



AFTER THE ELEVENTH SESSION

From Discovering to Following Jesus

Post-Alpha Principles and Foundations (2)

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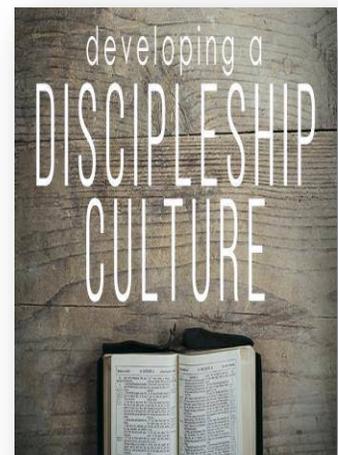
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BUILDING BRIDGES RECAP:

In the first *Post-Alpha Principles and Foundations* article titled, “From Big Leaps to Building Bridges”, I proposed three recommendations to parish leaders as they begin thinking about how to direct Alpha participants after the Alpha course has concluded:

First, the time interval between the eleventh session and the next discipleship opportunity should be relatively short. Second, whatever discipleship opportunity is offered, the program or activity of choice should be adapted to the discipleship-readiness (or lack thereof) of each Alpha participant.

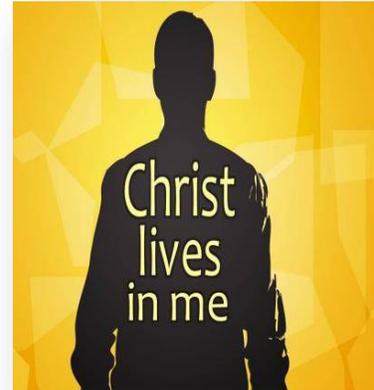


Third, each Alpha leader or helper should identify one or two participants (at most!) in order to accompany; this, so that relationships can develop and people's discipleship journey from discovering Jesus to following him can be personalized.

WE BECOME THE PROGRAM:

The purpose of this article is to elaborate on the second recommendation: *offering a discipleship opportunity that corresponds to where the Alpha participant is at on his or her discipleship journey.*

Here, I can't emphasize enough that programs, activities and even retreats often serve as short-term onramps to an active engagement in parish life. However, once these discipleship opportunities run their course, the human and spiritual needs of the seeker still remain while the inspiration of these events fades.



On an ongoing basis, therefore, people need their questions answered, their doubts resolved, their pains healed, and their successes celebrated. In other words, they need someone who is willing to do *life and faith* with them! Programs can't do this but disciples can. Therefore, before I recommend programs and activities as a follow-up to Alpha, we should always keep in mind the following:

Encountering the living presence and love of God in a parish leader or parishioner, more often than not, is why a seeker will continue their spiritual journey with the parish.

In subsequent *Post-Alpha Principles and Foundations workshops and resources*, we will take a closer look at how we, as disciple-makers, can "become the program." In the interim, however, a recommendation of well-placed discipleship opportunities (or programs) will suffice for the purpose of this article.

"With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us." I Thessalonians 2:8

POST-ALPHA CONSIDERATIONS:

1. IDEAS FOR THE ELEVENTH SESSION AND THE WEEK AFTER

a. Celebration Evening and Small Group Reunions:

The following suggestions are from an Alpha resource regarding the option of hosting a celebration evening and small group reunions:

At the last (and eleventh Alpha session), remind the group about the Alpha celebration evening.

[Celebration evening is an optional add-on event when Alpha participants invite friends and relatives to the next Alpha gathering following the eleventh session. The purpose of this event is for participants to share a meal together and to give testimony on how they benefited from the Alpha course with- not only their small group peers -but to those guests they have invited to the celebration evening.]

Try to finalize numbers. Make a date for a small group reunion. This would possibly be at the host's house [parish or restaurant], ideally about two weeks before the next Alpha course starts.

Discussion:

1. Go round the group, asking each person to summarize what they have learned and experienced over the past ten weeks. (Try to start and finish with an enthusiastic person!)
2. Ask the group what they would like to do after Alpha. Try to encourage them to stay connected as a group
3. Ask each of them if there is anything they would like prayer for.
4. Pray – it's a good idea to finish the final evening with prayer.

Keep in mind that Alpha participants may have two competing needs following an Alpha course: First, they may want to continue to meet with their small group. In fact, this request is frequently expressed following an Alpha course. After all, for eleven weeks they did faith and life together which, as we know, lends itself to relationship-building. For this reason, hosting monthly or periodic small group reunions after Alpha is worth considering.

Second, as noted previously, each Alpha participant is traveling at a different speed on their discipleship journey. Offering a small group reunion as a follow-up to Alpha may accommodate people's social or fellowship needs (which are very important), but they may also require an added discipleship opportunity for their spiritual needs. Understandably, responding to these two needs with each Alpha participant may be difficult to juggle in your attempt to offer post-Alpha programs.

2. CONTINUING TO DISCOVER JESUS

Considerations for Discerning Programs:

After having discovered or rediscovered Jesus during the Alpha course, some people need more time to experience how God truly desires to be at the center of their day-to-day lives. For a lot of people, in fact, eleven weeks is not enough time to discover just how important a relationship with Jesus Christ is in their quest to live life in all of its fullness. Wounds and misunderstandings may need to be redressed, questions about faith and life may need answering, and sins may need



forgiving. Here, disciple-makers in the twenty-first century may come to appreciate a well-known saying of the early Christians: "Christians are made, not born." In fact, it took about three years to prepare candidates for the Rites of Initiation in those early years of the Church. Yet, conversions abounded.

With this, if the program or discipleship opportunity that the parish offers following an Alpha course is too content-driven or theological, some may dropout from the discipleship process all together. This is to say that the labor pains of being reborn in Christ have to be taken into consideration with a person's transition from discovering Jesus to his or her intentional decision to follow him.

Accompaniment, not programs, is often the deciding factor with the success of this transition.

A Note of About Some Programs:

In the list of recommended programs below, the first three courses or programs on marriage and parenting fall into what the Catholic Church calls, the “pre-evangelization” category. Such courses address first and foremost, life situations such as communication, conflict-resolution and relationship-building within a marriage and parenting context. In fact, topics relating to faith are indirectly addressed but it is by no means the front-and-center of these courses.

The idea behind pre-evangelization oriented approaches is that human needs such as security, love and acceptance are addressed with the aim of showing how those basic human needs include a desire for God and his Word (cf. *National Directory for Catechesis*, USCCB). Here, parish leaders ask Alpha participants the following question: “How can I help you with your life situation?”

Seeking to fulfill this human need with the Word of God as a companion guide serves as a spring board for crossing the necessary thresholds of conversion. The hoped-for result is that after having people’s human needs met, they will then be open to having their spiritual needs met and thus continue their discipleship journey with Jesus Christ and the local parish.

Recommended Programs w/Links:

- [Alpha Marriage Course](#)
- [The Parenting Children Course](#)
- [The Parenting Teenage Course](#)
- [Invite Alpha participants to lead or help with the next Alpha course](#)
- [Discipleship Groups by Fr. John Riccardo](#)
- [Wisdom: God’s Vision for Life, Jeff Cavins and Thomas Smith](#)
- [FOCUS Bible Study Resources](#)
- [New Leaven](#)
- Rediscovering Jesus | Resisting Happiness Book Study- Matthew Kelly

3. TRANSITION INTO FOLLOW JESUS

Considerations for Discerning These Programs:

Having discovered the relevance of God and his Word in their daily lives and having crossed the thresholds of trust, curiosity and openness of conversion, Alpha participants may be ready for discipleship opportunities where prayer, doctrine, sacraments, the Mass and other church-related topics are addressed.



Recommended Programs without Links

- Oremus (Ascension Press)
- Catholicism Study (Fr. Robert Barron).
- Symbolon (Augustine Institute)
- Follow Me (Ascension Press)
- The Wild Goose (Fr. Dave Pivonka)
- Priest, Prophet, King- (Word on Fire)
- Great Adventure Bible Studies (Ascension Press)
- Live Your Faith- Fr. John Girotti (presentations to be delivered at St. John the Baptist Church in Howard starting in September. For more information, call the parish office at: 920-434-2145)

Considerations for the Discipleship Process at the Parish

Many Evangelical Christian leaders have publicly admitted that in the past they were too quick to “close the deal” with prospective converts. That is, before earning the right to be heard and having failed to consider that discipleship goes at the speed of relationships, many of them were tempted to close the deal by asking people if “they were saved” or if “they accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior.” In order to save souls, therefore, they rushed into their kerygmatic talking points in order not to lose an opportunity.

Catholics often respond to this error by saying, “Of course, we would never make that mistake!” But yet, we make similar mistakes! To be sure, we Catholics do not ask people if they are saved two minutes into the conversation, but we certainly hurry them along to theologically-driven programs, the sacraments or the Mass itself without having considered the same truth that discipleship goes at the speed of relationships. More than anyone else, therefore, Catholics are at risk of glossing over the personal dimensions of the discipleship process; this in order to introduce seekers to the more formal and institutional aspects of the Catholic faith. Both are necessary yet it is true that each dimension or aspect of Catholicism has its proper place.

If Jesus is our model on how to evangelize then it behooves us to recall that he helped the Apostles to fish before he made them into “fishers of men.” That is, he entered their world before he expected them to enter his. The journey from the Lake of Galilee to Mount Tabor was a long one. It was a journey that passed through boats, houses, deserts and fields in addition to Jewish synagogues and the Temple itself.



Questions about onramps and a discipleship process in our parishes!

- (1) Do you have a clearly defined process to bring people from attending church for the first time to becoming missionary disciples?
- (2) How are people with a non-Church background or non-Catholics brought into this process?
- (3) How well does your leadership team, staff, ministry leaders know it?

Fr. James Mallon, *Divine Renovation Guide Book*