

The YMCC Alpha Journey

YMCC stands for Youth Ministry, MacKillop Catholic College. We are located on the sunny Central Coast of NSW and our Alpha journey began during Term 2 of the pandemic in 2020. Sr. Jennifer, OSA had recently joined the MacKillop community and together we have enjoyed the opportunity to run Alpha at our school and observe the faith formation that occurs as they complete Alpha.

The Youth Ministry Coordinators in the Diocese of Broken Bay wanted to engage the students with something positive, provide an opportunity to socialise and continue to grow in faith; even if we were in lockdown. We completed the Alpha Youth Series online and every Monday evening we gathered, played games to break the ice, watched the videos and would go off into the breakout rooms where each coordinator worked with a small group of students. To replace the retreat, we offered 'Holy Spirit Week' where we engaged in prayer ministry online in our break out rooms. There were five YMCC students who participated regularly. By the end of our first Alpha, we were surprised at the connections we had made and looked forward to meeting each other in person.

In Term 3 we gathered the students who had completed Alpha online and hosted a reunion lunch to debrief about their Alpha experience and look at the possibility of running it after school. The students were eager to introduce the program to other students and become small group leaders. We met during a number of lunch breaks and used the training videos that were available to equip the students to become leaders and we allocated roles to the jobs of welcoming the students, organising the afternoon tea, and running the icebreakers and games. We even organised weekly Zoom meetings with the students at St Peter's Catholic College, Tuggerah to watch the videos and share our thoughts on the discussion questions. Approximately 15 students joined Alpha and despite restrictions, we were able to adapt and had a very positive experience.

By Term 4 more restrictions were introduced and beyond serving individually wrapped food, we had to separate the students so that they were only interacting with students from their year group. Another restriction was that after school activities were prohibited to limit the time students spent on-site. To overcome this, Alpha was offered during the 45 minute lunch break and this was another experience with its own challenges to overcome. Thankfully, by the time we got to Holy Spirit Week, we were able to stay back after school. By the end of the term, over 40 students from Years 7-9 had completed the Alpha program. Year 8 had over 20 students, whereas there were only 4 students from Year 9 and the experience with each year group was different but enjoyable.

By the beginning of 2021, restrictions had eased further and we were able to mix the students and run Alpha after school. This time around the focus was on developing the small group leaders and so we ran Alpha with the focus on how to develop the communication and leadership skills of the small group leaders. Each week, students took it in turns to be a student or a leader. The 'students' would genuinely discuss the question and then we would pause the discussion if there was something to bring to the leader's attention. An example of this would be encouraging students to participate or discussing different strategies that they could use if they noticed that one particular student was overtaking the conversation. Holy Spirit Week was also different because the students practised prayer ministry on each other. Term 2 saw a lot of success with the Alpha leaders allocated to younger students in Years 7 and 8. The leaders excelled at running icebreakers and games and developed their confidence and leadership skills. They learnt how to be more flexible in their approach and adjust their plans to suit the student's needs. It was the first term, after our first lockdown, that life was returning to 'normal'.

Life did not return to 'normal' and most of Term 3 was spent in lockdown and home-based or online learning. Fifteen students had already signed up for Alpha and were happy to participate in an online Alpha and so each Monday afternoon we would watch the videos together online and then use the breakout room function for small group discussions. Each week there was a different theme ranging from 'Beach Party' to 'Red' for Holy Spirit Week. Holy Spirit Week was very different and a bit of careful planning occurred to ensure it was a special Alpha session for the students. A care package was mailed to each student's home and the boxes were sealed so that the students couldn't open them until we were online together for Holy Spirit Week. The week before, we clarified that the students had each received a package and there was much excitement and anticipation as to the contents of the care packages. The students opened their packages online and we went through their reflection booklet and care package together. The following items were included in the care package.

Chocolate and lollies - A reminder that even though we are in lockdown, life is still sweet.

Tea light candle - To symbolise that the light of Christ is within you.

Stickers - A reminder that we need to stick together and support each other!

Squishy ball - This squishy ball is just for you to squeeze your stress out.

Slinky - When you play with this slinky, let it remind you that we are not perfect. As human beings we are going to make mistakes, but if we stay connected to God, even when we fall away from Him, He will always draw us back.

Red petals - To symbolise that the Holy Spirit is with you.

The students really enjoyed the experience and although there were some students who didn't engage in prayer ministry, they were happy to journal and reflect on their



Alpha journey.

This year we ran the Alpha Film Series in Term 1 and we will offer the updated Alpha Youth Series in Term 3. There is still so much for us to explore in the Alpha program and the Youth Ministry Coordinators of the Central Coast Catholic schools are hoping to plan a potential launch of Alpha together, as well as run the retreat together so that students from our schools are able to meet and interact with each other. Alpha is such an engaging experience for students and as a teacher and Youth Ministry Coordinator, I am also learning and growing in my own faith. The resources, training videos and support that is on offer is extensive but it also allows for groups to tailor it to their specific needs. I feel so blessed to be able to share the Alpha experience with my students and would recommend this series to everyone.