

Alpha for Prisons

Mini Guide





Welcome

Dear Alpha Team,

We are excited that you have taken this step to run Alpha in an institution close to you. Your decision (and commitment) to introduce Jesus and show love and compassion to those behind bars is courageous. You are about to embark on a journey that will change lives and transform your heart in a deep and meaningful way.

This guide on running Alpha in prisons will cover the following important topics:

1. Why Run Alpha in a Prison?
2. How Can I Get Started?
3. Registration and Resources
4. FAQs
5. Top Tips for Running Alpha in Prisons
6. Working with Local Churches
7. Links to Federal & Provincial Forms

Each institution is different, so each course will be unique, but there are specific components of the Alpha course that we call Alpha DNA, which should be consistent among all courses. We have found over time that a truly successful course will contain the following:

1. Consistent Prayer
2. Planned and Structured Sessions
3. No Preaching!
4. All Talks (videos) Are Presented
5. The "Alpha Weekend" or sessions on the Holy Spirit are set apart from other sessions

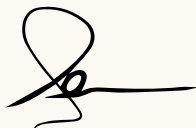
This is not a journey to be taken alone.

Once you are ready, register your course on the [MyAlpha website](#), and you will have access to all the resources and support you may need. We understand privacy and safety restrictions are in place, so when you register, your information will NOT be made public and will only be visible to Alpha Ministries Canada.

We want to walk this journey with you, hear your stories and progress, and, most importantly, keep you covered in prayer. Remember, you are not alone in this. You have a tremendous support group here at Alpha Canada, a team at your church, a site chaplain (where applicable), and the Holy Spirit looking after you as you listen, share, and point people to Jesus lovingly and genuinely.

Thank you for stepping out in faith and obedience.
May God bless you in the weeks/months to come.

In Christ,



Sean Wilkinson

National Director of Alpha for Prisons
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Why Run Alpha in a Prison?

Alpha for Prisons was launched in December 1995 in the UK in response to a demand from inmates who desired to live changed lives.

A. For many in prison, there is a desperate sense of loss and a deep hunger to discover the meaning of life. Jesus Christ is the only one who can satisfy this hunger.

B. Prisons can be a place of hopelessness and depression.

"Prisons are so final and leave you feeling hopeless. That's what God offers—what is on offer through Alpha is hope." - Ex-offender and Alpha Guest

C. Alpha is a tool to help answer questions about the Christian faith and the meaning of life. Only through lives changed by the love and forgiveness of Jesus can we hope to reduce both crime and the desperately high re-offending rates.

D. Alpha is run successfully in all types of prisons and correctional institutions for both men and women and is also used in young offender and juvenile institutions. Prison chaplains, officers, and church leaders often run Alpha along with volunteers from local churches, members of organizations, prison staff, and even inmates who have come to faith on Alpha.

How Can I Get Started?

1. Start praying. Running an Alpha in a prison is both a calling and a commitment.

2. Establish a relationship with the correctional chaplain. Any Alpha that runs will need the chaplain's (or Program Coordinator's) approval.
3. Complete and submit all forms (Federal and/or Provincial). A criminal record check will be required. You can get one by visiting your RCMP office (if you live outside the city limits) or your local police station (if you live within city limits).
4. Let's Connect! Contact Alpha's National Director of Alpha for Prisons, Sean Wilkinson. You can reach him at 506-259-0966 or by email at sean@alphacanada.org. Sean would love to discuss your role in running Alpha in prison and help set you on the right path.

Registration and Resources

Two ways to register your Alpha:

1. Register your course online at www.alphacanada.org and click "do not publish."
2. Contact the National Director of Alpha for Prisons (Sean Wilkinson). If you do not have access to the internet, please reach out, and he will make sure your Alpha gets registered.

Benefits of Registering Your Alpha:

- The Alpha office receives calls from inmates moving between prisons or just starting their sentences and is able to give accurate information about where Alpha is being run.
- Receive updates on Alpha events and webinars that may help you, and get access to useful Alpha resources and material.
- Alpha Canada will be able to offer prayer for your specific Alpha. Our National Director has committed to praying for your Alpha every week!





FAQs

This section covers frequently asked questions based on conversations with site chaplains and volunteers who have run multiple Alpha courses in a prison setting.

1. What are the biggest differences between Alpha in churches/homes/schools/work and Alpha in prison?

- A. Environmental** – you are entering a government-run facility.
- B. Cultural** – sensitivity to the culture is a must (not just Christian vs. Non-Christian). There is a prison culture that you must be sensitive to. Be aware of culture, etiquette, and rules that must be adhered to and respected.
- C. Alpha Weekend** - this can be vastly different (e.g. no food/drinks allowed, depending on the institution), no travel, no changing the room or location.
- D. Guests** can vary from week to week. Depending on the institution, you may have guests who are only there for a few weeks or a new guest who shows up halfway through the Alpha course. Flexibility is essential. Some Alpha sessions may get cancelled at a moment's notice (i.e. health & safety, security reasons, etc.).

2. What questions should I ask the Chaplain when looking to run Alpha in a prison?

- A. What options are available to us in terms of hospitality (i.e. food & beverages, Alpha Weekend, spaces/rooms)? What are the parameters around food?
- B. What day(s)/time(s) are available?
- C. What rules and regulations should we adhere to?
- D. Is there any additional training (outside the Alpha training) that we could take before entering your institution?
- E. Is there anything you can tell me about signs of manipulation?

- F. What do I need to know about how security is run at your institution?
- G. Where do you need help, and how can we support you and your program?

3. How can I (volunteer) be best prepared when entering a prison to run Alpha?

- A. Prayer. Make sure you are covered in prayer. Let others know what you (and your team) are doing. Have family, friends, and/or church leader(s) pray for you. Let them know the days and times you will be serving.
- B. Build your team in advance. It may take months to begin and get everyone approved, so ensure you have a team in place well before you agree on a start date.
- C. Train your team. In addition to the Alpha training, it is always recommended (and sometimes necessary) to take the government's "sensitivity training." Ask your Chaplain or Program Coordinator about this training.
- D. Preparation. Knowing the material/topic is essential for running a successful Alpha. Everyone has a role (i.e. greeter, point person for the TV/DVD, person taking attendance, small group host, etc.). You are on a very limited and strict timeline, so make the most of it by being prepared and ensuring everyone knows their roles.
- E. Understand the culture. Before arriving that day, ask if there is anything you need to know (culture, mood, tensions, etc.).
- F. Get pre-approvals for things you would like to do (i.e. food, reading materials, musical instruments, plans for the Alpha Weekend, etc.). Do not spring anything on the prison staff at the last minute.
- G. Always be aware of the time and keep to the time you have been allocated.
- H. Know your boundaries.





4. What mistakes could a volunteer make when coming into a prison to run Alpha?

- A. Sharing personal information with an inmate (directly and indirectly).
- B. Offering to do a favour for an inmate (regardless of how innocent it may seem).
- C. Getting involved (romantically) with an inmate.
- D. Dressing provocatively or wearing high-end jewelry.
- E. Language. Never whistle or call anyone a “goof.” Communicate with your Chaplain about language to ensure the safety of everyone.
- F. Assumptions. Never assume. When in doubt, ask your chaplain.
- G. Complacency is the enemy! Don’t let your guard down.
- H. Making promises you can’t keep (regardless of how big or small). For example, if you promise a resident a cup of water, ensure you can provide that cup of water. The smallest, most innocent, forgotten promise can/will lead to distrust of that inmate.
- I. In case of conflict with Correction Staff, DO NOT ARGUE. Comply immediately. Regardless of how you interpret any action, you must comply. If you have an issue with how something was handled, you can pursue it later, away from the eyes of the residents.
- J. Do not get involved in a resident’s legal matters.
- K. Nothing in, nothing out.
- L. Always demonstrate courtesy and respect towards prison officials.

REMEMBER: Every institution is different. When in doubt, ask your local Chaplain.

Top Tips for Running Alpha in Prisons

This section outlines prison Alpha best practices from chaplains and volunteers in federal and provincial institutions.

1. Have grace at the forefront of your mind. It's very easy to cast judgment once you see someone with face tattoos or you find out what an inmate has done (never ask, but the resident may voluntarily tell you). Your facial expressions tell a story, and your guests will pick up on them.
2. Prayer. All teams must pray. It sets the tone for your Alpha. Have a Prayer Team, and ask your church to pray for you and your team.
3. Get your heart right with the Lord before you go into the institution. Spending time alone with Him will create the right posture before you enter a prison.
4. Create a Praise and Prayer Request log. Take notes of these things and pray with your team (not the inmates) before going into the institution. Write them down. Debrief with your team following the Alpha session and discuss.
5. Adhere to and respect all the institution's rules, guidelines, and boundaries.
6. Read the room and be aware of the time. If appropriate, leave time for prayer at the end.
7. Keep the conversation on track. It is very easy to let the conversation go in another direction. Be able to respectfully guide the conversation back to the topic at hand.





8. Encourage invitation. Where appropriate, create an open environment for new guests and allow them to invite others.
9. Listen. It can be easy to answer all their questions and get into “preacher mode.” By remaining in a posture of listening and asking questions that provoke thought and open dialogue, the residents will be more open to returning for the next Alpha session because he/she is free to speak their minds without judgment. Remember, the residents have gone through a great deal of judgment already. Alpha could be the only time they get to speak freely, ask questions, be heard and provide answers and insight in a safe and judgment-free space.
10. End on time. This is vital in a prison culture where residents may be disciplined for returning to their cells/bunks past curfew.
11. Assure the residents that they will NOT be called upon to pray out loud or read anything unless they volunteer. This will relieve any stress they might have about being in a small group. There could be residents who do not know how to read. Don’t assume.
12. If including worship music, ensure it fits the audience. For example, it would be a good idea to avoid lyrics that talk about blood (e.g. blood of Jesus). It could be triggering for some residents.

Working with Local Churches

Our vision is that all prisons in Canada (and around the world) are “adopted” as part of the local Christian community. To do this, we encourage local churches to become actively and consistently involved with their local prison. Often, the church community doesn’t know about the prison or has a false perception of it or how church members can be involved.

Local churches can help with Alpha sessions by providing team members as small group hosts/helpers. Churches that run Alpha may also run Alpha training sessions.

Links to Federal & Provincial Forms

- Federal Forms: <https://www.csc-scc.gc.ca>
- Provincial Forms: Please contact your local Prison Chaplain or Program Coordinator for the forms in your province.

Most of the resources you need for Alpha can now be accessed for free through the Alpha website (www.alphacanada.org). This includes: talk transcripts, videos, training materials, tips on how to run Alpha, tips on giving live talks, and access to our live chat where you can communicate (live) with a member of our Alpha team!

If you have questions about resources, please email the Alpha Support Team at support@alphacanada.org and/or visit our support articles at support.alphacanada.org.



