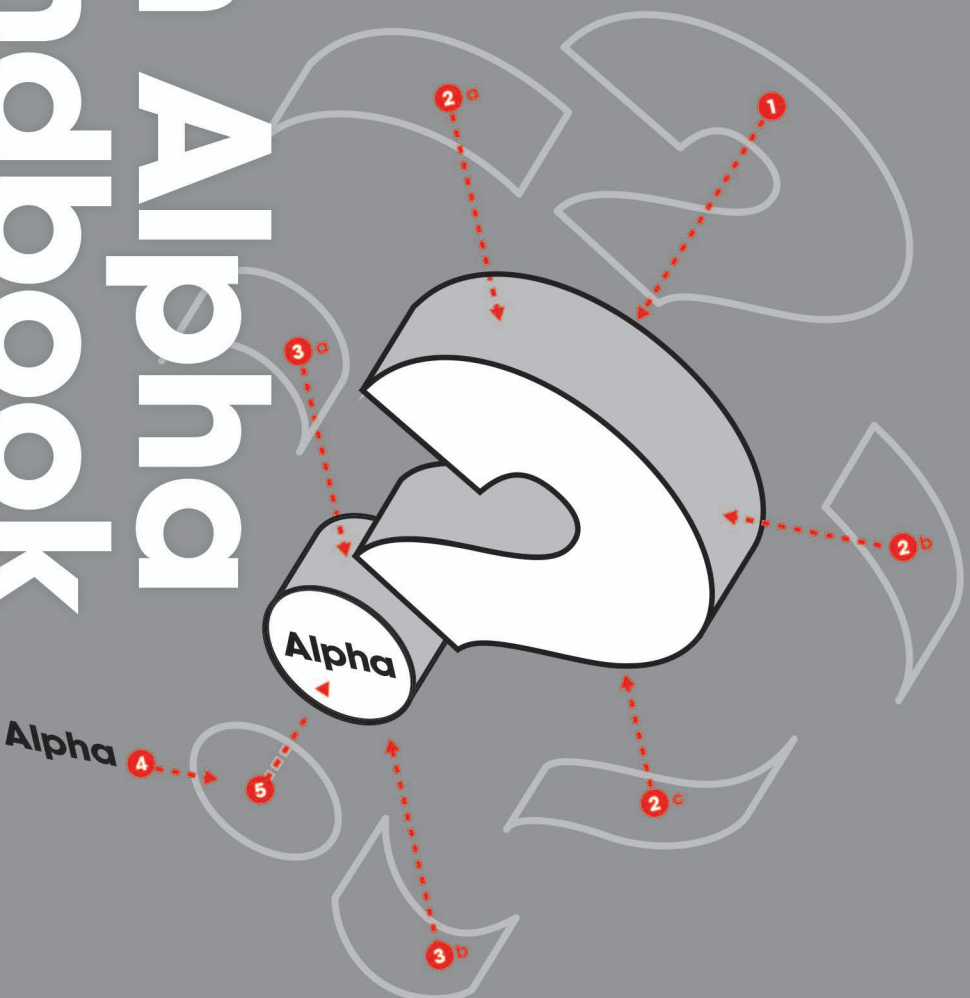


Run Alpha Handbook



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ISBN 978-1-938-3-2895-4

First Printing 2017 / Printed in the United States of America

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SECTION 1

Fundamentals



What is Alpha?

Alpha is an opportunity to explore life and the Christian faith in a friendly, open and informal environment. It's run in churches, bars, coffee shops and homes worldwide. Essentially, Alpha is a safe place to explore life's biggest questions.

WHAT'S THE STORY?

Alpha started in 1977 in England, in a church called Holy Trinity Brompton, affectionately known as HTB. HTB was very theologically rooted and was using Alpha as a course for new Christians or those new to the church. In 1991, a young pastor named Nicky Gumbel took over leading Alpha and he observed that it was effective at connecting with people outside of the church. He noticed the general format and lack of pressure resonated with most people, but especially with young adults. At this time in England, and much of Europe, many assumptions about faith in God, the Bible and Jesus were being abandoned, similar to what we are experiencing in the US and Canada today.

People no longer assumed that God was true or that the Bible was trustworthy. Instead of asking if things were true, people were asking what was real. Nicky repositioned Alpha for non-churchgoers by replacing what was a small group Bible study with a time of discussion and an opportunity

for people to ask questions and express their own views.

Alpha became highly relational and intentionally created a safe environment where people could share their opinions and points of view, no matter what they might be. Church leaders from around the world began asking how to run Alpha, and Nicky and the team at HTB passed on all they knew. The response has been overwhelming. Today, we estimate that over 30 million people have done Alpha globally.

WHEN ALPHA WORKS:

"And so it is with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power."

1 Corinthians 2: 1-5

A TYPICAL ALPHA SESSION

Every Alpha session has three key elements: food, a talk and discussion:



FOOD

Whether it's a group of friends gathered around a kitchen table, or a quick catch-up over coffee and cake, food has a way of bringing people together. It's no different at Alpha. We start with food, because it's a great way to encourage community and get to know each other.



TALK

The talks are designed to engage and inspire conversation. Generally thirty minutes long, they can be given as a live talk or played as a video. They explore the big issues around faith and unpack the basics of Christianity, addressing questions such as Who is Jesus? and How can I have faith?



DISCUSSION

Probably the most important part of any Alpha is the chance to share thoughts and ideas on the topic, and simply discuss it in a small group. There's no obligation to say anything. And there's nothing you can't say. It's an opportunity to hear from others and contribute your own perspective in an honest, friendly and open environment.

ALPHA WORKS WHEN IT IS:

Real

When people speak about Jesus authentically, unreligiously but unapologetically, and pray in the power of the Holy Spirit, we often see people's lives are changed. It's not always easy or straightforward but it is effective! Alpha is about authenticity; those running Alpha are real with the guests, which in turn creates space for the guests to be real and authentic.

Relational

Alpha is about relationships. Ultimately, Alpha revolves around the small group and the friendships that are formed here. It's about a journey, taken together. Everything we do with Alpha is designed to create a welcoming atmosphere—the food, the arrangement of tables and chairs, the centerpieces, and most importantly, those welcoming guests to Alpha. This all takes time, but over the course of several weeks, when sharing in a common faith journey and in each other's lives from week to week, many groups have created friendships that can last for years beyond Alpha.

Reliant

In Alpha, we are reliant on the Holy Spirit. Alpha doesn't change lives; it is the Holy Spirit working in people who changes lives. We must simply be open to him. We do Alpha in partnership with the Spirit. We are involved in God's amazing work which is why it is so important for us

to do everything we can to the best of our ability and trust God for him to act.

Reproducible

When you experience the love of God, the natural response is to tell others. Alpha is a way for anybody to share their faith. Alpha provides an opportunity for anyone to use their gifts to touch the lives of the guests. Oftentimes, after experiencing Alpha, guests want to get involved, to be able to impact the lives of people in a powerful way. The good news is, there are plenty of ways to help with Alpha—as a host or helper, welcoming guests, preparing food, prayer team etc. Ultimately, Alpha should be run in a way that is reproducible. In other words, someone interested in doing something similar should be able to look at your Alpha and know that they too could do this. With the right team, anyone can run Alpha!

TOOLS AVAILABLE

Running an effective Alpha involves planning. We have created a number of tools and resources to help make the process as easy as possible. Use this handbook as well as our online training center called Alpha Builder to get all the support you need. You can access Alpha Builder at run.alphausa.org or run.alphacanada.org.

Within Alpha Builder you can create an Alpha which will provide access to all of the digital resources (videos,

promotional materials, etc.) you need to get started. Here you can view and download the Alpha talks that are right for your audience - Alpha Film Series, Alpha with Nicky Gumbel, or the Alpha Youth Series.

There are a total of 15 talks (including those covered on the Alpha weekend).

Alpha explores these questions:

Is There More to Life Than This?

Who Is Jesus?

Why Did Jesus Die?

How Can I Have Faith?

Why and How Do I Pray?

Why and How Do I Read the Bible?

How Does God Guide Us?

Who Is the Holy Spirit?*

What Does the Holy Spirit Do?*

How Can I Be Filled with the Holy Spirit?*

How Can I Make the Most of the Rest of My Life?*

How Can I Resist Evil?

Why and How Should I Tell Others?

Does God Heal Today?

What About the Church?

*These questions are explored on the Alpha weekend or day.

Each of these talks, as well as the customizable scripts for live talks, are available for free through Alpha Builder. Here you can also access training materials for your team, promotional materials and all of the information you need to make your Alpha a success!

TRAIN

Alpha has created tools and training videos to support you as the Alpha administrator. Additionally, resources are available to help train the rest of your team. These resources will help answer the most common questions about food, teambuilding, atmosphere, prayer and the essentials of a quality Alpha. Also, be sure to check online for any upcoming Run Alpha training events. Run Alpha training provides a practical introduction to what Alpha looks like. It may also provide you with an opportunity to connect with churches who have been running Alpha for years, as well as those who are exploring or just running it for the first time.

Hospitality

Showing up to Alpha for the first time can be extremely intimidating for some guests—especially for someone who wouldn't typically go to church. That's why we suggest creating a welcoming and fun atmosphere. Hospitality helps people feel like they belong.

When we put some effort into creating a welcoming and fun atmosphere, guests are more likely to enjoy themselves, build relationships, engage in the discussion and keep coming back each week! And they will feel comfortable enough to tell their friends about Alpha.

The key to creating a positive atmosphere for your Alpha is to think of it like a casual party. We aim to set the mood as if we're welcoming guests into our home. Here are some ideas from churches who made their Alpha a bit more inviting.

WE HOPE THIS WILL HELP SPARK YOUR CREATIVITY:

Food

Eating a meal or a snack together allows guests to have a space for casual conversations and to get to know each other. Remember to provide a meat-free option and to ask about allergies.

Venue

Run Alpha where people are most likely to show up. Think about who you're trying to reach and where they spend their time. Most Alphas take place in a church, but Alpha has also been run in places like coffee shops, high schools, homes, gyms, pubs, and even bike shops.

Room Decor

The way you set up the room, including things like table setup (centerpieces, place settings),

signage (welcome sign, menu, food labels) and even lights (candles, table and floor lamps) contribute to the overall guest experience. Try to be creative each week because these details make the Alpha experience memorable especially when targeted to the demographic you are trying to reach.

Seating

You want seating that will make conversation easy. Try to steer away from office or classroom set up and aim for small groups of 8-12. Use whatever is available—try small coffee tables instead of big tables, big comfy couches, floor pillows—anything that will help people relax.

Music

Depending on your context and audience, play upbeat music or invite a local artist to play during meal time. Some groups slowly introduce Christian music and worship after the Alpha weekend and some begin with it right away. Whenever you choose to introduce it, it helps to explain why worship is a key element of Christian life.

Temperature

Monitor this throughout the night because if it gets too warm, guests will feel uncomfortable and possibly fall asleep during the Alpha talk. The more people that are in the room, the warmer it will get as the night progresses.

Fun

Laughing together is one of the best ways to build a sense of community and friendship. It can lighten the mood, bridge over awkward

dynamics and allow people to relax. Depending on your group's age and context, you can start with a funny, neutral video clip, tell a joke, or do a short icebreaker game.

Food and Alpha

Food helps set the tone and puts people at ease. It's also one of the easiest ways to make people feel welcome. It gives guests the opportunity to come together, share a meal and get to know one another on a deeper level.

THREE WAYS OF ORGANIZING THE MEAL:

Church catering team

Organize a catering team from within your church or organization to provide the food for Alpha every week or on a rotating basis. Keep the budget to a minimum, and invite your guests to make a contribution to the cost of the meal by suggesting a small donation (\$5.00). Provide a secure or enclosed box for donations.

The Alpha small group

If you have a small Alpha group, each week one member of the group could provide the food. You might start by asking all the hosts and helpers to contribute, and often after week five, one of the guests will offer to provide food or the dessert. Always keep this optional and not mandatory for the guests.

Professional catering

As your Alpha grows you may need a caterer. The disadvantage is that it often raises the cost of the meal. You can also hold Alpha in a café or restaurant where they provide the food at a reduced price. Also, check with your team to see who they know. Oftentimes team members have connections to restaurant owners or food providers. Many times these groups will donate a meal to Alpha or will offer a discounted rate for food.

MENU PLANNING AND OTHER GENERAL THOUGHTS:

- ☐ Pinterest is full of great ideas on cooking for a crowd.
- ☐ Keep meals simple.
- ☐ Consider your space. If guests aren't at regular dinner tables, opt for meals that can be eaten in a bowl or ones that don't require utensils, etc.

❑ Offer a non-meat and possibly a gluten-free option as well as a meat option the first few weeks until you determine the dietary preferences of your guests.

❑ If cooking for a large group, check with a local butcher who might give you a good price on bulk orders.

❑ Plan your menu ahead of time so you can watch for sales on non-perishable items.

❑ Buffet style is generally the best way to serve the food. Consider providing servers who can portion out the food onto plates so everyone gets at least one helping.

Listening Leaders

Usually after the first Alpha session, guests are assigned to a small group (by age and/or with friends). The ideal size for a small group on Alpha is between 8-12 people, including two or four hosts and helpers. The goal is that the small group would stay together for the duration of Alpha, go on the journey together, and hopefully become friends along the way.

Ideally your groups would sit together, eat together, watch the Alpha talk and then discuss it right where they are. This helps your group connect, and it saves time since there's no transition to another room or space. Your Alpha leader will explain how it will work.

We use the terms “host” and “helper” because on Alpha it's less about being a leader and more about helping facilitate a conversation. We want people to feel welcomed and included. The format is not teacher/student, but rather host/guest. Note: There are two team training videos to help you learn about how to host great small groups,

and tips on praying for others. Take some time to discuss these with your team.

WHAT DO HOSTS AND HELPERS DO?

Simply put, hosts are the ones who facilitate the small group discussion. Helpers are there to help the host and the guests with anything that might make the group experience even better. Helpers mostly stay quiet. They listen and pray silently as the discussion is unfolding. Being a helper on Alpha is actually one of the best ways for people to step into a leadership role for the first time.

FOR THE ALPHA YOUTH SERIES:

Small group discussion is not only after the Alpha talks, but included throughout each episode. There are several pause prompts with questions for you to discuss with your small group. Take about 5-10 minutes and if you want more time to chat, there are additional questions in the discussion guide to go through at the end of the talk.

FROM GOOD TO GREAT

Show guests that they're valuable by being 100% committed and consistent. Attend all the team training sessions, the Alpha weekend and all the small group discussions. Show genuine care for them by remembering their names and asking how their week is going. Remember, Alpha isn't about "information transfer," it's about friendship.

Keep the Conversation Alive

SHARE THESE GUIDELINES WITH YOUR SMALL GROUP

- You don't have to talk if you don't want to, but we'd love to hear everyone's thoughts.
- Any question or comment is welcome (just be brief and respectful).
- Respect each other by listening and allowing different opinions.
- Keep things confidential when you leave this group.

Small Group Discussion

The heart of Alpha is the small group. This is where people can ask questions, talk through issues, build relationships and experience what the Christian life really looks like. Use the discussion questions that are provided in the Alpha Team Guide, but don't feel like you have to get through all of them. The questions are simply suggestions to help you spark key conversations. Be open to questions that guests have on their own. It will take practice to keep the conversation balanced. Watch for people who tend to dominate and engage those who seem disengaged or shy.

FACILITATING DISCUSSION

One thing that can help in forming the small groups is to use the information gathered from the Guest Sign-Up Form (Appendix F) and put all who check “Christian” in the same group. Their small group will probably have more of a discipleship emphasis.

When guests ask a question, ask the rest of the group what they think or feel about it. If you answer all the questions, there will be no discussion

and your answer will be viewed as “the final answer.” We want to encourage honest conversation.

Occasionally in the first few weeks, a small group host finds a guest in their group who is quick to answer questions during the small group time. If this occurs, privately remind them the purpose of Alpha is first to listen. Other guests will feel shut down if this is left unattended. If addressed the discussion will flow with more freedom.

Conversation Tips

QUESTIONS

- What do you think about the talk?
- How do you feel about the talk?
- Yes, good question! What do the rest of you think?
- Can you explain a bit more, or give an example?
- Are you wondering if...? (clarify, rephrase)
- Has anyone else felt that way too?
- And how does that make you feel?
- Can you share with us how that question came up for you?

AFFIRMATIONS

- Thank you for sharing that.
- I appreciate your honesty. Tell us more.
- Yes, I can relate to that too!
- It's okay to take a minute and think about it. That's what we're here for. No rush.
- It's okay to have different opinions and disagree. Discussion helps us learn other viewpoints.
- I'm glad you're here!
- Very interesting perspective!

Materials

Many of the resources you need to run your Alpha, including the Alpha talks, are available to you for free through Alpha Builder. DVDs of the Alpha talks as well as other accompanying materials are available for purchase from the Alpha Store/Bookstore.

Plan ahead and determine what type of resources you'll be using, and ensure anything you need is available and delivered prior to beginning Alpha.

Location

The good news...you can run Alpha anywhere! Currently, Alpha is running in homes, cafés, churches, pubs, and all sorts of other locations all around the world. It doesn't matter what venue you choose; simply do what you can to make the space welcoming and conducive to good conversation.

Talks

Based on your audience and the abilities of your team, consider which talks are best suited for your Alpha—several options are available on video to suit different styles, audiences, and contexts. Additionally, scripts are available for those interested in presenting live talks.

Training

Choosing the right team is crucial. The people who host and help in the small groups need to be the best people to both welcome new people into the community and guide discussions in a way that allows for real exploration.

WHO'S ON THE TEAM?

The most helpful question to ask when considering someone for the role of host or helper is, "Would I trust my non-Christian best friend with this person?" If the answer is no, then keep looking for the right people.

It is also important to train your team well. Although Alpha has a simple format, there are a few critical things to remember when running an Alpha small group. Even your hosts and helpers who have done Alpha several times can benefit from attending training before you begin your Alpha.

Training & Teams





Six Key Alpha Team Roles

ALPHA ADMINISTRATOR:

The administrator carries the overall responsibility of running Alpha, leading the team and delegating tasks.

The administrator is:

- well-organized, detail-oriented
- able to communicate well with a volunteer team
- friendly
- one who values prayer
- encouraging and approachable

The administrator is responsible for:

- scheduling and planning the meetings to train the Alpha team
- determining the day and time when Alpha will run
- securing the venue/location for the weekly gathering
- overseeing the small groups or delegating to the small group coordinator (if it is a larger Alpha)
- planning and securing the venue for the Alpha weekend
- leading the weekly team meetings as well as ongoing team coaching
- working with church leadership to understand and promote Alpha
- arranging the proper resources for the team and guests (Alpha Guides, Alpha Team Guides, additional resources)
- customizing Team and Guest Feedback Forms (see Appendix G and H) at the end of each Alpha

- scheduling post-Alpha evaluation meetings to determine if any changes need to be made for the next Alpha

SMALL GROUP HOSTS AND HELPERS

The small group hosts and helpers maintain a safe environment for guests to share openly.

Hosts are:

- warm and caring
- good listeners
- friendly
- okay with silence in the group
- able to facilitate the conversation during the small group time
- willing to pray for the small group on a regular basis

Helpers are:

- warm, caring and friendly
- good listeners
- proactive and seek out the quieter guests to befriend them
- happy to allow others to speak first in the small group
- willing to pray quietly while the small group is meeting
- willing to pray for the small group on a regular basis

EMCEE

This is someone who can host your Alpha each week—welcoming guests with a short introduction, guiding

people through each part of the evening, and encouraging guests to come back. This is a key role since the Emcee sets the tone for the evening. Think of one or two people who don't mind speaking in front of groups and can make people feel at ease, especially if they don't typically go to church. It generally helps to lean towards a younger person. In some situations, this role is well suited for a pastor.

HOSPITALITY TEAM

This fun, servant-hearted crew of volunteers cooks the meals, takes care of logistics, greets people and provides administrative support.

SET UP/TEAR DOWN CREW:

- assists with set-up of the Alpha space
- sets up tables, chairs, helps create the atmosphere
- ensures that other tools and resources for the team are ready and available
- assists with tear down and clean up after Alpha

TECH SUPPORT:

- ensures the right audio and visual gear are set up and tested so that everything goes smoothly

DECOR TEAM LEADER:

- dreams up creative ways to make the meeting space more welcoming and fun
- probably loves to spend a lot of time on Pinterest

MEAL COORDINATOR:

- secures a team to assist in the meal preparation and clean up*
- plans the menus
- works with the Alpha administrator to plan the budget
- purchases the food
- oversees the preparation and serving of the food
- delegates and manages the cleanup
- understands this team is vital to the success of Alpha

*Some meal teams gather the names of all the hosts, helpers and small group guests in order to pray for them while washing dishes or preparing food.

GREETERS:

If you have a larger Alpha it's a good idea to have a few friendly people available to help with this.

- welcomes guests at the entrance(s)
- assists them to the childcare area (if offered)
- shows them where the food is being served
- introduces them to their small group

ADMIN SUPPORT:

- helps the Alpha administrator to have things run smoothly before, during and after Alpha
- assists with greeting and registering guests
- helps direct guests as to where to go and what to do next

WORSHIP LEADER

Often the people who find singing worship songs the most difficult at the start of Alpha comment that it is the most enjoyable part by the end. Group worship singing is only recommended if your Alpha is over 25 people. Delegate your worship leadership well in advance. Here are some options:

Some Alphas include worship music from week 1, others begin at weeks 3, 4 or 5.

Some Alphas opt to play a secular song the first week or two and then transition to worship.

If you plan to have worship at the

Alpha weekend consider introducing one or two worship songs on Alpha evenings beforehand.

If you don't have live music, at some point on Alpha it might be an idea to play a worship CD or music through your mobile device, even in the background, to allow guests to become familiar with the songs.

PRAYER TEAM

This team prays for your Alpha regularly. Be intentional about praying not only for logistics, but for each guest, host and helper weekly. Many prayer teams commit to gathering and praying for Alpha as it is happening each week.

Four Tips for Building Strong Alpha Teams

1. MATCH PEOPLE UP WITH ROLES THEY LOVE DOING

People enjoy volunteering when their gifts are being used. Find the administrative people and invite them to help with planning. Invite those with the gift of serving and hospitality to be Alpha greeters, servers, and registration helpers. Those who love praying can be on the prayer team. There's a place for everyone on the Alpha team!

2. TAKE YOUR WHOLE TEAM THROUGH THE TWO ALPHA TEAM TRAINING SESSIONS: SMALL GROUPS AND PRAYER & THE WEEKEND

Even if some of your volunteers have done the training before, we suggest that everyone attends the training sessions. It's a great refresher and it ensures that everyone is on the same page and feels like part of the team. The training videos are available for download in Alpha Builder and on the Alpha DVDs.

Note: You can do two sessions in one training day or split them up and watch the video on Prayer & The Weekend closer to your Alpha weekend. Have fun when you get your team together —host a meal or provide snacks, do an icebreaker, share some laughs, provide time for Q&A.

3. MEET WITH YOUR TEAM EACH WEEK DURING ALPHA

Usually teams meet together about 30 minutes before Alpha begins. It's a time to share key info or tips for that session, answer any questions and then pray together.

4. GET FEEDBACK

Some groups debrief each week if time allows, but we definitely encourage you to get together with your team after Alpha has ended. Maybe have a meal with them, thank them for their commitment, time and effort, and talk about what went well and what could be improved.

NEXT STEPS

Take a moment and think of some people who might be excited to be part of your Alpha team and write down their names. Pray about what role they can do. Next open up your calendar and schedule a time for team training if you haven't already.