Online

It's been amazing to see how churches and youth ministries are adapting to the changing landscape in our culture.

Like many churches and groups, in this age of social-distancing you are likely looking for ways to continue connecting and doing ministry online. So, what follows are our best tips and tricks (so far) for how to run Alpha in an online setting.

Here's everything you'll need to take Alpha online for your remaining sessions.

What you will need:

The Zoom app

It's free to download but we'd recommend the paid subscription version that can host meetings longer than 40 minutes.

(Though other apps could work as well, Zoom is our #1 choice, especially for groups of more than 12 people). Zoom has a number of great tutorials to help you get it all figured out!

A solid Internet connection

You can share your screen and play the episode - it works much better when the episode is downloaded first.

How each session could look:

• **6:40 p.m.** Team Prayer and Brief

• **7:00 p.m.** Welcome Guests and give guidelines on how to use Zoom

• **7:05 p.m.** Fun Icebreaker—we want people to laugh! (more on this below)

• **7:15 p.m. - 8:15 p.m.** live stream video with breaks for discussion using breakout rooms (these can be pre-assigned or done on the fly)

• **8:15 p.m.** Final discussion time

• **8:30 p.m.** End

• **8:45 p.m.** Send Follow Up Message(s)

Preparing well:

Pray. Thankfully, the presence and power of God is not bound by social distancing or digital interfaces! Pray for youth by name. Pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit to bring peace and love to people and pray against the spiritual forces of evil that want to bring fear, death, and destruction in this time. Pray for your team. And pray for all of the technology to work well. Try and find ways to join other youth workers to pray together.

Build a Team. More below on what new roles you will need to fill. One thing to consider is how to empower young people to be hosts and helpers on your Alpha.

For additional support as you run Alpha, contact us at **youth@alphacanada.org.**

Reach out. While many of us are thinking through the question of how we can stay connected to the students already in our ministry...a GREAT question is how can we use this situation as a way to reach out to those who don't yet know God? Now, perhaps more than ever, the need for the hope found in Jesus is profound.

Students, like all of us, have questions and fears about all that is happening. You can provide a safe and loving way for them to connect. Be prepared for questions to naturally lean towards what's happening with COVID-19, and then invite conversation around the deeper issues of faith and where truth can be found in a world that is very confusing and concerning.

Some of the students in your ministry who were always "too busy" to share their faith or intentionally connect with their friends may now have their calendars cleared. Encourage them to use this time wisely and with great intentionality. It is highly probable that their friends would welcome the opportunity for something to break up their day and help them work through their questions.

Use Zoom Breakout Rooms. Creating breakout rooms on Zoom can be done ahead of time or during your session. It's a great idea to have someone on the team specifically responsible for making the assignments and troubleshoot any issues along the way. As a host, you are able to broadcast announcements to the groups to let them know the question(s) for discussion and also to give them a warning when time is almost up! Zoom has some great tutorials on how to use this feature well.

Food, Fun, & Hospitality:

Even before all of this, our world has been experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. The need for social distancing has heightened this even more and people are growing increasingly desperate to find ways to make authentic connections with others.

Usually on Alpha, hospitality centers around food. In an online Alpha, food is replaced with fun. (Of course an in person Alpha should be fun, but the need here is even greater.) In order to help people settle in and feel connected, they need to laugh together. A shared laugh can have the same impact as a shared meal.

Make sure that each host and helper have access to a list of icebreaker questions. You can find some great examples here. There are also a lot of other great online games to help you with elements of fun. You can find a list and more information here.

Download Youth Ministry is currently offering a free month of Sidekick, designed to bring interactive elements to your experience. You can find out more info HERE.

Here are a few other tips:

Engage from the start: Identify a strong MC or group host who is energetic and engaging right from the start of the online session—saying hello to people, asking questions, telling jokes. Avoid the silence and keep excitement and enthusiasm high. Be aware that while awkward silence in person is manageable, in an online setting silence is deafening, so try your best to keep interaction going.

Chat it up: Encourage hosts, helpers, and guests to use the chat functionality to comment and ask questions during the video as well as during discussion time when others are talking.

Communicate Well: Send weekly group messages re-capping last week's talk/discussion and ask youth to share their thoughts.

If you want to raise the level of hospitality and communicate "we love and care for you," consider sending a gift to everyone using Amazon or another delivery service. You could also mail them a handwritten card and a bag of microwave popcorn! Be creative about how you can give a personal touch from a distance.

Prayer Ministry and Alpha Weekend:

Even though you won't be able to host an Alpha Weekend/Day Away we would still encourage you to host an Alpha Weekend Online. While you won't be able to visit a new location and have the opportunity to connect during free time the same way, spending extended time connecting with others will be incredibly valuable for those who are feeling the strain of social distancing.

In this context, we recommend hosting a "binge party" and watch all three videos in one day. Make sure to add fun elements into the day - surveys, games, humorous videos— the day should feel varied and creative. You don't have to stay online all day, but be sure to communicate the schedule clearly.

When it comes time for prayer ministry, break out into small groups and offer to pray for anyone who would like. Set aside time and let groups connect through various platforms. You can also invite guests to request prayer from the group host via chat or email. The group host can then reach out individually to the guests to set up time for a quick individual prayer time that day.

If you feel it is appropriate you could also host a few worship songs together. Before, during or after the sessions. This could be done by someone leading a few songs live, or Youtube videos of your favourite artists and songs.

Building a Team:

Some of the usual jobs, like the food prep and the setup crew aren't needed online, but here are some key roles* that you will need:

*Note: We understand that on smaller teams one person will need to fill many roles - you can do this!

MC: A good MC will bring the energy, greet people as they come online, get them talking and engaged while people are joining in, and will make the overall experience a lot of fun. Equip them well with questions and icebreakers that engage the whole group.

Technical Help: If the MC brings the fun, this person brings the function. This person will work behind the scenes to handle everything from sharing the video, to creating breakout rooms, to moderating the chat window, and troubleshooting tech issues with guests. This person needs to be very comfortable with the platform you choose and needs to understand the functionality of it all.

Host and Helpers: The role of the host and helper during online Alpha doesn't change much. The hosts may need to be a bit more energetic and dynamic than they are in person to help maintain energy within the group. Being online may help those who are more reserved or a bit quieter to actually speak up and participate in discussion. Helpers can also help moderate the chat window for those who choose to participate that way. Some churches find that guests participating in online Alpha are willing to be more vulnerable and groups may delve into deeper conversation more quickly that they are otherwise used to.

Prayer: You will need people supporting you and your team behind the scenes and praying for God to move powerfully in the lives of your guests.

Other Top Tips for Creating the Space:

When running Alpha in a physical space, the setting and environment are essential elements to help people feel comfortable and open up in conversation. In a virtual Alpha, the space that you are inviting people in to is equally important. There are a few things that you can do to help create the best online experience for your guests.

1. Minimize Technical Distractions & Expect Technical Difficulties

As people enter the room, the MC will be the first face that they see. It's important for the image and audio to be as clear as possible to avoid distractions. You'll also want to make sure that all of the settings are sorted out before guests start to arrive. The same principle applies to small group hosts if you are using breakout rooms.

Tech it to the next level! Also remember that the kind of microphone you use will affect the other participants' ability to hear you. Preferably, you should use a headset rather than the camera's built-in microphone to help lessen any unwanted background noise, as well as feedback.

By lessening technical distractions (and not allowing them to bother you too much by expecting the learning curve), you are increasing the feelings of being connected and "together," as well as honouring those who may be sharing at any given time.

2. Check Your Connection.

The most important aspect of video conferencing is stable and fast internet connectivity. Once the connection is slow, it will affect the conference adversely with visual disruptions and inconsistent audio. This is an essential component for the person hosting the call.

The ultimate goal is for people to feel comfortable and allow themselves to settle into the experience ahead. If the video is choppy or they have to constantly repeat themselves because the host connection is weak, it will be hard to feel like they can open up about their thoughts and feelings.

Tech it to the next level! When you are using your laptop, make sure to adopt a LAN cable that will help guarantee a stable internet connection. Go for a secure connectivity along with advanced encryption and password protection in case your only choice is wireless connectivity.

Also be sure to limit other software or apps that are running on your computer to help things run as smoothly as possible.

3. Do a Practice Call.

As you prep your team to run online, it's a great idea to do at least one practice call. Assemble the team on the platform you're using, run through the basics of how it works, test video and audio settings and do a test run of breakout rooms on Zoom. The goal is to have the team comfortable with the experience so they can help others, rather than needing to be helped themselves.

4. Look Behind You!

The people you're interacting with will be treated to the view of whatever is behind you through the whole session. While it's not about projecting a perfect image, you may have something sitting there that's part of the scenery to you but jarring to everyone else. The goal is to minimize visual distractions to help guests focus on the conversation. Encourage all team members to do the same.

Tech it to the next level! MC's and hosts may also want to consider some form of "On Air" sign for their door to help others at home know that it's not a good time to wander in for a visit.

5. Be Prepared.

When reading the questions to the group in person, you wouldn't hold the paper up in front of your face or be distracted looking for notes on your phone. The same idea applies here.

Have everything that you need readily available so you are able to focus on interacting with guests. Focusing eye contact on your camera will allow people to feel more connected to you. If your attention is wandering at other screens or places in the room, theirs will too!

6. Give Guest Guidelines.

In the same way that you would help orient guests to a physical space by telling them where the washrooms are or helping them find food, be sure to give your guests some directions as they join the group. Take a few moments to help them understand the platform, find the mute button and the chat box.

Here are a few other things to communicate:

1. Encourage all guests to be on video, not just audio.

2. Encourage them to join in a quiet environment if possible.

3. Ask everyone to unmute during discussion (unless in a noisy setting). This allows for more organic, free-flowing conversation.

4. Ask guests to not use green screen backgrounds, to help create a more natural environment. It may be fun to have moments when everyone uses the greenscreen for a few laughs, but it may be distracting during discussion.

5. Invite the guests to use Gallery view to see all the other participants.

In Summary:

Thankfully, many churches and ministries have tools to allow us to continue doing meaningful ministry in this disrupted and turbulent time. We are praying for you as you love teens and help connect them to each other and to our gracious Heavenly Father. Please reach out and let us know how it goes!