

Why we use Youth Alpha as the “gateway” to Confirmation

Dear Parents/Guardians

We all want our children to grow up with a strong faith. But it’s a sad fact that across the country, Catholic parish populations are ageing.

Faced with so many demands, young parents have little time for themselves, let alone for God. Even without the impact of the pandemic, it’s hard to bring the children to church when they are young; and even harder as they get older and start complaining that church is “boring” and not for them.

It’s not surprising, then, that families drift away from regular attendance before or after First Holy Communion. Often they return for Confirmation, only for it to live up to its depressing nickname, as the “sacrament of exit”. This has been a problem for us at Holy Innocents’, as it is for parishes across the country. The statistics are frightening.

Back to basics

Despite all of the devotion and hard work of our catechists over many years, our sacramental programmes have not been stemming the tide. The model is broken; and we need to fix it. That’s what we have been trying to do at Holy Innocents’ over the past few years.

Father Victor’s starting point was to go back to basics, by rediscovering in Church teaching a simple truth – that **sacraments are for disciples of Jesus, for those who have committed their lives to Him**, rather than a mark of being attached to a church and having reached a certain age.

Starting with First Holy Communion

In relation to First Holy Communion (FHC), it was this emphasis on discipleship which led us to ask parents to join in our remodelled FHC journey, by attending the sessions with their children and also by considering attending Alpha. Because, as we all know, children at that age have little hope of being sustained in their fledgling discipleship without the strong support and example of their parents.

Moving on to Confirmation

When it comes to Confirmation, parental support remains important – but it can no longer be determinative. In putting themselves forward to be confirmed, a teenager must not be acting to please, placate or obey their parents. It’s no longer parents (or sometimes, grandparents) making a decision for a child: it’s a young person making a decision for themselves.

Or rather, two decisions. Because sacraments are for disciples of Jesus, for those who have committed their lives to Him. So before asking, “Would I like – am I ready – to be confirmed?”, each young person needs to respond to a threshold question: “Have I committed, or am I ready to commit, my life to Jesus Christ? In other words, am I, or am I ready to become, His disciple?”

Only when they have made that discipleship commitment should they go on to ask whether the time is right for them to be confirmed. Not as an end in itself, but to receive the anointing and support of the Holy Spirit on their ongoing road of discipleship.

Which explains why we divide the Confirmation journey into two parts, two stages:

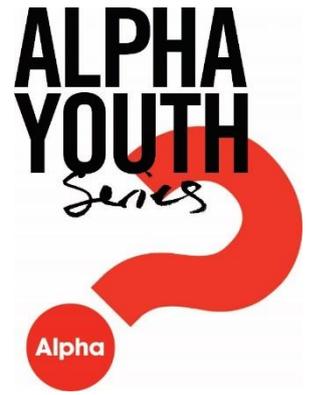
Stage 1 – conversion and commitment to discipleship; followed by

Stage 2 – preparation for and reception of the sacrament of Confirmation, as a consequence of and to support that conversion and commitment.

Putting the theory into practice

As in 2019/2020, our Confirmation journey 2021/2022 will reflect this “two stage” approach:

- **Stage 1 – Youth Alpha as the gateway:** starting with Youth Alpha, which focuses on the basic truths of our faith, the “kerygma”, and explicitly invites those taking part to conversion and making a commitment to Christ.
- **Invitation to commitment:** towards the end of Youth Alpha, asking the unconfirmed participants to think and pray about whether they have made, or are ready to make, that commitment to discipleship, to hand their lives to Jesus; and if so, whether they are ready to go forward for Confirmation.
- **Stage 2 – Confirmation preparation:** inviting those who are ready to go forward to Confirmation at the end of Youth Alpha to move into the second part of the Confirmation journey, with sessions aimed at preparing them for Confirmation. In planning this second part, we aim to build on Youth Alpha, avoiding duplication and so keeping the overall commitment about the same as for the previous Confirmation programme.
- **For those who are not ready to be confirmed:** the young people who decide they are not ready for Confirmation will continue to the end of Youth Alpha; and will be able to move to the second part of the Confirmation journey in future years, when they are ready to do so – all in God’s good time.



Engaging with young people

Pope Francis has said, “I want to state clearly that young people themselves are agents of youth ministry.” We try as hard as possible to make that happen in Youth Alpha:

- **Focus groups:** groups of youngsters helped us design aspects of each of our Youth Alpha courses.
- **Young leadership:** we invite regular attendees from one Youth Alpha to volunteer to help in the planning and leadership of the next course. Last time, we had an amazing response to this invitation, illustrating the popularity of Youth Alpha with the young people who participate. We are hoping for the same this time.
- **More listening:** we also try to involve those volunteers in planning the Youth Alpha weekend and the content and style of the Confirmation sessions in the second stage.
- **Young people learning from each other:** Youth Alpha is not about adults teaching young people. It’s about the young people sharing their own experiences and learning from each other, as they gather in small discussion groups each week to answer questions arising from the Youth Alpha films, which were produced specifically for young people. This approach works well with adults – and brilliantly with Youth Alpha.

Your support is vital

Please pray for your youngsters and support them in attending regularly, including the weekend away.

In addition, Father Victor strongly encourages you, if you have not done so already, to attend adult Alpha yourselves. “In doing so,” he says, “you will not only deepen your own faith. You will be accompanying your children on their faith journey in a very special way. And providing a great example of how journeying in our faith, developing and deepening our relationship with the Lord, is a lifelong task for all of us.” We are hoping to run our next adult Alpha course in early 2022.

Finally, please pray for us, and be patient with us when we get things wrong. We are trying our best!

Holy Innocents’ Youth Alpha and Confirmation teams