

Food For the Soul



A church in France has adopted the Alpha course as its ‘handbook’ for formation and mission. Participants find the approach transformational as students and young professionals become leaders and evangelists

Bringing your parish from maintenance to mission is one of the great challenges of today. Recently I visited a parish in the south of France that seems to have found a way to do it.

The parish of Notre Dame de la Sagesse (“Our Lady of Wisdom”) is located in the heart of Sophia Antipolis, an international technology park north-east of Antibes with more than 30,000 people working there. A large concrete church was built in 2000 but with no real residential population, it was not a popular clerical posting.

Most of Chemin Neuf’s work is in faith formation but it has also had several parishes entrusted to it over the years; and, in 2004, the community was invited to run this parish. The current parish priest at Sophia Antipolis is Fr Jean Hubert Thieffry.

When he began working in a parish in Paris, he was at a loss to know how to meet the challenges of parish life – especially how to reach out to the lapsed and unbelieving. He discovered the Alpha course through his ecumenical contacts in 1998 – a course developed in the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom. He found this to be not only an effective tool for evangelisation, but also useful in forming missionary disciples within the Church.

When he arrived at Sophia Antipolis in 2005, he insisted that all those involved in formation in the parish, as well as seekers on the fringe, “do” the Alpha course. Here the Gospel message is proclaimed in an atmosphere of joyful service and hospitality.

When I visited the parish, I attended an Alpha session. Half the people there were helpers – small-group leaders, greeters, cooks, washers-up, among others. Many were recent Alpha participants, including the woman in charge, who was giving one of the talks.

One of the helpers told me that her Muslim neighbour, who has occasionally come with her, had told her that she wanted to do Alpha in her mosque because she liked the way people listened to each other

in their small groups. This experience of intimacy and discipleship exemplified in the small groups in Alpha influences all the ministries of the parish.

Of the 1,500 parishioners, 450 people are involved in service or ministry of some kind. New converts are quickly given responsibilities and jobs – not just because the jobs need doing, but because they help people feel a sense of belonging and undertaking a mission helps them to grow spiritually and be a witness. One woman in her late sixties told me that she had come on an Alpha course a couple of years ago; she became a helper and now she volunteers part-time in the parish office.

Alpha was the entry point for the woman who is in charge of the parish welcome ministry too. She was disillusioned with the Church but a friend persuaded her to come to the parish. Her first step was to watch the Mass live on the internet.

Baptised only two years ago, she says her life has not been the same since. The welcome team go out of their way to make newcomers feel welcome. There is a rota of people who run a welcome desk before and after Sunday Mass; and there is also a team of volunteers that man the reception area during the week 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., where there is coffee on tap.

The part-time parish pastoral assistant told me that Alpha lies at the heart of all their pastoral planning. The first thing that goes into the diary each year are the six Alpha courses they run at the different churches of the parish (including the lunchtime Alpha for nearby office workers).

Everything else is structured around these courses and every activity of the parish is geared towards evangelisation and formation of missionary disciples. Marriage preparation, for example, is timed so that participants can be invited on to the Alpha course once their marriage preparation is finished.

The parish is constantly reassessing and revising how they do things. For example, there has been a total overhaul of the approach to baptismal preparation in the past three years. The team are now formed in how to preach the kerygma (the preaching or proclamation of the Gospel) through their personal testimonies. Many of the parents are not practising; one of the aims of the catechists is to find ways to integrate them into parish life.

The ministry teams meet once a month to share with each other what they are doing spiritually and how they are working together. They have found this transformational. It reminds them that they are not just serving in the parish, they are on a mission. Their point of service thus becomes a place of energisation rather than exhaustion. The aim is to encourage leaders of the different ministries to see themselves as shepherds caring for people and not just taking participants through a parish programme.

Also key are the “five essentials” – service, formation, prayer, fellowship and evangelisation. Every year parishioners are asked to do a spiritual health check on how these elements are in balance in their lives and ministries. The establishment of this total pastoral vision with a group of students and young professionals over the past two years has transformed this young consumer generation into leaders and evangelists, and the group has more than doubled in size. More and more parishes in France are getting interested in this vision and are putting it into practice.

Food is also used as an important tool of community building. The reception area cafe is often in use, whether it is the weekly parish lunch for 20-50 people, a meal before the young adult group or the post-Alpha lunch group. These meals help to create an atmosphere of fellowship and family, which so many people are looking for. They also give people the chance to meet informally with the parish clergy and the various parish ministers. People come to the area in France for work. Far from their families, this welcoming spirit has a great attraction and the parish becomes “home from home”.

Prayer lies at the heart of everything; and the parish has a vibrant charismatic prayer group. Something else highly unusual is an entry code for access to the church so that parishioners can come into the church to pray at any time of day or night.

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