**ALPHA IN MOREE**

On Tuesday 12th February, this year a group of five rather excited yet slightly nervous parishioners eagerly welcomed nine participants to our first six-week Pilot Alpha Course at our Parish Centre here at St Francis Xavier, Moree. Dinner was ready at 6.00.

By 8.10 that evening fourteen of us had dined, watched Topic 1 Video, ‘Is there more to life?’ and participated in a discussion group. After seeing some of our older guests to their cars and the kitchen left as we found it, the team had a short prayer time and review and we were off home. By the grace of God Alpha was happening!

Then, on Thursday 2nd May in the first week of the Easter Season this year once again our team welcomed a group of fourteen as we embarked on Week 1 of a full eleven week Alpha Course. We were very thankful for the parishioners who participated in the pilot course as it gave us all a chance to have a taste of what we hope to do in the future to reach out to the unchurched and to share with our Catholic brothers and sisters the joy of experiencing a personal relationship with Jesus and the Holy Spirit from within our Catholic tradition.

For those who may not be familiar with Alpha, it is an eleven week interactive course, each night following the routine of, a dinner, a video input, a frank discussion and as the course progresses a concluding prayer. It began over 40 years ago at Holy Trinity Anglican Church Brompton in London when someone asked the curate, “What is Christianity?’ and he invited the person to dinner so he could explain. Over the years that simple invitation has evolved into the eleven week course as we experience today.

Alpha is an interdenominational interactive program that introduces people to a personal relationship with Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Any Christian group or denomination can facilitate the program but where it becomes Catholic is in what happens after the eleven weeks have finished and how well participants can be welcomed into the life of a parish.

 The preparation for our journey here in Moree had begun early in 2018 when a small group of us who had attended workshops at the Ignite Catholic Youth Conference in Brisbane began to get together to plan and pray. People of all ages from High School up are welcome to attend the Ignite Conference and the workshops offered during the day when the young people are busy with their activities cover a wide range of topics relevant to our living a full Catholic life.

The Canadian priest, **Father James Mallon’s** book **Divine Renovation** was also a catalyst for our group as was listening to the **Divine Renovation podcast**s that come from St Benedict’s parish in Nova Scotia, Canada. By using the Alpha Program at St Benedict’s, the parish has been renewed from being rundown to bursting at 1,400 parishioners.

We have been given a great deal of support from **Alpha in a Catholic Context** which is based in Melbourne. Lorraine McCarthy, who heads this ministry has been readily available throughout the last 15 months helping us to be familiar with the Alpha training resources, answering questions and altogether encouraging us on our journey. At Lorraine’s invitation three of our team attended a 3-day intensive training at the Maronite parish at Harris Park in Sydney in August last year.

One important factor in conducting an Alpha Course is prayer. In the training sessions we are told if we don’t pray it will be like driving a car without fuel. When we were first canvassing people in the parish we asked them if they weren’t able to participate would they pray for us. A number of the mothers agreed to make their daily work in the family and elsewhere a prayer for us and we found that a great support. Some parishioners set aside one day each week to pray. Other people prayed the Rosary and or went to week-day Mass.

We were also aware of the Communion of Saints and remembered those parishioners who had worked diligently in our parish so we asked them to pray, as well as St Francis Xavier, our patron and St Joseph and Mary MacKillop. The Carmelite Sisters at Ormiston in Queensland prayed and Fr Christopher, our former curate who is now at St Nicholas in Tamworth said he would ask the Frassati Group to pray as well. We were also fortunate that the Blessed Sacrament is present in the Parish Centre Chapel.

The next important factor is the dinner. We have been so fortunate to have Maureen Wong on our team. Maureen and her husband, Edward have 35 years of restaurant experience and Edward and Maureen kindly prepared gourmet meals for the pilot course and then his sister, Margaret Ha with as much experience helped us with the 11 Week course. Colleen Nash, another gifted parishioner spoilt us as well. All of us on the team contributed to make up the 11 weeks.

And so each week rolled on with topics like ’Who is Jesus?’, ‘Why did Jesus die?’, “How Can I Have Faith?’ and ‘Who is the Holy Spirit?’. There are amazing testimonies on the videos that show the power of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives. Watching people sharing their conversion stories has a vital impact on our faith journeys.

At Week 8 we had 24 hours at Bingara (for those who could come) in which we could pray for the release of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It was a time of laughter, joy and wonderful fellowship.

And so when we came to our last Week 11 evening together, the overall reaction was very positive with comments like;

* Don’t let this die!
* I feel renewed and energised to keep going in my faith, I found Alpha to be non-judgemental and non-confrontational.
* The videos have been an eye-opener and inspiring and the weekend away was fantastic.
* I found the community spirit within the Alpha group so supportive.
* I enjoyed being with people and the communal meal was a great idea.
* The fellowship was exceptional and the best part was the discussion.
* A potential bridge between those who have little or no faith and a great opportunity to share with like-minded people.
* Alpha opened my eyes to the wonders, complexity and simplicity of God’s love, and I enjoyed the companionship.
* Make sure Alpha continues!

It is important to say that we couldn’t have conducted Alpha without the support of Fathers Abmar and Kingsley which we appreciated very much especially when they joined us for dinners along the way. We can only give thanks to the Lord for the incredible way our five person team worked so well together. Each of us pooled our strengths which was a great blessing all round; no doubt, one of the benefits of the great prayer support. Our team has expanded now as some of our recent participants have indicated they would like to be part of the next Alpha Team. Next year we hope to run two separate 11 week courses where we hope to include people who have not been part of our Parish Journey.

Meanwhile, so that we won’t let Alpha die we are planning to hold monthly ‘Pot Luck Nights’ where we can invite the parishioners to share a meal, a video with discussion and prayer. It is still ‘early days’ at this stage and there are a lot of milestones to reach, but to work with the Holy Spirit to create a vibrant, missional parish is our dream.