years. The format of Awana Together created space for that. Additionally, we found that children who wanted to continue into the middle school and, eventually, the high school curriculum, could do that because their parents were their teachers. During the writing of this project, Plymouth Covenant had two students in the middle school curriculum and one that had moved on to the high school curriculum, something that was not possible before Awana Together.

These program changes and additions put in motion a version of Awana Together that surpassed the others. Each programming piece was in the right place. The value of offering age-specific ministry during Connect time was sustained from the previous year. Parents understood better the benefits of choosing one handbook option over the other. By the end of the third year, surveys and observations showed families had embraced the new Awana Together format to the point of inviting other families to join. Awana

Together leadership felt that inviting other families was an important accomplishment. Not only did it say much about parent confidence in the Awana Together ministry, but it carried forward the Awana tradition of outreach to others.

## **Evaluation of Awana Together**

### *Overview*

Having studied the history of family ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church over the past ten years, including the events that led up to the creation of Awana Together, the researcher was interested in hearing directly from families and leaders what their experience with the ministry had been. The goal of Awana Together was to “empower families to grow together in their relationship with Jesus and invite others to do the same,” and the researcher wanted to determine if the goal was being met. Beyond evaluating if the ministry was meeting its goal, the researcher sought to discern if the Awana Together ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church truly empowered parents as spiritual mentors for their children.

The researcher developed and administered a survey to families that had participated in Awana Together during one of the developmental years but did not re-register for the following year. A second survey was developed and administered to current participants in the Awana Together ministry to determine their reasons for registering for the program and the goals they had for the year ahead (Appendix C). Third, a focus group discussion with the Children’s Ministry Leadership Team (CMLT) was conducted. Their conversation around seven evaluative questions provided important information (Appendix D). Last, the researcher invited three families currently active in the Awana Together ministry to respond to a short questionnaire about their experience

(Appendix E). These data streams provided insights to the Awana Together case study. They uncovered what was valuable about the ministry, what needed improvement, and what elements were still missing.

### *Non-Returning Awana Together Families*

At Plymouth Covenant Church, Awana Together was designed to help parents lead their children spiritually from birth through high school graduation. If families have multiple children, the time spent in Awana Together could equal 20-30 years, depending on the age span of their children! Many children stop their progress in the Awana curriculum after fifth grade when they move into the middle school ministry as new sixth graders. In the traditional Awana program, there was no option to continue into Awana's middle school or high school curriculum. The highest award that could be earned was the Timothy Award for completing all the Cubbies, Sparks, and Truth & Training handbooks. The Awana Together model made it possible for children to continue in the Awana curriculum beyond the elementary years because their parents could work in the handbooks with them at home. If Awana Together was meeting the goal of empowering parents as spiritual mentors, it followed that families would re-register year after year.

In reviewing church ministry records, however, the developmental years of Awana Together showed many families only attended for a year or two at most. Some never finished one year. Other families graduated out of the program because they no longer had children in the preschool to fifth grade age range. Table 6 shows the return rate, during the developmental years, of registered Awana Together families who chose to continue the following year. By the end of the third developmental year, the return rate was at its highest, significantly higher than previous year.

**Table 6. Awana Together Return Rate of Registered Families 2015-18**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Registered Families</b>	<b>Families at End of Year</b>	<b>Graduated Families</b>	<b>Continuing Families</b>	<b>Return Rate</b>
<b>2015-16</b>	85	69	8	35	57%
<b>2016-17</b>	74	71	4	35	52%
<b>2017-18</b>	72	64	8	41	73%

Because of the lower return rate of registered families in the first two years, the researcher was interested in knowing what kept families from continuing with the program. Additionally, the researcher wanted to know what drew them to register in the first place. A survey was put together and distributed to non-returning Awana Together families who had registered for at least one of the development years of Awana Together and not returned the following year. The survey was distributed via email through Survey Monkey to 58 families. Of the families who were invited to take the survey, 33 opened the email invitation, but only 13 families completed the survey. That is a survey response rate of 22 percent, which is in keeping with the expected response rates for a survey of this kind.<sup>4</sup>

The first question on the survey asked participants to indicate why they registered for the Awana Together ministry. The survey provided three different responses and participants could choose more than one answer. There was also the option to write in a different response than the three offered. Of the 13 people responding to the survey, five indicated they registered because it was a ministry for families, 12 said it was the Awana curriculum that drew them, and no one registered for the ministry because a friend invited them. There was one write-in answer that stated s/he registered because s/he had attended

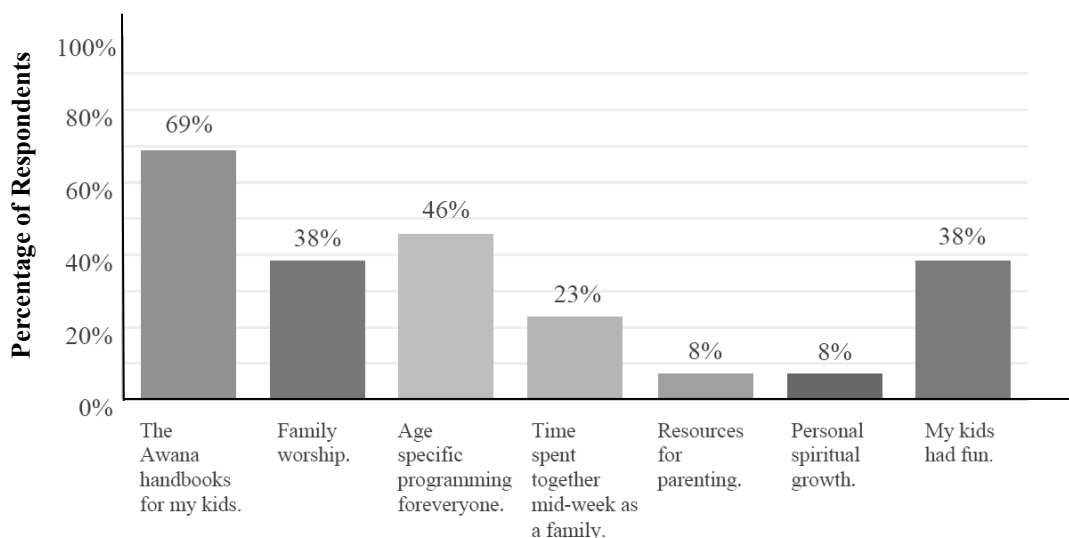
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<sup>4</sup> Andrea Fryrear, "What's a Good Survey Response Rate?" *Survey Gizmo*, July 27, 2015, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://www.surveygizmo.com/resources/blog/survey-response-rates/>.



Awana as a child. These responses support the belief of family ministry leaders at Plymouth Covenant Church that the Awana curriculum was a draw for families.

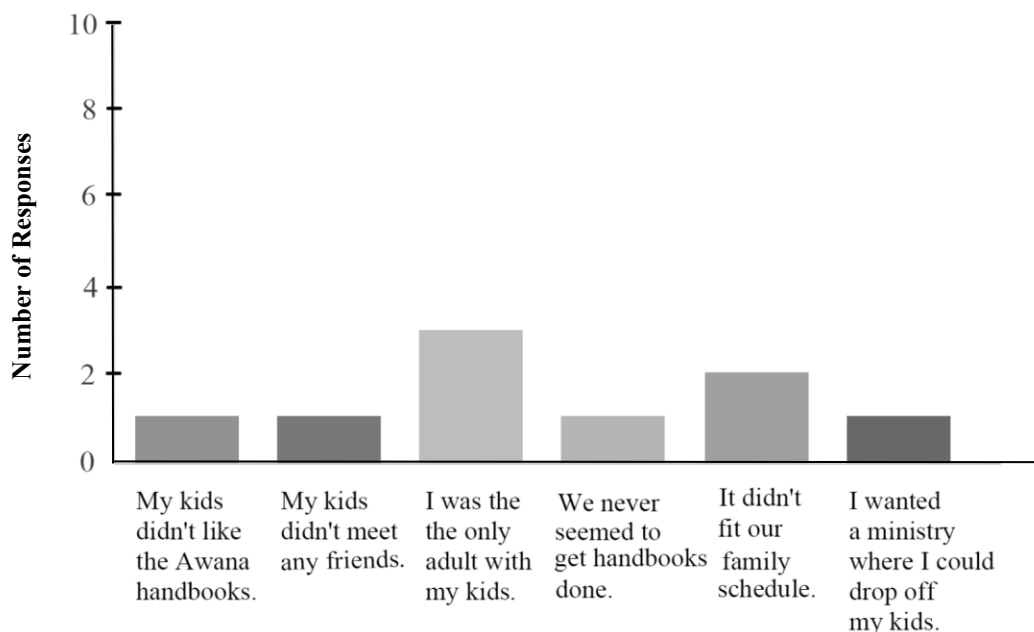
The fourth question in the survey asked what families valued about the Awana Together ministry. Figure 1 shows the possible responses to the question and what percentage of participants selected each option. This question also provided the option of writing in a different response than was offered. There were three write-in responses, but each was a comment on the choices already listed instead of a new response. Again, the responses showed the Awana curriculum and traditional Awana program components were valued by families.



**Figure 1. Awana Together elements valued by parents.**

The fifth question on the survey asked participants why they chose not to continue in the ministry. The answers to this question were much more varied and the write-in responses pointed out some barriers that families had in common that were not offered in the original choices for the question. Participants could select multiple answers. Consequently, the researcher anticipated there would be a higher cluster of responses among the options. Figure 2 shows how varied the responses were. The eleven write-in

responses clustered around three main barriers to continuing in the Awana Together ministry: too late at night/too long a day for children (four responses), program was too confusing (3 responses), and did not make connections with other families (2 responses).



**Figure 2. Barriers to families continuing in the Awana Together ministry.**

The responses to question five of the survey highlight some of the programming issues Awana leaders and other families also identified. The confusion of the handbook time in the first and, to some extent, the second years contributed to families choosing not to continue in the ministry. The survey responses indicate the length of the evening was difficult, especially for families with young children. The truth of this was observed in the number of families with young children leaving the program before the evening was finished. And the need for connection was affirmed by the survey responses as well. This was an issue the Awana Leadership Team worked on each year as they made changes to the program to foster a sense of true community among families and peer groups.

### *Focus Group with the Children's Ministry Leadership Team*

Since the CMLT is charged with the oversight of all ministry to children and their families, it was important to invite their evaluation of the Awana Together Ministry over the past four years. The researcher developed an interview guide to use for the focus group conversation which took place during the CMLT's November 2018 meeting (Appendix D). One hour was set aside for the conversation. It was recorded with permission from those in attendance. The one-hour time frame was enough time to cover only the first four questions. The remaining three questions were emailed to CMLT members who were invited to email back their responses. The responses were coded by writing key phrases on post-it notes and then grouping the notes according to similar themes. At the December 2018 CMLT meeting, discussion of the last three questions occurred.

### **Program Element Evaluation**

The first four questions evaluated the programming components of the Awana Together ministry by asking how the current version of the ministry compared to versions from the developmental years. The original mission statement of Awana Together was to "empower families to grow together in their relationship with Jesus and invite others to do the same." The first question asked which of the original goals of the ministry still applied. The answers from the CMLT supported not only the original mission of the ministry, but the findings of the research for this project as well.

Team members valued the following components of the ministry that had been goals from its beginning: connection with peer groups, outreach, training and equipping parents to live into their roles as spiritual mentors for their children, the Awana

curriculum, and family worship. These themes had been consistently a part of the development of the Awana Together ministry through the years. Whenever it was determined that one of these initiatives was missing or foundering, creative energy was put into making that part of the program work better and accomplish its goal. Question two asked the opposite of question one. Collectively, the team agreed there were not any parts of the original mission of the ministry that did not still apply.

The team talked at length about the third question regarding new ministry goals that should be added to Awana Together. Several people felt the connections among parents still were not happening as well as they could be. It seemed while parents said they wanted to meet other parents, they were reluctant to do so unless it was built into the program. The team talked about the attempt that had been made at the beginning of the year to group parents together for small group discussions during the parent Connect time. For reasons ranging from inconsistent attendance, to the size of the room (about sixty adults were meeting in a sanctuary that seats 600), to the introverted personalities of the adults in the room, the attempt at small groups failed. But the desire to foster parent connections remained. It would be at the second meeting of the CMLT to discuss the remaining questions that a new idea for fostering community developed.

In addition to helping parents build friendships with one another, there was long discussion about the effectiveness of handbook time. It was noted the Cubbies children no longer came to class with verses ready to go. The 45-minute time frame for the Cubbies program at church did not leave space for leaders to work with children directly on verses, either. The team realized very little verse memorization was happening for these children. Two team members raised the observation that some families like their

children to say verses for an adult other than the parents. While leadership had built that option into the handbook at church time by placing Awana leaders in the café to listen to verses, there was an agreement most families were not aware of the option. Better communication around the availability of additional verse listeners was needed. It was noted children often worked harder on their verses if they knew they needed to say them to someone else.

The final suggestion of ministry goals that should be added to the ministry was a recognition that the Awana Together format had not been a draw for families with upper elementary aged children. Because of this, the numbers of children in third through fifth grade were low, making Awana Together feel less exciting than the traditional Awana program that had three times more children in the upper elementary grades. This comment surfaced in the non-returning parent survey and in casual conversations with families who had upper elementary aged children. It was a consistent and accurate critique of the program.

The fourth question for the focus group invited team members to identify what they felt was the most important aspect of the Awana Together ministry. Responses included: the intentionality of participating in a program as a family, seeing dads leading their families, the Awana curriculum as a tool for faith development in the home, connecting like-minded families to one another, and families worshiping together. Most of these had been consistent goals throughout the development years. But one was new. It had not been a stated goal of the ministry for dads to step into spiritual leadership for their families, but over the four years of building the ministry, it was an outcome that was

noticeable. The level of participation from dads through the years grew steadily. Ministry leaders were excited to see more families arriving at Awana Together with both parents.

### **Ministry Application Evaluation**

Next, the focus group considered three ministry application questions. Instead of just evaluating program pieces, the researcher wanted to know if the ministry was achieving the goals it set out to accomplish: empowering parents, growing families spiritually, and inviting others to the faith journey. These questions were answered via email and then discussed at a subsequent meeting of the CMLT.

The first question asked how Awana Together empowers parents to be spiritual mentors. Responses fell into the following categories: it does not assume prior Bible knowledge and encourages parents to learn alongside their children, it offers practical tools and resources for spiritual mentoring, it creates a space mid-week for families to intentionally focus on faith with other families, it engages parents to be spiritual mentors for their children, and it provides many modeling opportunities on-site for growing in faith together. These outcomes were discerned through leader observations of the ministry as it was happening, through conversations with Awana Together participants and through the Awana Together Goals survey that was given to parents at the beginning of the year.

The second question asked how families had been empowered to grow together spiritually. One reference was made to the equipping and encouraging that takes place during the parent Connect time. Two responses referenced the age-specific programming and how it helps to create a community in which faith can grow. Families worshipping together was mentioned three times. But well beyond these answers, team members

pointed to the space Awana Together creates mid-week for families to prioritize faith learning. This response was mentioned 13 different times in the answers to this question that were submitted by seven of the CMLT's ten members. The accountability of a family-focused weekly program was identified as a major contributor to empowering parents as spiritual mentors. One of the team members summed it up this way, "I love the goals of Awana Together and the program has been beneficial for our family. Growing in our faith is something that we value greatly and we use Awana Together as a tool to help prioritize that in our lives."

The last question asked team members to reflect on how Awana Together empowers families to invite other families to the ministry. The "fun" elements of the program were mentioned twice, as was the observation that people think about inviting others because they are encouraged to do so. The Connect portion of the evening was listed because it makes it possible for visitors to stay with those who invite them (parents with parents, children with children). One person noted that, as the program became more solid through the years, it became easier for families to reach out and invite other families. Like the second question, though, there was one response that was mentioned much more than the others. Eight people observed the flexible and more laid-back format of the Awana Together ministry made it easy to invite other families to try it out. New families were welcome to attend the ministry for a couple of weeks to see if it was a good fit for their family before filling out registration forms. This helped to make inviting families a low-stakes endeavor.

The consensus of the CMLT was that Awana Together was positioned well to meet the goals of the ministry. They were able to identify measurables that indicated

goals were being met. The data collected by the researcher supported this conclusion. It was affirmed by reviewing ministry statistics, survey responses, leader observations, and conversations with participants. The focus group evaluation yielded two areas that need improvement: parent connections with each other and Cubbies verse memorization. To meet those needs, the Cubbies team planned to incorporate more work with verses as part of the preschool Connect time. It also was decided that a second attempt at small groups was warranted. To make the small groups more effective, families would be invited to request one other family to be in their group. The team decided that moving the parent Connect time to the café would provide a better setting that would be conducive to relational conversations among small group members. The team decided to put these ideas in place beginning in January 2019.

#### *Participant Insights*

As the final area of data collection, the researcher wanted to hear directly from participants how they felt about the Awana Together ministry and its impact on their families. To accomplish this, both a survey and a questionnaire were developed. The survey was designed to gain insight to what parents valued in Awana Together and what their spiritual goals were for the coming year. It was given in paper form during the first Connect time in September 2018. Parents were given time to fill out the survey and turn it in before going home. They were asked to read through the disclosure statement on the back of the survey card and sign with their initials if they were willing to have their responses included in the research for this dissertation. There were 48 completed surveys. Of those, 45 people gave permission to have their responses used in this dissertation.



The questionnaire was designed to get more detailed responses from three families who were chosen by the researcher because they met certain criteria. This purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to pick families who had been a part of Awana Together during the developmental years, who had children in multiple age brackets, and who represented the ethnic make-up of Plymouth Covenant Church. Each family was personally invited to participate. When they agreed to participate, they were emailed the questions developed by the researcher. The email included a disclosure statement and participants were informed the submission of their answers to the researcher indicated their willingness to be included in the research for the project.

The data collection for the Awana Together goals survey, while in paper format, was entered by hand into Survey Monkey by the researcher in order to take advantage of the software's analytics. There were four questions to the survey (Appendix C). Each question was offered in multiple choice format with the opportunity to write in additional answers. Participants could choose more than one answer for each question.

In answering the first question, 32 families indicated they chose to enroll in Awana Together because it was a ministry designed specifically for families, 24 people said they were drawn by the Awana curriculum, and three said they were in Awana Together because a friend invited them. The write-in responses included the following:

- Making faith a priority (3)
- Teaching for children (2)
- Closer to home than their church (2)
- Accepting responsibility for leading children spiritually (1)
- My child loves it (1)

The responses were in keeping with the other data streams studied that emphasized regular family involvement in spiritual mentoring and the Awana curriculum as highly valued components of Awana Together.

The third question invited parents to reflect on personal spiritual goals for the upcoming Awana Together year. The top answer with 36 responses indicated they wanted to feel empowered in their role as parents. Close behind that answer, with 31 responses, was the goal of deepening their personal relationship with Jesus. There were 13 people that indicated wanting to learn more Bible basics. While this number was not as high as the others, it did support the research by the Barna Group that the current generation of parents has less of a biblical foundation than generations ahead of them. The number of people choosing this option totaled 28% of the respondents. The write-in answers to this question included a desire to teach their children about Jesus (5), to get to know other families (1), to spend more time in Scripture (1), and to help others grow (1).

The fourth question of the survey asked parents about the spiritual goals parents had for their families. 42 of the 45 participants listed the goal of growing together as a family in faith, 34 responses that said making Jesus a priority in their home was a goal for the year, and 28 people selected wanting to memorize God's word together. This question had the fewest write in responses with one person saying they hoped to have one-on-one time with the child enrolled in the program with them and one person said it was a goal to "joyfully learn together." Again, the responses to this question provided affirmation of the information provided through the other data streams.

The last set of data collected for this project were the individual family questionnaires. The researcher developed questions like the ones asked in the Awana

Together Goals survey and in the CMLT focus group. Two of the three families that filled out the questionnaire had been part of the Awana Together ministry since the pilot year. They had experienced every version of Awana Together as the ministry was being developed from year to year. The third family had been a part of Awana Together for two years. All three were currently enrolled in Awana Together.

Some general information on each family will be helpful. “Family A” was led by a single mom who had no additional adult support at home for engaging in the Awana Together ministry outside of Wednesday nights. This family is Caucasian. There are four children in the family: an 18-year-old daughter and three sons aged 15, 12, and nine years old. This family is one of the original families of the family Awana pilot.

“Family B” is led by both parents who support the Awana Together learning together during the week. Due to the father’s work schedule, the mother is the one who brings the children to Awana Together each week. This family is a bi-racial family where the father is African-American and the mother is Caucasian. They have two children: a 10-year-old son and an eight-year-old daughter. This family homeschools and has been a part of the Awana Together ministry since the family Awana pilot year.

“Family C” is led by both parents during the week as well as on Wednesday nights where they attend Awana Together as a family. The parents are first generation Asian Indian-Americans. They have three children: two daughters aged 11 and six years old, and a one-year-old son. They have been a part of Awana Together for two years.

The parents of these three families were invited to respond, in short answer form, to a questionnaire comprised of eight questions (Appendix E). Their responses were coded and organized by the researcher into post-it note clusters around common themes.

Attention was given to themes that were new or that affirmed findings from the other data streams. Questions one through three invited comments on the programming components of Awana Together. Questions four through eight were designed to help the researcher see if Awana Together was meeting its goal to “empower families to grow together in their relationship with Jesus and invite others to do the same.” The researcher was also evaluating if the answers to these five questions provided evidence of empowering parents as spiritual mentors.

The first question asked for feedback on elements of the Awana Together ministry that had been helpful to families. All three of the families singled out the Connect part of the evening. Each family appreciated the encouragement and equipping parents receive. Teaching topics, guest speakers, connection with other families, and the Rest & Relax nights were specifically mentioned. Family A and Family C also mentioned the options children have during Connect. The games played in the gym were a value to Family A and the crafting time in the elementary classrooms appealed to Family C. The two other programming pieces mentioned were the family worship time (Family C), and leading children through their handbooks as part of the family’s homeschool routine (Family B).

The second question asked which parts of the Awana Together program have not been helpful to families. Here, the personal situations and backgrounds of each family came into play. Family A said handbook was the least helpful, directly referencing the busyness and fatigue of a single-parent lifestyle. They were not able to arrive for the early handbook time at church and the late handbook time was not optimal because the children were tired and sometimes still had homework to complete. In her own words, this single mom noted there is usually “a lot of homework during weeknights so the stress

of getting that done and the lateness of the evening make handbook time not very productive.” The handbook at home option also feels out of reach when there is no additional adult help at home.

Both Family B and Family C mentioned the attempts to create a small group experience for parents within Awana Together have not been helpful. Family B noted because the small groups were randomly assigned, they did not have much in common with the other people in their group. Family C did not find the small groups helpful because of a cultural barrier. They wrote, “In the culture we were brought up in, we are not at all open to talking with an unknown person. We open up only when someone comes to talk with us.” As a result, Family C sometimes skipped the nights when parents were invited to get to know other parents.

The third question invited parents to comment whether they would change or add anything to the Awana Together ministry. Families A and B, who had been a part of the development of the ministry since the pilot year, said there was nothing they would change or add. The mother from Family B said, “Since the program started a few years ago, each year has had some changes and improvements, all of which I really love! I can’t think of anything that I would change or add at this point.” Family C said they would value the option of having their children say their verses for someone else on Awana Together nights. This option is available during the early and late handbook at church times. The fact Family C was not aware of the option helped the Awana Leadership Team know that they needed to communicate that option to families more clearly.

The next set of questions, beginning with question four, provided some insight as to whether Awana Together was meeting its ministry goals and whether Awana Together was a good answer to the research problem. Question four asked how Awana Together had impacted personal spiritual growth. Families B and C mentioned how Awana Together has equipped them to do a better job of reading and memorizing Scripture with their children. Family C spoke of realizing the children “are going to be with me for only a little while and I need to give them as much JESUS as possible [emphasis in the original].” This sense of urgency complemented Family B’s observation that spiritual growth is intentional. The mother wrote, “I think, for me, watching my children memorize verses and studying the Scripture encouraged me to do the same.” Family A pointed to how the information and support received at Awana Together has allowed her to grow spiritually.

Question five invited comments on how Awana Together has impacted the spiritual growth of their children. Family A stated she was “not as clear on that right now.” She referenced how it was sometimes hard to discern the impact. She hopes that the “kids are taking in things even though we are rushing through life and I am not seeing the immediate or consistent fruit.” Families B and C highlighted how Awana Together is helping their children read and know the stories of the Bible more. Family B had additional comments about how the Awana curriculum was a valuable tool that was helping their children learn to apply elements of their faith to everyday life. These insights came out of side conversations that occurred when their children were working in their handbooks, and throughout the day at random times.

Question six asked how Awana Together has impacted the spiritual climate of their homes. Family A valued the support she receives at Awana Together and how it encouraged her to lead her children. Family B mentioned daily faith conversations, the chance to grow together as they learn together, and the impact that reading the Bible and memorizing verses together is having on their relationships and the atmosphere at home. Family C shared how they have begun to allow their older children to be more actively involved in their family Bible learning. They highlighted how they used to read to their children from the Bible then lead a family prayer. Awana Together changed their routine.

Now we make sure that kids understand that chapter and we allow them to ask questions. In our culture parents ask questions but children donot [*sic*]. We now encourage our kids to ask questions and they sometimes even try to explain the Bible verses themselves.

Question seven asked these parents if the Awana Together ministry had equipped and empowered them to be spiritual mentors for their children. Family A again pointed to how much the tools, resources, and encouragement of the ministry has strengthened her to lead her children spiritually. She noted, “It has given me encouragement and hope in moments where I have been discouraged.” Family B responded offered the following observation:

While I have always known that my husband and I are ultimately responsible for leading our kids spiritually, I think I still had the idea that they will get their teaching and learning from Sunday School or from the church. I may not have admitted that before, but I think I did feel that way. We are reminded during Awana that the church comes alongside us. The church is not and should not be the main source of spiritual leadership for our kids. So, hearing it and then being encouraged that we can do it has been super helpful and encouraging!

Family C shared the personal time spent studying the Bible helped equip them for teaching their children about Jesus and completing the work in their Awana handbooks.

The last question, question eight, was included in the questionnaire to determine if families were inviting other families to consider joining Awana Together. Since outreach is such a strong component of the traditional Awana ministry and of the ministry of Plymouth Covenant Church, it remained an important goal of the Awana Together ministry. Two of the three families had not invited anyone else to join Awana Together. The single mother of Family A wrote, “Because we are chicken-running so much that we are just working to get ourselves there every week.” Family B noted a lack of friends who are not already attending a church ministry on Wednesday nights. It was the response of Family C that felt like the goal of reaching others through Awana Together had been accomplished. They wrote, “Most of our friends are Hindus. We do not want to press them to come to church on every Wednesday. But we do invite them for Jubilee and many Hindus have come and they have enjoyed.” Jubilee is a quarterly event for families in the church and community to come together and have fun doing various free activities at church. It is highly promoted through the Awana Together ministry.

The mother of Family C went on to write about what occurred when they did invite a Hindu family to come to Awana Together. In short, the invited family came with their two-year-old son and a colleague from work who was also Hindu. But it was not the invited family that continued to attend Awana Together. It was the colleague and his family. This family started to attend worship at Plymouth Covenant Church, as well as the church’s marriage ministry, until they had to return to India. On a recent trip to India, Family C was able to re-connect with this family and encourage them.



## CHAPTER SIX: EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

### **Evaluation of the Project Design and Implementation**

This research project took an intrinsic case study approach where the case was the Awana Together ministry itself. Within the case study, was a grounded theory component. Each phase of research led into the next phase of research. This case study included historical documents, feedback from actual participants in the ministry, and insight from ministry leaders. By collecting information in a variety of ways, the researcher was able to see patterns and common themes arise. The researcher intentionally included families who tried and subsequently left the Awana Together ministry, as well as the voices of those who pioneered the Awana Together concept and those who were new to the ministry. Efforts were made to collect information from diverse people such as church leaders, ministry leaders, and participants representing a variety of family dynamics.

Evaluating the project design and implementation required reviewing the four subproblems of the project and the nine steps taken to evaluate those subproblems. The research process was mostly linear. An in-depth study of several scripture passages during the biblical-theological review gave insight and presented a framework for the project. This was the first step in the research process because it produced a standard for God's design for spiritual formation in families. This standard provided a way to measure the success of family ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church, with an emphasis on Awana Together.

The next step was to consult academic and ministry experts in the fields of children's and family ministry. The researcher was looking for consensus of thought that supported or challenged the biblical-theological framework already discerned. On the academic side, it was difficult to find material that spoke directly to the research problem. As a relatively new discipline, scholars were just beginning to explore the topics of child and family theology. There was plenty of material available from ministry experts, but much of it lacked the scholarship of well-researched, academic work. Even so, the information uncovered during this second phase of the project provided strong support for the biblical-theological framework from the first phase.

In seeking to discern a pathway for empowering parents as spiritual mentors, several models for family ministry surfaced. Additionally, there were ministry programs and movements launched during a five-year window that sought to help churches embrace the renewed partnership between the church and home that had been identified as necessary for leading children to a life-long faith in Jesus. Ministries such as Mark Holmen's "Faith@Home" (2009), Reggie Joiner's "Orange" (2009), Michelle Anthony's "Tru/Big God Story" (2010), Rob Rienow's "Visionary Family Ministry" (2006), and Brian Haynes' "Legacy Milestones" (2009), were quickly influential to family ministries in the United States. Each one echoed the plan for faith formation outlined in Scripture, lending itself as a useful ministry tool for empowering parents as spiritual mentors. The study of historical program documents from Plymouth Covenant Church showed how their family ministry was impacted by these new movements.

The next phase of research involved evaluating Plymouth Covenant Church's Awana Together ministry. Each of the ministry movements mentioned above had

influence on family ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church, but church leadership noted a lack of long-term influence. Historical church documents outlined how ministry leaders sought to employ these known pathways for empowering parents, but ultimately decided in 2014 to develop its own ministry to better empower families living in a post-Christian context. The discerned need for a better pathway for empowering parents as spiritual mentors marked the beginning of the Awana Together vision, one that the church pursued over the next four years.

The last phase of research for this project focused on the Awana Together ministry as a possible pathway for living into God's plan for spiritual formation in families. It utilized surveys, focus group discussion, and individual family questionnaires to gather data that would evaluate Awana Together as a ministry tool for empowering parents. With just four years of data to consider, the results of the research provided only a preliminary look at the ministry. A definitive answer on whether it was the pathway for spiritual mentoring that Plymouth Covenant Church hoped to build could not be given in this report. That answer would have to wait for children to grow to adulthood before the effects of Awana Together and its partnership between the church and the home could be fully measured.

There was just one change made to the research design of the project during this phase. Originally, the researcher had planned to schedule personal interviews with the three families that were invited to provide more in-depth feedback on their participation in the Awana Together ministry. However, due to time and scheduling conflicts, the decision was made to turn the interview guide into a questionnaire that each family could answer in writing and return to the researcher. For the two families with intact marriages,

both spouses were invited to give their own answers to each question, instead of answering as a couple. The questionnaires came back with personal answers from the single parent, individual answers from both spouses of one family, and combined answers from the third family, for a total of four responses to the questionnaire. The researcher personally followed up with respondents, as needed, to gain clarity on the answers provided.

### *Project Design Strengths*

The proximity of the project to the researcher was a strength. The researcher serves as the Pastor to Kids and Families at Plymouth Covenant Church. Having served in this capacity since 2005, the church, its leaders, and its families were all known to the researcher, providing access to the research needed. It was easy for the researcher to study historical documents that provided the narrative of family ministry and the development of the Awana Together program at church. Many of those documents were created by the researcher while in her pastoral role for the church. Conversations with families about their involvement in the Awana Together ministry were not difficult to secure. Likewise, the focus group discussions with the CMLT were scheduled by the researcher as part of the team's regular monthly meetings. No additional meetings were required. The rapport between the researcher and church leadership and families meant that people were eager to support the research of this project.

A second strength of the project was the number and variety of people invited to participate in the research. Care was taken to seek feedback that would include critical feedback on Awana Together as well as positive feedback. It was important to hear what parents liked and disliked about the ministry, especially during its developmental years.

The voices included in the research represented ministry leaders who had longevity with the ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church and were part of the original Awana Leadership Team that developed the ministry. It also intentionally included input from people who were new to their leadership positions within children's ministry and did not possess the same bias about the Awana Together ministry as those who had been a part of it from the beginning. The leaders who participated were both paid staff and lay leaders in the church.

Likewise, the researcher invited the voices of three different families to provide a deeper discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Awana Together. Each family represented a different family structure on Wednesday nights: single-parent, married couple but only one parent present for Awana Together, and a married couple with both parents present. These three families had varied involvement in the Awana Together ministry. Two of the three families had been part of the traditional Awana program prior to Awana Together. One of the families was chosen for the cultural perspective they could provide. The diversity in this purposeful sampling brought breadth to the research.

A third strength of the project design were the surveys, focus group interview guide, and the family questionnaire. The questions asked of participants and leaders were similar in nature, seeking to discern the effectiveness of Awana Together as a ministry and as a potential solution to the research problem. Yet, each instrument was developed and tailored to those who would be responding to the questions. There were questions asked of the non-returning Awana Together families that were different than the questions asked of the CMLT members. The researcher intentionally leveraged the insight that each group of people could bring while still working to answer the main

question of the research problem. These instruments brought focus to the data collected and kept the research process streamlined.

### *Project Design Weaknesses*

One of the weaknesses of the project, listed earlier as a strength, was the proximity of the researcher to the Awana Together ministry. It was a strength in terms of access and familiarity with Awana Together families and leaders, but it was also a weakness to the project in terms of potential bias. The researcher had to work to remain as neutral as possible in the formation of surveys, focus group interview guide, and the questionnaire. It was challenging to lead the focus groups and not interject personal thought and opinion. When negative feedback regarding Awana Together was received, it was difficult just to listen and not to defend or try to fix the issue.

The sample size of the non-returning Awana Together parent survey was also a weakness. Fifty-three survey invitations were made, but only 13 surveys were completed. It would have made for stronger research if more people had been willing to participate. As it was, there were common themes that arose. But having a larger number of surveys returned would have given credibility to the findings of that survey.

Likewise, the selection of just three families for the in-depth questionnaire was limited. While the feedback received from these families was detailed and useful, having a larger sample would have provided more data to consider. Each family's experience with Awana Together was unique, influenced by the personalities of family members and their ages. Each family represented different stages in life. While the three families chosen did represent many of the registered Awana Together families, the researcher

recognized that inviting more families to respond to the questionnaire would have been helpful.

Finally, this project was limited by time. While some goals of the Awana Together ministry are measurable within a year or two, there is one piece that cannot be observed for another five to ten years: the long-term impact of the Awana Together ministry on faith formation in children. The goal of Awana Together was to empower families to grow together spiritually. The problem of this project was to identify whether Awana Together at Plymouth Covenant Church empowered parents as spiritual mentors. A definitive answer to both of those goals would have to wait until kids grow into adults and leave their home of origin.

### **Research Findings and Discussion**

The field research of this project produced four major findings. Each one was an affirmation of the decision to build a version of Awana that families could participate in together at church. Each finding pointed to the biblical-theological research for the project as well as the literature research. Like threads in a tapestry, each data stream was important to the whole. When pulled together, the full picture came into focus. It was exciting to see agreement among the different types of data.

#### *The Value of the Awana Curriculum*

The first finding was the value of the Awana curriculum. As a tool for discipleship, the Awana handbooks led children systematically through the stories of the Bible. They taught spiritual disciplines to children through verse memorization, Bible navigation, and teachings on Christian living, outreach, missions, and evangelism. What made the Awana curriculum successful in a post-Christian, family learning setting was

the fact that the handbooks did not assume parents were mature in their own faith. Any person, regardless of age, could learn and grow spiritually by working through the handbooks from preschool through high school. This finding was important given the observation that more and more parents were coming to church with little to no Bible background themselves.

The Awana curriculum encompassed all three of the scripture passages researched in the biblical-theological study of this project. The Deuteronomy 6:4-9 passage taught that personal spiritual growth was necessary if adults were going to lead children to a life-long faith in Jesus. The call to love God with “all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength” was a necessary starting point for parents, or any adult, who would mentor children spiritually. It was part of God’s design for his people from the beginning.

During the first two developmental years of Awana Together, the parent interest surveys for the Connect time reflected this ingrained need for connection with God. The number one area of interest, according to those surveys, was help with achieving intimacy with God. Parents intuitively knew they needed connection with God in order to lead their children to their own relationships with him. The Awana curriculum helped parents grow in their own faith as they worked through the handbooks with their children. Parents indicated that helping their children complete sections in the handbooks encouraged their own personal time with God as well.

The focus of Psalm 78:1-8 was the importance of the shared story of the people of God. Faith was strengthened by remembering God’s love and provision for his followers. Psalm 78 encouraged the collective recitation of God’s work in the past and present. Remembering his stories together and how they intersect with personal stories of



faith produced a shared identity that cemented faith. The Awana curriculum helped accomplish the goals of Psalm 78 with its teachings on Bible stories and the people in those stories. As parents worked with their children, these stories were shared together, becoming part of the family's collective story and affirming their identity as Christ followers. The handbooks invited children to reflect on what the Bible stories and verses meant to them in their own lives. It was an effective tool for remembering and celebrating God's faithfulness to all generations.

The commands to "go" and to "teach" in Matthew 28:18-20 had a strong presence throughout the Awana handbooks. Teaching was an obvious value. The handbooks taught truths from Scripture as well as information about Christian living and mission work. In addition to individual learning, the Awana curriculum provided tools for large group teaching experiences. In the Awana Together format, the large group teaching times took place during worship. As children were taught about the Gospel message, they were also encouraged to think how they could share the good news of Jesus with others.

While children were being taught, parents were present and learning how to teach their own children. By observing the Awana Together staff, parents were being mentored in how to lead their own children spiritually. Because many parents had not taken on the task of leading their children spiritually, the mentoring at Awana Together allowed them to see what their children were capable of learning. Many parents expressed surprise at the concepts their children were able to embrace. It was powerful to see children leading their parents in learning the lessons in the curriculum as well.

The "go" command of the Great Commission found its expression in the emphasis that Awana put on outreach. Built into the handbooks themselves, children and families

were expected to reach out to their friends and neighbors and invite them to come to church. In the first two years of Awana Together, the unsettled aspects of the ministry made it uninviting for families to bring new people with them. By the third year, though, the program had settled into a comfortable and flexible ministry which made it easier to invite friends. Families began to do just that. Of the 77 families registered for the current Awana Together ministry year, 22 families listed a church other than Plymouth Covenant Church as their home church. 19 of those 22 families indicated they registered for Awana Together because a friend invited them to join.

One more value of the Awana curriculum was the credibility it gave to the Awana Together ministry. Because of its reputation, Awana was a recognizable and desired ministry both for Plymouth Covenant Church families and for families in the surrounding community. Research indicated that many families were interested in trying the Awana Together ministry simply because they knew the traditional Awana program was a quality ministry. Name recognition was the motivating factor. Three families indicated registering for Awana Together because they looked online for an Awana program in their area. Confidence in the traditional Awana program was also referenced as a reason some families left Awana Together in search of churches that offered the traditional Awana program. Parents were looking to repeat for their children what had been a positive spiritual learning experience when they were children.

#### *The Importance of the Faith Community*

The second finding was the importance of community. Inviting families to participate in spiritual formation together at church, alongside other families, created a sense of community that was important to the spiritual mentoring process. In the early

versions of Awana Together, parents and their children both expressed desire for more peer-to-peer contact. Awana leaders sought to develop pieces of the program that would meet that desire. At the writing of this report, it is one of the ministry areas still being developed. Peer-to-peer contact for children was not as difficult to achieve as peer-to-peer contact for the adults. Parents expressed wanting to get to know other parents, yet they did not take full advantage of the opportunities provided to accomplish those connections. Even so, it remained a strong priority for them and for Awana leaders.

This need for community was a natural response to God's design for spiritual mentoring. The call to parents and the faith community in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 showed that it was God's intention that spiritual formation take place both in the home and in the gathered faith community. Awana Together intentionally combines the influence of parents and the need for the wider community in fostering faith in children. In the traditional Awana ministry, there was no direct support or collaboration between the church and the home. Children learned with parents (or on their own) at home, then they learned alongside other adults at church. But the sense of the faith community gathering together around children was missing.

It was this collaborative community that leaders at Plymouth Covenant Church felt was missing from the other family ministry models it tried to employ. The Faith@Home movement focused on equipping the home for spiritual mentoring. Ultimately, it was up to parents to know and embrace what that mentoring would look like and it was their responsibility to accomplish it. The Tru and My First Look (Orange) curricula invited parents to join in what the church was doing to teach children. The message sent was that the church was still primarily responsible.

Legacy Milestones was the ministry that came closest to creating a collaboration between the church and the home. But its focus was on reaching and celebrating certain spiritual milestones. The partnership between the church and home was strong around those milestones, but it lacked a consistent presence in between. Only some of the milestones were likely to occur during childhood. Baby dedication, new faith in Christ, and baptism were the most likely, but there was no guarantee that these milestones would be reached by a certain age. Faith development research highlighted the importance of early faith instruction during the preschool years. The milestones ministry ran the risk of missing these key years of faith development.

Awana Together provided an opportunity that other ministries did not. It provided weekly touchpoints with families who came to church to be together. Children watched their parents prioritize and participate in faith learning each week. Survey respondents indicated wanting to make faith learning as a family a priority. The historical narrative of Plymouth Covenant Church's ministry showed that parents were not successful in prioritizing and committing to spiritual mentoring in the home. Awana Together provided a mid-week accountability for parents as well as a community that was trying to keep the same faith priorities. The result was a nurturing ministry that combined the responsibility of parents to lead with the responsibility of the larger family of faith to participate in the overall spiritual mentoring of all children.

The strength of the gathered community was seen in Psalm 78 as well. Whole families would have gathered for the public recitation of God's work on behalf of his people. The Jewish feast days were perfect examples of families hearing the stories of faith alongside other families. All generations would have been gathered together. The

expectation that the faith of future generations rested on the involvement of current generations in nurturing faith was an important goal for the Awana Together ministry. In building a ministry that intentionally sought to bring children, parents, and even grandparents together in faith learning, the Awana Together Leadership team was honoring the plan laid out in Scripture.

### *The Benefit of Families Participating in Faith Together*

The third finding was the impact of families participating in faith together. In addition to working through the Awana handbooks, families enjoyed learning to worship together. They learned about important faith milestones and how to watch for and celebrate them when they came. Parents observed ministry staff teaching biblical concepts to their children both in large group and small group settings. Awana Together provided families the opportunity to put new learning into practice before leaving the building. The Bless time at the end of the night was a short but powerful time of putting into action the concepts being learned. By empowering parents to sign off on their children's work in the handbooks, they were given the privilege and responsibility of hearing and really thinking through all the faith concepts their children were learning. They did not have to rely on their child's account of what happened on a Wednesday night because they were present with their children. Families said that the opportunity to grow in faith together was of value to them.

The researcher heard from participants how encouraging it was for them to have a weekly time together. The busyness of life and juggling of other commitments presented an obstacle to faith learning at home. But the handbook work provided a reason to get into God's Word together. The Wednesday night program gave them a reason to gather

the family together. The brand promise of Plymouth Covenant Church is “Enjoying God Together” and Awana Together made it possible for families to do just that. Parents valued worshipping with their children since many families did not worship together on the weekends. Children got the message that learning about their faith was something the family experienced together. Parents were equipped and encouraged to carry spiritual mentoring into every area of their daily lives in such a way that they reported feeling empowered to lead their children spiritually.

#### *The Significance of the Daily Rhythm of Faith Formation*

The fourth finding was the significance of spiritual mentoring happening in the daily rhythms of life. Parents were taught to see God at work in the everydayness of what they do. Then they were encouraged to take advantage of those daily opportunities to point their children to Jesus. Parents who were nervous and confused about their role as spiritual leaders for their children felt encouraged as they discovered that everything they needed to lead well, God had already provided for them. The Deuteronomy 6:4-9 passage provided a blueprint for spiritual mentoring that parents felt they could embrace, even if they had little-to-no Christian foundation. The opportunities to have faith conversations presented themselves as a part of morning and evening routines, mealtimes, and times when families were traveling from one commitment to the next. The everydayness of growing in faith brought encouragement to parents who felt overwhelmed and ill-equipped.

The concept of taking advantage of the daily rhythms of life surfaced in many areas of research for this project. Nearly every faith ministry expert consulted for this project pointed readers to the Deuteronomy 6:4-9 passage of Scripture. It was also

featured in much of the scholarly research. The simplicity of God's plan for spiritual mentoring was easy to embrace. It was a shared responsibility between parents and the faith community, a welcome message for today's overwhelmed and often unqualified parents. Spiritual mentoring found its expression throughout each day, not just when families arrived at church.

Awana Together purposefully sought to teach parents this message and to mentor them to have faith conversations with their children in deliberate and spontaneous ways. One mom told the story of how her son started talking about something he had learned at Awana Together while on his way to the bus stop. During worship the week before, the speaker had challenged children to notice how God was at work during the day. At the Bless time that night, families were given time to ask this question of one another: How had they seen God at work during the day? As the mom walked with her son, he noticed something and said to her, "That's going to be my 'God at work' for tonight!" Empowering parents to intentionally include God in the daily rhythms of their family life was a significant tool for spiritual mentoring.

### **Research Project Conclusions**

The problem that this project addressed was the need for a family ministry model at Plymouth Covenant Church that fostered a partnership between the church and families that empowered parents as spiritual mentors for their children. The search for an answer to this problem had two components: 1) defining a pathway for family ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church that would empower parents as spiritual mentors and 2) evaluating the Awana Together ministry to see if it provided the pathway discerned by

church leadership. Both emphases required the rigor of the academic research contained in this project report to reach accurate conclusions.

*A Pathway for a Partnership between the Home and the Church*

The biblical-theological research presented a simple and consistent message regarding the spiritual mentoring of children. The responsibility for instilling life-long faith in future generations was bestowed upon both parents and the larger faith community. This was clearly stated in the Deuteronomy 6:4-9 passage and supported by both academic scholarship and the work of ministry experts in the field. The partnership between the home and the faith community was again emphasized in the Psalm 78:1-8 passage as all generations came together to celebrate feast days, uphold traditions of the faith, and collectively remember the powerful story of God's provision. The motivating words of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 reminded Christ-followers of the necessity of the partnership of the faith community with individual families. The commands to go, make disciples, teach, and baptize are directives for parents and for the faith community alike.

Looking at various models for family ministry that have risen to the forefront of ministry in recent years, the researcher found each one lacking a true partnership between the home and church. The historical research of Plymouth Covenant Church's attempts to use these models to minister to and with families revealed a lack of long-term commitment within families. Parents were not embracing their role as spiritual mentors for their children, despite the ministry opportunities offered to them on a weekly basis and during special seasons of ministry. Each popular ministry model had merit, yet none accomplished the task of empowering parents to be spiritual mentors. The researcher



discovered that ministry in a post-Christian context needed something more. Churches could no longer assume the parents they served knew anything about the stories of Scripture, or their role as spiritual mentors.

The pathway that was discerned by the CMLT at Plymouth Covenant Church was in keeping with the results of this research project. They were looking for a way to empower parents to be spiritual mentors for their children that would translate into life-long faith. It had to be a ministry that did more than just tell parents what to do. It needed to be a ministry that would show parents what to do, help them learn how to do it, and then encourage them along the way. Parents needed real-life spiritual mentoring tools. They needed an easy pathway that would fit into their family life. They needed support from a faith community that would walk alongside their successes and the failures. They needed accountability to keep them on track. Only a true partnership between the home and the church could accomplish these things.

#### *Awana Together as a Pathway for Spiritual Mentoring*

When the CMLT collaborated with the Awana Leadership Team, the goal was to build a new ministry that would accomplish the task of providing a pathway for empowering parents as spiritual mentors. The leaders who dreamed of and developed Awana Together were intentional about the partnership they sought to create. They deliberately leveraged their strongest ministry to make it work not just for children, but for parents, too. Although the design of the traditional Awana ministry included parents as a necessary part of the program, Awana Together sought to integrate them in such a way that they, too, would benefit. The mission statement of Awana Together clearly defined the goal: To empower families to grow together in their faith in Jesus and invite

others to do the same. Ministry leaders knew what they wanted to do and set out to use their best ministry to accomplish the task.

As each developmental year of Awana Together was evaluated and improved, a new version emerged. The feedback from families and leaders provided the information needed to revise the program each year, cutting out program pieces that did not work and finding viable new options to take their place. Each year, the program improved. By the third development year (2017-18), leaders at Plymouth Covenant Church had arrived at the Awana Together model they wanted. As predicted, it was a three-year process. The success of that third year meant there were no major changes needed for the 2018-19 year. Awana leaders could turn their attention to fine-tuning small issues, but the program itself was set.

Awana Together was designed from the beginning to equip the entire family. Instead of calling parents to the task of leading their kids spiritually, Awana Together invited them to come to church to learn what that looked like and to practice it before leaving to go home. Awana Together leaders asked parents what kind of support and tools they needed most and then set about building a program that would meet those needs. The cry for community, for Bible knowledge, for a growing personal faith in Jesus, and for tools to use with their kids at home were all answered by pieces of the Awana Together ministry. Worship, Connect and Bless times were created to encourage and equip in life-giving ways. Leaders sought to alleviate the stress of spiritual mentoring and alert parents to the truth that everything they needed to lead their kids spiritually they already had.

Parents were surprised to find that faith could happen powerfully in the gritty of life. Deep faith learning was often more informal than formal. While the formal learning times in the handbooks and at church were important, parents seemed energized to know that just calling attention to what God was doing each day would translate into flourishing faith for themselves and their children. To know that this concept of everyday faith was God's original blueprint for faith formation as described in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 was powerful for parents.

The ability to arrive at church, just as they were, and connect with other families who lived with the same challenges, successes, and failures was also important. So often it seemed that parents put undue pressure on themselves to look like they were excelling at family faith development. But many of them struggled and felt like they were alone in their perceived failures. Awana Together gave these weary parents a chance to meet other parents like them. The common stories they shared helped them feel more encouraged than defeated. True friendships grew out of these gathering times and shared experiences. It was a form of community not felt when faith formation was either owned by the church or pushed off to the home. Bringing the home and church together created a different opportunity that was empowering.

The ministry of Awana Together was not perfect. There were still aspects of the ministry that proved challenging to the Awana Leadership Team. Fostering true community among parents was not as easy as they thought. Some parents were introverted and the idea of talking to people they did not know was intimidating. Often, parents arrived at Awana Together from a long day at home or at work, having eaten something quickly on-the-go. Their capacity to fully engage during the Connect time was

low. Some of these parents chose to sit outside in the lobby instead of participating with other parents. The Awana Leadership Team continued to wrestle with how they could get parents to prioritize the opportunity to build friendships with one another instead of isolating themselves on Wednesday nights.

Awana Together appealed the most to families with younger children. As children reached the upper elementary years, it got harder to prioritize work in the Awana handbooks. Many parents allowed other commitments to slide in and squeeze out this time of formal faith learning. The result was seen in the Handbook Completion Rate chart. Upper elementary children did not have the same completion rates as younger children. This was true both in the traditional Awana program and in the new Awana Together ministry. The hope of the Awana Leadership Team is that, with time, family involvement on Wednesday nights would make it easier to keep upper elementary children on track with their Awana handbook learning.

These and other challenges continued to be discussed among Awana leaders and parents. The collective feedback that helped to build the ministry in the first place continued to be a guiding source for improving the ministry model from year to year. The feedback received from the CMLT during the focus group discussions clearly communicated that ministry leaders at Plymouth Covenant Church believed the pathway for empowering parents as spiritual mentors that was built into the Awana Together ministry was going to accomplish the ministry goals they had in mind. The research in this project supported that conclusion.

In seeking to find a pathway to empower parents as spiritual mentors for their children, Plymouth Covenant Church successfully built a ministry in Awana Together

that empowered families to grow together in their faith in Jesus while inviting others to do the same. It was a ministry model that honored God's plan for faith formation as laid out in scripture. It took popular ministry models one step further by recognizing the new starting point of post-Christian parents. Awana Together was a unique ministry that created a true partnership between the home and the church that allowed parents to grow their own faith while growing their skills as spiritual mentors. The result was parents who felt encouraged, equipped, and empowered to live into their God-given role, knowing that they had the support and partnership of the surrounding faith community.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: REFLECTION

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Throughout the process of researching this project, there were areas that surfaced that invited further study. Because Awana Together was built specifically for the families of Plymouth Covenant Church, it reflected the context and setting of that church. By necessity, the scope of the project was focused in that direction only. As a new ministry, there were open ended questions about the effectiveness of Awana Together in achieving the long-term goal of empowering parents as spiritual mentors. The time constraints limited the conclusions that could be made. With these challenges in mind, the researcher would recommend three areas for future study.

#### *Alternate Ministry Settings*

The first area would involve exploring whether Awana Together could be an effective ministry in alternate settings. Plymouth Covenant Church is in an affluent suburb of a major metropolitan area. Within five miles of the church, there are large immigrant communities that bring diversity to the church body both ethnically and economically. Even with this diversity, the current dominant demographic of the church is educated, middle-to-upper class, Caucasian families. In this setting, parents are mostly available to invest in the lives of their children and it is easier for both parents to participate in Awana Together.

It would be interesting to see if the Awana Together model would fit in an urban context or a rural one. In these settings, the opportunity for two parents to be involved could be challenged by both parents working or by a larger number of single-parent households. Extended family relationships could come into play in homes where grandparents are involved in raising children. In lower economic settings, the cost of the Awana materials might be prohibitive for both the church and families. Further studies around the Awana Together model in other ministry contexts would help define if Awana Together could succeed in empowering parents as spiritual mentors regardless of demographics.

#### *Awana Together for Special Needs Families*

The second area of study could be in the area of ministry to families with special needs children. While there were special needs families at Plymouth Covenant, none of them were currently participating in the Awana Together ministry. Exploring what it would look like for special needs families to participate could uncover both strengths and weaknesses of the ministry. That families participate together could be a strength for some families because they know the needs of their children the best. They would know how to motivate and encourage their children in ways that other leaders might not.

At the same time, many parents of special needs children often need respite from the high demands of caring for their children. Awana Together would not provide that. Leaders would have to decide if any accommodations to the curriculum could or should be made to help special needs children complete handbooks and enjoy the accomplishments that their peers do. The goal of creating community for special needs families could be challenged if there were not many other special needs families

participating in the ministry. Taking time to evaluate how Awana Together could include and serve families with special needs children would be beneficial.

### *Long-term Impact of Awana Together*

The third area of study is related to the long-term outcomes of the Awana Together ministry. Awana Together seeks to help parents lead their children to a life-long faith in Jesus. Since the ministry is only four years old, a follow-up study could be done in seven to ten years to measure whether participation in Awana Together really led to a mature faith in children and their parents. Evaluating the effectiveness of the Awana curriculum would be important. It would also be insightful to measure how much being a part of Awana Together changed the way that parents spiritually mentor their children. The main goal of the ministry focused on families growing together in their faith in Jesus and inviting others to do the same. A follow-up study could show if this happened.

### **Personal Reflections on the Awana Together Project**

The writing of this project report marks an ending and a beginning. It brings to completion a journey that God set in motion over six years ago. It has been a journey that challenged and shaped family ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church. The first God-given yearning to do more to help families grow in their faith was the starting point for a process that could only have happened because God was directing it. At each moment when crucial decisions needed to be made, there was nothing but support for the vision of Awana Together. God called the leaders at Plymouth Covenant Church to discover and create a ministry that could make spiritual mentoring something parents could embrace. There were times when the process was both daunting and humbling.



The research for this project provided the opportunity to really find God's heart for faith formation. The deep study of key biblical passages provided a solid foundation and the encouragement needed to risk a thriving traditional Awana program in order to build a new family-focused Awana program. The literature review invited voices that spoke strongly to the importance of some of the initiatives that Awana Together worked to put in place. With thorough research supporting the Awana Together concept, leaders felt sure that what they sought to do was what God was leading them to do. That made it easier to boldly invite families to embrace a form of ministry that was foreign to them.

The personal responses received from families through the surveys, focus group discussions and the questionnaire were affirming and encouraging. These were opportunities to begin to measure if Awana Together was meeting its goal of empowering families to grow together in their faith in Jesus while inviting others to do the same. The feedback showed that, despite the challenges of early programming missteps, families were embracing the new ministry and were, in fact, inviting their friends to consider participating as well. This was deeply encouraging to the researcher whose leadership at Plymouth Covenant Church defined the path taken with the new Awana Together ministry, from concept form to its current model.

Throughout the entire doctoral learning process, seemingly unrelated experiences began to coalesce and make sense. It was humbling to realize that God was accomplishing something significant through a handful of people. It took will power to consistently listen for God's voice above any others. There were moments of discouragement and frustration around the research process that was outside the researcher's previous academic experience. At times, the project seemed less significant

than it was. Doubts crept in, twisting the process into something that felt irrelevant. It did not seem possible that anyone else could be interested in the research project or the Awana Together ministry. It took discipline to press onward and choose to believe that the research project itself was an act of worship that God would use in ways that could not be imagined.

That is where the completion of this project really marks a beginning. While the work has come to an end, the ministry of Awana Together is just taking off. The obedience of the leaders of Plymouth Covenant Church led them to create a ministry that will have kingdom impact. Parents are finding that they can live into their responsibility as spiritual mentors for their children. Children are flourishing in a ministry space where their parents learn alongside them. Families are creating friendships with other like-minded families. Faith is deepening as they seek God together in the everyday aspects of life. Instead of an ending, this project report celebrates a beginning. The journey continues. Parents will be empowered as their families engage in Awana, together.

APPENDIX A

## APPENDIX A

### **Awana ReThink 2015**

#### *Reasons We Love Awana*

- Gets kids into scripture more
- Brings Bible learning to the home
- Tool for parents in leading their kids spiritually (doesn't assume prior Bible knowledge)
- Kids get to worship at their level
- Creates community for kids and volunteers
- Provides mentor relationships between team leaders and kids
- It's fun
- Teaches spiritual disciplines (Bible study, journaling, prayer, worship)
- Outreach to friends/family/classmates is encouraged and rewarded

#### *What is missing from Awana?*

- Community outreach/interaction
- Enough volunteers
- Family involvement (want to get rid of "drop off" mentality)
- Written and shared expectations for: kids, families, volunteers and fulfillment of PCC goals

#### *Vision for Awana Together*

To empower families to grow their relationship with Jesus together and invite others to do the same.

## Ministry Proposal

Offer only Family Awana from 6:30-8pm on Wednesday nights.

*How does this empower families?*

- Creates space for Bible learning together
- Provides atmosphere where resources can be shared among families
- Builds community
- Parents become the primary teachers
- Families spend intentional time together each week
- Parent Connect will encourage and equip parents as spiritual leaders

*How does it help families grow in faith in Jesus together?*

- Worship
- Bible study
- Intentional time as families
- Serving together
- It's fun

*How does it encourage families to invite others into the faith journey?*

- Help families expand the meaning of what “family” is by encouraging extended families to welcome others into their family (whole families, friends, neighbors, etc.)
- Families can serve as mentors to new families/kids

*To pursue this idea, we are prepared to:*

- Think outside the box
- Be content with lower enrollment
- Bless families who choose to leave
- Look for ways to collaborate across ministries (youth, worship, A-team, Marriage Matters)
- Put a lot of time and energy into communication
- Cover this ministry in prayer in intentional ways

APPENDIX B

## APPENDIX B

**Parent Connect Survey 2015**

Please rank the following topics according to how important they are to you in this season of life. Your answers will be used to schedule topics for our Parent Connect times on Wednesday nights. 1=Low Interest and 5=High Interest

1. Helping your kids get along	1	2	3	4	5
2. Praying as a family	1	2	3	4	5
3. Praying with your spouse	1	2	3	4	5
4. Taming the family schedule	1	2	3	4	5
5. Creating and keeping family traditions	1	2	3	4	5
6. Discipline that connects with kids	1	2	3	4	5
7. Intimacy with your spouse	1	2	3	4	5
8. Intimacy with God	1	2	3	4	5
9. Sex with your spouse	1	2	3	4	5
10. Boundaries around technology	1	2	3	4	5
11. Internet safety	1	2	3	4	5
12. Family devotions	1	2	3	4	5
13. Ages and stages of faith development	1	2	3	4	5
14. Spiritual gifts and how to use them	1	2	3	4	5
15. Communion for kids	1	2	3	4	5
16. Baptism for adults and kids	1	2	3	4	5
17. LGBTQ questions or concerns	1	2	3	4	5
18. Talking to your kids about sex/dating	1	2	3	4	5
19. Mean kids/Bullying	1	2	3	4	5
20. Leading your kids to faith in Jesus	1	2	3	4	5
21. Helping your kids choose good friends	1	2	3	4	5
22. Establishing family rules/boundaries	1	2	3	4	5
23. Having fun as a family	1	2	3	4	5
24. Learning styles/Personality profiles for kids and adults	1	2	3	4	5
25. Age appropriate chores	1	2	3	4	5
26. Reading the Bible together	1	2	3	4	5

27. Choosing a school (home school, charter, immersion, public)	1	2	3	4	5
28. Helping your kids with homework	1	2	3	4	5
29. _____	1	2	3	4	5
30. _____	1	2	3	4	5

### Parent Connect 2015 Survey Results

Rank	Topic
1	<b>Intimacy with God</b>
2	<b>Discipline that connects with kids</b>
3	<b>Praying as a family</b>
4	<b>Praying with your spouse</b>
5	<b>Helping your kids choose good friends</b>
6	Family devotions
7	Intimacy with your spouse
7	Reading the Bible together
8	Boundaries around technology
8	Having fun as a family
9	Ages and stages of faith development
9	Establishing family rules/boundaries
10	Helping your kids get along
11	Leading your kids to faith in Jesus
11	Age appropriate chores
12	Internet safety
13	Sex with your spouse
13	Learning styles/Personality profiles for kids and adults
14	Spiritual gifts and how to use them
15	Creating and keeping family traditions
16	Taming the family schedule
17	Talking to your kids about sex/dating
18	Mean kids/Bullying
19	Helping your kids with homework
20	Communion for kids
20	Choosing a school (home school, charter, immersion, public)
21	LGBTQ questions or concerns
22	Baptism for adults and kids

#### Write-In Topics

	Practical ways to help kids deal with fear/anxiety
	Kids and money
	Talking with kids about hell/devil. How? When?
	Older child's attitude/behavior influences younger siblings (good and bad)
	Setting family priorities



APPENDIX C

## APPENDIX C

**Awana Together Goals Survey**

**AWANA TOGETHER  
GOALS**

**1. WHY DID YOU CHOOSE AWANA TOGETHER?**

It's a ministry for families.

I value the Awana curriculum.

A friend invited me.

Other:

**2. HOW OLD ARE YOUR KIDS?**

Nursery (birth-1yr)

Puggles (2 yrs)

Cubbies (3-5 yrs)

Sparks (K-2nd)

T&T (3rd-5th)

**3. WHAT GOALS DO YOU HAVE FOR YOURSELF?**

Learn more Bible basics.

Feel empowered as a parent.

Deepen my relationship with Jesus.

Other:

**4. WHAT GOALS DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUR FAMILY?**

Make Jesus a priority in our home.

Grow together in our faith.

Memorize God's Word together.

Other:

**Awana Together Survey Disclosure**

Your participation in this survey is completely optional. Your responses, should you choose to provide any, will be used in two ways:

1. To help the Awana Together and Children's Ministry Leadership teams of Plymouth Covenant Church to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of the Awana Together program in meeting the needs of kids and families in their spiritual growth.
2. To be included in the research component of the dissertation that Pastor Sara Sosa is completing for her DMin at Bethel Seminary.

Results of the completed survey responses will be made available to registered Awana Together parents through the Awana Together Parent Newsletter that will be emailed in November 2018. No names will be used in the dissertation report and survey responses will remain confidential.

If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this survey, please contact Pastor Sara at [sara@plymouthcovenant.org](mailto:sara@plymouthcovenant.org).

Your initials at the bottom of this page will signify that you have read the above information and are willing to have your responses included in Pastor Sara's dissertation research. The absence of initials will remove these responses from those included in the dissertation research.

**Your Initials Here:** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D

## APPENDIX D

### **Interview Guide**

November 6, 2018  
Children's Ministry Leadership Team

#### *Mission Statement for Awana Together*

Empowering families to grow together in their relationship with Jesus and invite others to do the same.

#### *Awana Together Schedule*

6-6:15pm Arrive and Check-in  
6:15-6:45 Family Worship  
6:45-7:30 Connect (programming for adults, elementary and preschool)  
7:30-7:40 Bless

#### *Handbook Time Options*

Handbook at Home (anytime during the week)  
Handbook at Church (from 5:45-6:15 or 7:45-8:15)

#### *Ministry Evaluation*

1. Which of the original ministry goals of Awana Together still apply in the current version of the ministry?
2. Which of the original ministry goals of Awana Together do not apply any longer?
3. Are there any new ministry goals that should be added? If so, what are they?
4. What would you say is the most important aspect of Awana Together?

#### *Ministry Application*

1. How has Awana Together empowered parents to be spiritual mentors?
2. How has Awana Together empowered families to grow together in their faith?
3. How has Awana Together empowered families to invite others to grow in their faith?

APPENDIX E

## APPENDIX E

**Awana Together Participant Questionnaire***November 2018*

**Notice of Participation:** Thank you for being willing to take part in the Awana Together project for Sara Sosa's dissertation study at Bethel Seminary. Your answers to the following questions will be used in two ways: to evaluate the Awana Together ministry at Plymouth Covenant Church and to contribute to the research of the dissertation. Your answers and identity will remain confidential. Your demographic information may be included in the dissertation report. If at any point you would like to withdraw your participation in the study, you can do so by contacting Sara Sosa at [sara@plymouthcovenant.org](mailto:sara@plymouthcovenant.org). If you choose to withdraw from the study, it will not have an adverse effect on your participation in Awana Together or any other ministries at Plymouth Covenant Church. Filling out your answers to the following questions and returning them to Sara Sosa signals your consent to the information contained in this notice and your willingness to have your responses included in this study. Questions can be directed to Sara Sosa at [sara@plymouthcovenant.org](mailto:sara@plymouthcovenant.org). If you would like to receive a copy of the completed study, simply request one using the same email address.

**Demographic Information:**

Name:

Spouse:

If married, how long have you been married?

Your Ethnicity:

Names and current ages of kids:

How old were your kids when you started attending Awana Together?

**Ministry Evaluation:**

1. Of the program elements of the Awana Together ministry, which have been the most helpful to you and your family and why?
2. Of the program elements of the Awana Together ministry, which have been the least helpful to you and your family and why?
3. If you could change/add a program element of/to the Awana Together ministry, what would it be and why?

**Ministry Application:**

1. How has your participation in the Awana Together ministry impacted your personal spiritual growth?
2. How has your participation in the Awana Together ministry impacted the spiritual growth of your children?

3. Has your participation in the Awana Together ministry changed the spiritual climate of your home? If yes, in what ways?
4. How has your participating in the Awana Together ministry equipped and empowered you as a spiritual mentor for your children?
5. Have you invited other families to join Awana Together? Why or why not?

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