

Bringing people the 'Alpha' of evangelization

Sarah Kaczmarek first encountered Alpha during her decade serving at the parish level and quickly fell in love. She is now starting her fourth year working for Alpha out of Detroit, where she is associate director of Alpha Catholic. The evangelization model, which began in London over 30 years ago, is present in some 1,300 Catholic parishes across the United States (where it first arrived about 20 years ago) and has reached 26 million people globally, in 151 countries in 19 languages.

Per Kaczmarek, Alpha exists to empower the Church to rediscover its identity to evangelize. Practically, that means providing a resource to welcome to church those who are farthest from the Church through a non-threatening point of entry, even those who have never been to church.

The building blocks of their programming: a meal, a talk and table discussion. About three-fourths of the way through the course, participants go on a full retreat. Running through all the content, Kaczmarek says, is an ethos of radical hospitality: "We welcome them in, we offer them food, and we give them a place at our table."

Kaczmarek spoke with Our Sunday Visitor about how Alpha seeks to help the Church grapple with how to reach people in a cultural context that isn't necessarily Christian, and how their programming brings people together to discuss big questions of meaning and existence in a personally relevant way.

Our Sunday Visitor: Alpha has a sort of primordial, pre-evangelization quality to it, but I take it you all would see this as simply recognizing the times in which we live and

work, where belief in God and religious experience simply can't be taken for granted anymore as frames of reference for the people you're trying to reach?



Kaczmarek

Sarah Kaczmarek: In so many ways, the culture which we're ministering to has changed dramatically. So the Church oftentimes finds herself ministering out of a model that comes from ... what we could call a Christian culture. When most people went to church, it was just a matter of which church they went to on Sundays. ... And now we find ourselves in a situation, culturally and in society in the U.S., where more and more people are identifying themselves as the "nones" ... meaning they have no faith, no religion, no belief in God. ...

We really just want to give the Church an opportunity through our resource to begin to see some real effectiveness in reaching out to people like that, because we're no longer in the situation where we just open the doors and people come. ... We want to equip the Church with a resource ... to begin to discover the basic tenets of Christianity. Alpha is beginning, not even alpha and omega, not even alpha and beta. Alpha is just Alpha.

OSV: You've said that Alpha is "uniquely designed to fail if God doesn't show up." What does that mean?

Kaczmarek: From my own perspective as a minister ... I was creating programs and content and structures and events for young people and even adults to have what I would consider a positive experience at church ... but I didn't make a ton of

space for them just to really, truly encounter God. So with Alpha we try to create as much space as possible for God to show up and them to have an encounter with the living God. And if he didn't show up, because we created so much space for him and we rely and depend upon him so radically ... that if he didn't show up it would fail. ...

We try to position ourselves in a place of radical dependence. He has to show up. He has to move in their hearts. He has to do the heavy lifting and the tilling of the soil in their hearts. ... We know that when people encounter Jesus, when they encounter the living God, just like in Scripture, they are changed.

OSV: What questions or topics might be discussed at any given Alpha event?

Kaczmarek: With Alpha, in the very beginning, we're trying to engage people with the big questions of life. Oftentimes people may not be in a position or a place in their lives where they're asking ... does God exist? Why do I need Jesus? What is faith? Why the Bible? Why Christ? Which are topics we would cover on an Alpha Course. ... But in the very beginning we're just trying to engage them with the bigger questions of life, which most human beings at some point will wrestle with. ... Why do I exist? Is there more to life than this? What's my purpose? ... We ultimately know the answer to those questions is Jesus, that he has all the answers to those questions, but they might not yet want to hear that. ... So we try to begin with the things that they perhaps have thought about, have questioned in their own minds. ...

The very first talk on an Alpha course is, "Is there more to life than this?" – just engaging them with that deep longing that they hopefully have discovered within themselves. And then we move into some of the basic tenets of faith, like the why of faith? Who is Jesus? Why did he have to die? Why the Bible? ... The retreat covers: Who is the Holy Spirit, and what

does he do? And what is the ministry of the Holy Spirit on earth today? Very much a questioning thought process, bringing them through the basics of the kerygma and the basics of faith.

OSV: One of Alpha's three central pieces is the shared meal. Why is that so important to your model?

Kaczmarek: Part of it is just the beauty of the reflection of Jesus: Oftentimes in the Scriptures, ministry happened around a table. The table is so central to the ministry of Jesus, so central to our Faith as Catholics, that we gather around a table for the Eucharist every single week, and hopefully sometimes more than once a week. This idea of table is so very important. Culturally, we know that ... the sharing of food, and gathering around a table is central to ... what you value in your culture. ...

And so people today are oftentimes more connected than they've ever been in terms of technology and all these other ways that people connect, but they feel more disconnected than they ever have before. They lack real relationship, real friendship. So for us that meal piece is about connecting with another person, about the deepest human need we have, which is to belong, to be a part of a family. And to share a meal with one another is, I think, a beautiful representation of belonging and of family. Particularly with younger generations we're seeing that. They didn't grow up eating around a dinner table. They didn't grow up sharing meals with their family, and so they never really had that sense of belonging that comes from ... a family that eats together ... that shares their lives.

With ... Alpha, it's so key for building trust, for creating belonging, that they share a meal. ... That's where people connect on a human level ... and eventually, as the course progresses, we hope that the connection across the table – that horizontal connection one person to another – then gets transferred to a more vertical connection between that person

and Jesus.

OSV: Alpha has Anglican origins but has really taken off in a Catholic sphere. Is this because a program of “radical hospitality” fills a void in the outreach of Catholics?

Kaczmarek: It does have Anglican origins. One of the things we talk about with Alpha is it's the *kerygma*, the basic proclamation of the Gospel. And so you can't really get more Catholic than that. Like the basic proclamation of the Gospel transcends denominational lines. And we're very conscious of making sure that, when content is created at Alpha, that it can cross denominational lines. ... It's also been a grace that allows us to be a bridge for unity among denominations. ... They can sometimes build friendship with one another around the idea of running Alpha and share resources and pray for one another. ... It's just a beautiful witness to an unbelieving world of the unity the Body of Christ can have. ...

But for us, the grace of it starting in a church in London is, in terms of culture, London is about 10 years ahead of us in this post-Christian culture or the secularization of culture.

...

We've been very good at liturgy. We've been very good at sacramentalizing and perhaps catechizing, but maybe have missed the evangelization piece, the piece where they first need to encounter Christ. ... So it's just putting things back in right order and then allowing the Church to have this beautiful arm or sense of radical hospitality, a warmth that people maybe haven't experienced in their churches before and we're realizing now that they desperately need. ... I think the Church always relied on the domestic church to be places of belonging and encounter with Jesus and reconciliation and all the things God designed the domestic church to do. We're just not in a place that that's really happening anymore. ... I think we've seen this longing and this discontent with business as usual in the Church. ...

OSV: You used the word *kerygma*. Is one of the ways our work is stacked against us is this tendency that, the more urgent or central a concept is, the more opaque and inaccessible our word for it is?

Kaczmarek: It's interesting depending on where you are in the country to see how comfortable or aware people are with even the language of *kerygma* or evangelization. ... I have to be conscious of the broad swath of where we are as Church in the U.S. today, and not everyone is there yet. Not everyone's on the same page, so there's a consciousness about that. ... If you've been raised in the Church, if you're a cradle Catholic, you often speak this language – we call it “Christian-ese” jokingly – ... and people on the outside don't understand what we're saying.

Don Clemmer is managing editor of Our Sunday Visitor. Follow him on Twitter: [@clemmer_osv](https://twitter.com/clemmer_osv)