

SHORT ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ALPHA

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INTRODUCTION TO THE ALPHA PROCESS:

During the 2018-19 school year (one year from now), all parishes will begin offering the Alpha small faith-sharing process. In order to offer Alpha effectively to parishioners in the future, parish and school leaders will be attending the Discipleship Seminars this Fall so that they understand how Alpha relates to the overall discipleship process.

Parish staff, school staff and key parish leaders, following the Discipleship Formation Seminars, will go through the Alpha process; similar to how the priests went through Alpha.

It is important to remember that the goal is not to add another “program” to parish life but to shift our focus from programs to people and to a discipleship-oriented process. Alpha happens to be a key part of that process. In fact, Alpha is one way that people can discover Jesus so that they can enter more fully into the journey of following, worshipping and sharing Jesus.

It is also important to remember that the parish staff, school staff and key parish leaders who need to attend Alpha the most are likely to be the ones who will resist going through this process. With that said, please pray that for diocesan, parish and school leadership that they enter into the journey of discipleship with an open heart, open mind and willing spirit.

PART ONE: THE ALPHA ROLL OUT

1. What is Alpha?

Alpha is a series of sessions exploring the Christian faith; typically run over eleven weeks. Each talk looks at a different question about faith and is designed to create conversation. Alpha in a Catholic context is a version adapted for Catholics with a few modifications to the content, especially with session eleven focused on the Church. With this, Alpha is designed to be an easy onramp for people to encounter Jesus Christ and develop relationships within the parish community.

2. In short, what is the Alpha roll out plan for the Diocese of Green Bay?

- 2016-17: Alpha was introduced to priests and pastoral leaders as well as curia employees.
- 2017-18: Alpha is introduced to deacons, parish leaders, DRE's, key parish volunteer leaders, and principals of Catholic schools (for more details, see questions 3-5).
- 2018-19: Alpha is introduced to all catechists, teachers and engaged parishioners
- 2018-19: Alpha is introduced to all parishioners.
- 2019-20: Alpha is introduced to neighborhoods within parish boundaries.

3. When are the Alpha trainings going to be offered?

November of 2017 to January of 2018.

4. Where are the Alpha trainings going to be offered?

The majority of Alpha trainings will be held at Melania Hall at the Diocese of Green Bay main campus. However, there will be some Alpha trainings at designated parishes.



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5. When will the complete Alpha training schedule be published?

Sometime in the beginning of October, 2017.

6. Who is eligible to attend the Alpha trainings?

Deacons, parish leaders, DRE's, key volunteers, and principals of Catholic schools.

7. Is attendance required of all deacons, parish leaders, DRE's, key volunteers, and principals of Catholic schools for the Alpha trainings?

No. Only Alpha small group leaders who have been chosen by the pastoral leadership should attend the Alpha trainings.

8. How many people normally make up a small Alpha group?

Anywhere from 6-10 people.

9. From each parish, how many Alpha small group leaders should be represented at the Alpha trainings?

The number of designated small group leaders is dependent upon the size of the parish and in particular, the number of staff and key volunteers that will be attending the Alpha course at the local parish. Keep in mind that Alpha small groups should be limited to 6-10 people. For instance, if there are a total of 10 staff and volunteers, the parish may decide to form one or two Alpha small groups. With this, the parish should choose one or two Alpha small group leaders to attend the Alpha trainings. However, if the number is close to 20 staff and volunteers, then the parish may decide to form up to 2-3 Alpha small groups; thus sending 2-3 Alpha small group leaders to the Alpha trainings.

10. When can parish leadership (e.g. personnel mentioned in question number five) begin the Alpha course?

Any time after the designated Alpha small group leaders (from that particular parish) have been trained in Alpha.

11. What kind of credentials does an Alpha small group leader need to have?

Alpha small group leaders should be disciples of Jesus Christ and active members of a parish who are good at facilitating discussion. Here, the responsibility is not to teach or do all of the talking. Rather, it is to elicit and guide the discussion process. Again, lecturing or answering the questions participants may have is not the goal of Alpha small group leaders. The objective is to create a safe space for people to share their views in response to the Alpha discussion questions.

12. How does Alpha fit into the discipleship process?

Alpha is an easy and effective introduction to the discipleship process. It equips parishes to exercise hospitality (or pre-evangelization), evangelization and accompaniment to undisciplined churchgoers, newcomers and seekers. As for the Diocese of Green Bay, the four step discipleship process is a simple four-step process: 1. Discover Christ. 2. Follow Christ. 3. Worship Christ. 4. Share Christ. What the Alpha course does is to help equip parishes to fulfill the first step of this discipleship process; namely, to provide an opportunity for people to discover Christ. Indeed, Alpha, if used strategically, can personalize the process of joining the parish by introducing people to Jesus Christ and to a social network of disciples within parish community.

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13. How do the Alpha trainings (from November- 2017 to January- 2018) differ from the Regional Discipleship Seminars and the Discipleship Formation Seminar on October 24th?

Again, the Alpha course is designed to equip pastoral and parish leaders to implement the first phases of the discipleship process. While the discipleship formation seminars instructs and trains leaders on the full scope of the discipleship process, the Alpha trainings instruct and train leaders to effectively implement the Alpha course for the first stage of discipleship; which is to help people to discover Christ.

14. How long does each session last?

Two and a half hours gives the parish the extra cushion it needs to make whatever adjustments are necessary. The first two parts of the Alpha session, the meal and video, are 30 minutes each. Time allowance for the discussion should be about 45 minutes.

15. What are the titles for each of the sessions?

- Session 1 - Is There More to Life Than This?
- Session 2 - Who is Jesus?
- Session 3 - Why Did Jesus Die?
- Session 4 - How Can I Have Faith?
- Session 5 - Why and How Do I Pray?
- Session 6 - Why and How Should I Read the Bible?
- Session 7 - How Does God Guide Us?
- Weekend/Day Away Sessions:
 - Session W1 Who is the Holy Spirit?
 - Session W2 What Does the Holy Spirit Do?
 - Session W3 How Can I Be Filled with the Holy Spirit?
 - Session W4 How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?
- Session 8 - How Can I Resist Evil?
- Session 9 - Why and How Should I Tell Others?
- Session 10 - Does God Heal Today?
- Session 11 - What about the Church?

16. Why does the 3-part Alpha session work?

First Part: Meals - First, by providing a free meal and by taking an interest in our guests, the parish using Alpha is practicing what the Church calls "pre-evangelization." This is simply fulfilling basic human needs such as security, love and acceptance. Pre-evangelization, by its nature, predisposes the heart to be more open to the Word of God. And this is where the Alpha videos come in.

Second Part: Videos - The second part of the Alpha session involves a 25-30 minute video where the Gospel is explicitly proclaimed (e.g. "Jesus loves you." "He died for you." "And he has been resurrected for you."). Yet, this is carried out within the context of everyday life and common human experiences. For instance, the commentators in the Alpha videos share their past struggles as Christians such as: boredom with Christian ritual, skepticism with biblical teaching and questions as to why God allows suffering. Indeed, it has been my observation that people need a lot of time in this part of the discipleship process.

Third Part: Discussion - Finally, the Alpha participants are invited to share their opinions on what they had just watched. This latter part of the Alpha session can be unpredictable and a little messy precisely because building relationships are unpredictable and a little messy. Here, it is important that participants

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feel free to express their views without being corrected, judged or censored. Our guests need to experience the unconditional love of Christ and his disciples before they open themselves up to a transformative conversion.

Later on, this conversion, with proper guidance, moves them to a change of beliefs and behaviors. But in this initial stage of the discipleship process, it is important that we earn the right to be heard. By first demonstrating fraternal love, faith in God and repentance from sin becomes a possibility later on for seekers.

17. What does the day or weekend away look like?

There is no rigid formula for the Alpha day or weekend away. The agenda can be structured in any number of ways. Parishes can do it by themselves or they can team up with neighboring parishes. The location can be off of church property or it can be hosted at the parish itself. With that said, the Alpha day or weekend away should include the main Alpha ingredients that participants have come to experience: hospitality, proclamation and discussion. However, if desired, some or all of the videos can be replaced by a live speaker. What is more, this is a time when an opportunity is presented to participants to experience the Holy Spirit through a shared prayer activity. Here, Alpha participants partner-up and pray with each other. Quite often, this is a transformative turning point for many people who were once resistant to Alpha.

18. What is shared prayer?

Shared prayer is an informal prayer- often spontaneous- whereby one person prays with another. A document has been created to accompany the process by the Department of New Evangelization call "Share Prayer". It can be found by visiting <http://www.gbdioc.org/images/docs/SharePrayer.pdf>

19. Is Alpha Catholic enough?

Alpha has received many endorsements from many Catholic leaders; including Father Raniero Cantalamessa, Preacher to the Papal Household and members of the Catholic hierarchy of the Church including the USCCB. But in short, Alpha is the milk of the Gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Hebrews 5:13-14). That is, it offers us a platform to exercise of those beginning stages of the discipleship process that the Catholic Church enjoins us to employ, namely: Christian witness, dialogue and presence in charity, the proclamation of the Gospel and the call to conversion.

What Alpha is not meant to do is provide what the New Testament refers to as the "solid food" (Hebrews 5:12-14 | 1 Corinthians 3:1-2) of the Gospel; which includes (but is not limited to): moral theology, apologetics, the theology of the body, the catechumenate and Christian Initiation. Alpha can be used for these latter stages of discipleship as a complementary piece but, by itself, it is not designed to address heavy theological content.

20. What was the feedback from the Alpha pilot parishes?

Overwhelming positive! With proper training, parish leaders at the Alpha pilot parishes were equipped to properly roll out the Alpha course with promising results. However, because there is work involved- work that not all parish leaders may be used to –a thoughtful planned out strategy is needed. For instance, at the conclusion of the Alpha course many people ask, "What's next?" In other words, "How can I continue to grow in my faith?" To have a follow-up plan of action, even if it is of an experimental nature, is important for the accompaniment process of Alpha participants.

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21. What are Alpha pilot parishes doing as a follow-up to Alpha and what does the Diocese of Green Bay recommend for the Follow Christ stage of the discipleship process?

Good question! Alpha pilot parishes in the Diocese of Green Bay are currently experimenting with different options. Until more promising results or best practices rise to the surface, the Diocese of Green Bay is not yet in a position to endorse a plan of action. It is important to note that God reveals his will for the parish—not only during the planning process—but also in the “doing process.” In other words, it is not unusual that answers to these kind of questions become self-evident as we take baby steps in faith. Such steps are sometimes necessary to discern God’s will and to discover fruitful discipleship methods.

With that said, as a follow up to the Alpha course, some Alpha pilot parishes have experimented with hosting small group reunions while other parishes have invited Alpha participants to be Alpha helpers with the subsequent Alpha offerings. Another option is to move Alpha participants to a discipleship group. What does a discipleship group look like? Alpha in a Catholic Context has a page of suggestions for possible follow-up options on their website: <https://alpha.org/catholic-context/after-alpha/>

Moreover, two parish leaders that are resourceful to this end are Shannon Ausloos, Director of Evangelization & Discipleship at Blessed Sacrament Parish in Oshkosh. Her contact information is: (920) 231-9782 | mbssausloos@gmail.com and Anita Revord, Adult Faith Formation Coordinator at St. Thomas Parish in Appleton. Her contact information is: 739-8172 | anita@stmccath.org.

22. Does it help to collaborate with other parishes?

It certainly does. Parishes of the Fox Valley area have collaborated with each other for a number of things; especially in regards to the Alpha weekend away. Moreover, these parishes meet on a regular basis to discuss what is working and what is not working with both the Alpha and discipleship process.

23. What would you recommend as effective methods for promoting Alpha?

A multi-layered approach is always best. People need to hear a message several times before it registers in their minds. Relying only on the parish bulletin is a mistake that some Alpha-based parishes in the Mid-West have learned from. In fact, one Alpha-based parish I visited in Michigan used the following methods to better promote their Alpha course. Keep in mind that not all parishes can employ all of these promotional methods at once. But most parishes can use at least some of these promotional methods:

- Greeters were assigned to hand out Alpha flyers (with date, time and location of the upcoming Alpha session) as parishioners were coming into the church building.
- Then, these parishioners were greeted by a big Alpha banner in the narthex.
- A welcoming counter was also set up to answer any questions about Alpha and other parish discipleship programs.
- A PowerPoint image of the information regarding the upcoming Alpha event was projected on a screen (or wall) prior in the main worship area before Mass (this image was then turned off when Mass commenced).
- An announcement was made at the beginning (or end) of Mass about the Alpha event.
- The parish websites and a social media presence (such as a Facebook page) is highly recommended to feature the information needed to attend the Alpha events as well as additional Alpha resources that may be required.

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24. How do we pay for the “free” meals offered at each Alpha session?

A free will offering can be made available at each Alpha session. Some parishes in the Mid-West have sponsors for Alpha; thus covering the food and material costs to run the Alpha course. With that said, it is important that the food and meal experience is good enough to inspire participants to share the “good news” about this free meal to friends and family members.

25. What tips do you have to generate participation from the congregation?

Use as many as the above mentioned promotional methods as possible. Additional considerations include rolling out the Alpha process in a methodical fashion. For instance, have the parish staff and/or parish leadership team experience Alpha first; then, if the parish leadership sees fit, offer the Alpha course to parishioners and, if possible, sacramental candidates (e.g. also parents of children who attend faith formation). Ultimately, after the parish has been introduced to Alpha the parish will be in a better position to offer the Alpha course to non-churchgoers when it is time to do so.

26. What does success look like and how long does it take to see promising results?

It varies from parish to parish. It takes at least 2-3 years for the Alpha process to bear favorable results. Why is that? Well, for one, the culture of the parish needs to embrace values that are consistent with the spirit of missionary-discipleship. That takes time. Also, the success of any discipleship process at the local process rests, in large part, on the integrity of the parish leadership team. Parish staff has to fully embrace the vision of the discipleship process even though they may disagree- from time to time –on particulars.

The important thing is that the parish leadership team not be intimidated by a lack of immediate success or obstacles that may present themselves in the initial phases of rolling out the Alpha process at the parish. If we are not “failing” at least some of the time, we are not trying hard enough! If truth be told, the Alpha-based parishes that are now experiencing growth have relied heavily on the Holy Spirit through “behind the scenes intercessory prayer.” Furthermore, knowing that God can use even their mistakes for a great purpose, these parish leaders have given themselves permission to fail and to make mistakes so as to not be paralyzed by undue fear. By taking this stand, they were empowered to take risks and try new things. If something did not work, they simply went back to the drawing board with the intention of trying something else in its place.

27. How do I convince team members who may be resistant to Alpha to at least give it a try?

Pray and humbly ask the Lord to inspire open dialogue about how Alpha can be a good tool in implementing pre-evangelization and evangelization methods. Certainly a case can be made in many of parishes that much of what worked before is no longer working. With that said, be charitable in your efforts to propose Alpha to your leaders and colleagues; but be persistent. Don’t give up easily.

Sometimes explanations fall short in persuading pastoral or parish leaders to try new things. Refer skeptics or critics to living, breathing models of those Alpha-based parishes that are flourishing. Indeed, a living model of success and growth is difficult to deny; especially when decline is being felt at the parish you are working at. Encourage your parish team members to contact other parishes or the Department of New Evangelization to share ideas and to help with the process.

28. Do any of the Alpha sessions need to be supplemented with Catholic material?

Yes. The eleventh session, What About the Church, does need material on how the Catholic Church fits into the discipleship process. For more information please contact Joe Tremblay, at (920) 272-8276 or jtremblay@gbdioc.org. Another key resource for assistance in this regard is the Alpha in a Catholic Context website at <https://alpha.org/catholic-context/home>