

BUILDING YOUR COMMUNITY TIES WITH A BLOCK PARTY

Some neighborhoods feel more secure once neighbors have become acquainted. Church leaders wanting to get to know their community could organize a block party. It can be a great way to meet the neighbors and develop friendships.

A key goal of a block party, besides having fun, should be to build relationships among the strangers in our midst. The first steps when planning a block party are developing a simple theme (such as a color or a holiday) or highlighting a community issue that needs to be addressed (such as saving the community garden). Here are seven steps for organizing a block party.¹

Step 1: Have a Clear Goal

Most block parties have a general purpose: to enjoy music, food, conversation, games, or dance in order to get to know others in the neighborhood. For those who have never done this before, this general purpose might be enough.

With a little imagination, the focus could become more specific. For example, your church community could choose to focus on being welcoming to families with children; celebrate the diverse makeup of the neighborhood by highlighting ethnic foods; or engage a particular issue in the community such as schools, policing, parking, or community pride.

Step 2: Do a Little Research

Get in touch with the neighbors. Even before setting a time and date, talk one-on-one with people about a theme, or find someone who seems to know everyone in the neighborhood and ask for help with networking. Even if the party idea started with church leadership, gather a group to help with organizing the event itself by addressing basic questions about planning, such as where, when, and for how long it will last. Better yet, ask for input from neighbors before selecting a theme or addressing a community issue.

Step 3: Invite the Neighbors

In some neighborhoods, it may be possible to go door-to-door passing out flyers with the time, date, and location of the event. If not, consider using email, social media, neighborhood newsletters, or posters to get the word out.

Have a media team ready to take photos or videos to communicate that this is not just a block party but a means of bettering the community, such as saving the community garden or improving pedestrian safety.

If the block party has a specific community issue as its focus, consider using the visual arts—a banner, or perhaps musicians, dancers, or street performers—to communicate your ideas. Benjamin Shepard, a social worker and professor of human services at City University of New York, writes, “A well-selected banner or perhaps grass or chairs can transform a street corner into a living room or even a community garden. . . . Connect the visuals with



the message of the party. Art is part of getting the ideas out there.”² Consider drafting a press release that would go to blogs, social media, and other media outlets to explain how the party connects to the campaign you are organizing.

Step 4: Offer Food

Food is central to a block party’s success. If you want to increase participation and reduce the cost, a pot-luck meal may be the best way to go. As an alternative, organizers could hold a barbecue, buying supplies and asking people to reimburse them for it, or have everyone bring their own meat or veggies to grill. If it’s a picnic, everyone would bring their own meal.

Though it’s a lot of work, people could be asked to indicate on a sign-up sheet what type of dish they are bringing. Then a week or so before the block party, have the volunteer or employee in charge of food contact everyone to remind them to bring the dishes they signed up for. Some churches prefer to offer a free meal as a way of giving back to the community. In this case, it is important that no strings be attached. There must be only one message: “We care about our neighbors, and here is how we want to show it.”

Local farms or restaurants could be asked to get into the act as well. From the business side, food donations can serve as advertising, but they can also reinforce the community aspect of the event by highlighting a locally distinctive agricultural product or celebrating the neighborhood’s unique ethnic mix.

Step 5: Add Music and Games to the Mix

Besides food, music and games are key ingredients to a successful party. If located in a park and children are a focus, consider summer picnic games like bean-bag tosses, relay races, sack games, and wheelbarrow games. If located on a street, then bicycle-decorating contests and scavenger hunts might be more appropriate. Add music, both live and recorded, to the mix, and be sure to provide a sturdy sound system. If young children are living near the party area, then plan to finish by 9:00 p.m.

Step 6: Obey the Law

Many municipalities require a permit if your block party will close down a street, redirect traffic, or if it

will be located in a public park. If a public site is used, it will need to be cleaned up afterward. The best bet would be to check the city’s website for information on requirements. If you plan to have music, pay attention to noise ordinances.

Step 7: Don’t Be Afraid to Improvise

Even for relatively small-scale events, block parties require a lot of planning. It’s important to prepare for the worst case. For example, what happens in case of a medical emergency? Do you have a backup location in case it rains? If you run out of food, do you have a backup plan or an announcement ready? Conversely, if you have too much food, do you have a plan to responsibly get rid of it (to-go containers for people to use or a plan to donate to a local shelter)? Don’t be afraid to improvise, and remember to have fun!

A Little Fun Along the Way

Finally, the day arrives, and the party begins. Whether the purpose is to get to know the neighbors or mobilize around a community issue, a block party can be an effective way to draw people out from behind locked doors, walls, and hedges. What better excuse than an outdoor event to roam from driveway to yard to sidewalk to street, rubbing shoulders with people we recognize but have never met?

In order to know the community, both church leaders and members need to be a part of the planning and the event. They need to engage with the strangers in the crowd and get to know them. This knowledge can help inform the congregation’s purpose in the neighborhood. A block party can break down the isolation a bit, offering a little fun along the way.

1. Adapted from Benjamin Shepard, *Community Projects as Social Activism* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015), 20–23.

2. *Ibid.*, 21–22.