

Zhuang_Alicia-Documentary Magazine Article

Headline: You don't have to believe to belong

Dedication

To people who create safe spaces where others feel accepted.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Bay Area Youth Alpha founder Joanne, and leader Ashley for sharing our stories. Thank you to Mr. Greco for helping me with this project.

Thank you to my friends and family for supporting me. And Youth Alpha for giving me the experience that inspired this story.

Preface

In an age of constant digital connection, why do so many teens still feel disconnected and searching for meaning?

Two years ago, on a gloomy fall afternoon, I sat in the car next to my mom, arguing, tension filling the space between us. Outside the car, people walked past with their eyes locked onto their phone screens. They looked emotionless. It all felt distant.

My mom was taking me to Youth Alpha, a group where people talk about big questions most people don't usually say out loud, like God, purpose, and the meaning of life. Because those topics are often portrayed as taboo or stigmatized. And even though I didn't want to go because I felt it must be cringy, my mom pushed me to try it. "They are a group of very nice people the same age as you." My mom said,

I've always had questions about purpose and meaning. I was struggling to connect with people all my life, mostly because of my questions, and the absence of my social cue. I remembered looking out the window, everything gray and quiet, thinking I wouldn't belong there.

But I went anyway.

I found myself in a cozy room, food cooking on the stove in the kitchen, people scattered around talking and laughing, music playing through the speaker, and stacks of board games sitting on the coffee table. It's just like a regular living room. I felt at ease.

Introduction

From my conversations with Youth Alpha leaders and teens, I learned that Alpha is a discussion-based course where people explore the meaning of life, purpose, and Christianity. Youth Alpha is a version made for teenagers.

Even though we live in a world full of social media and constant connection, teens still feel lonely and disconnected. Maybe it's because scrolling and digital life don't actually fill that

space, or maybe it's just natural to question things like who we are and what matters. According to a 2022 Pew Research Center report on changes in U.S. religious identity, fewer young people today identify with organized religion, especially Gen Z. Researchers like Daniel Cox have also found that many still think about spirituality and purpose, even if they don't identify with a religion.

The Center for Bible Engagement reported in 2024 that social media can make teens feel connected, but also lonely and unsure of themselves, which can make those questions feel even stronger. That's why Youth Alpha matters now. It gives teens a place to talk about things they're already thinking about, especially when they don't feel comfortable bringing it up anywhere else.

The Beginning

Youth Alpha usually takes place in simple spaces like a church room or someone's house. When I first walked in, it didn't feel like a typical religious setting.

Ashley Chen, a high school senior and student leader at Youth Alpha, sat in the circle with everyone else, listening more than she spoke. She didn't seem like someone trying to teach or convince people. Instead, she was just part of the conversation. Like many teens, she is still figuring things out. In an interview on March 8, 2026, Ashley described what she's going through as "searching for direction and commitment."

We get together once a week, usually at night around dinner time. People start by talking about things like "how's life" or "what's up," while eating food and playing board games. It feels casual, more like hanging out than going to a program. After everyone settles down, we usually watch a short video about topics like life, purpose, or faith. Then people split into small groups and talk. According to Alpha USA, this discussion-based format is designed to encourage open conversation rather than formal teaching. This is where most of the experience happens.

For many teens today, religion is not a big part of their identity anymore. Fewer young people say they belong to a religion, and many feel unsure about what they believe. But that doesn't mean the questions are gone. Teens are still searching for meaning, purpose, and direction. They may not like traditional religious spaces, but they still want somewhere to talk about bigger questions.

Ashley's experience reflects that. Even though she grew up around church, she is still figuring out what she believes.

At the same time, social media makes it seem like everyone is connected, but it doesn't always feel that way in real life. Just like me, I often felt unsure where I belonged or who I could talk to about deeper topics. I felt distant from people around me, and it was hard to find others thinking about the same questions.

Youth Alpha exists in response to this. It creates a space where teens like Ashley, and people like me, can talk, question, and feel a little less alone.

The Darker

At first, it might sound like a solution. But in reality, there are many challenges to recruit teens to explore the Youth Alpha program. Because Youth Alpha is associated with religion, many teens, including me, already feel uncomfortable or distant before they even walk in.

In a personal interview on March 1, 2026, Bay Area Youth Alpha founder Joanne Irwin explained that some teens don't trust the church or Christianity because of the stigma around it, so they hesitate to come, or they try it once and don't come back. Ashley also said that Alpha is not for everyone. Some people don't connect with the discussions, and some just aren't interested. Because the program is based on open conversation rather than clear answers, it depends on how willing someone is to participate and share.

Even for people who grew up in church, doubt is still there. Ashley shared that she sometimes finds it hard to fully believe, even though she has been around Christianity for a long time.

This connects to a larger pattern, many young people today question religion, not just because of personal experience, but because of what they see and hear around them.

There are outside influences that shape how teens see religion. Social media, news, and online discussions often show negative opinions about Christianity. For example, Ben Edwards of the Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary wrote in 2020 that many people see Christians as judgmental or even harmful, especially toward LGBTQ communities, often based on how certain beliefs are expressed publicly. This perception can shape how teens view Christianity before they experience it themselves. At the same time, some people connect Christianity with political issues, such as anti-immigration views. However, reporting from *The Conversation*, based on a study funded by the Louisville Institute and conducted by sociologist Brad Christerson of Biola University, theologian Alexia Salvatierra of Fuller Theological Seminary, and UCLA professor Robert Chao Romero, shows that many faith leaders actively support migrant rights, challenging the idea that Christianity is only tied to exclusion or specific political positions.

But because of those mixed views, many teens feel uncomfortable talking about religion at all, even if they have real questions. This creates a barrier before people even walk into Youth Alpha.

Another challenge is that the experience depends on the people in the room. Ashley mentioned that discussions feel better when there are more voices and different perspectives. When fewer people talk, it can feel harder to connect or share. Youth Alpha creates space for conversation, but it cannot guarantee connection or belonging. Some people are not ready, some don't relate, and some are still figuring things out in their own way. And that may be the biggest tension of all: even in a space designed for openness, not everyone will feel like they belong.

That hesitation was real. Before going to Youth Alpha, I thought it would be strict and judgmental. I even worried it might feel like a place where people would try to change what I believe. That feeling made it hard to stay open-minded.

The Brighter

For me, the hardest part of Alpha was just getting started. At first, I wasn't sure if I would fit in or if I even wanted to go. But I decided to try it anyway. Once I walked in and sat down with everyone else, the space felt different from what I expected. It didn't feel formal or strict, and I didn't feel like I had to say the "right" answer. Ashley described the space as "casual" and "low pressure," which makes it easier for people to speak.

In the discussions, no one tells you what to believe. People ask questions like "What do you think?" or "Do you agree?" You can share your thoughts, disagree, or just listen. Religion is still part of the space. The videos and conversations often explore Christian themes, including topics like God, purpose, and belief. But instead of being taught as something you must accept, religion becomes something you can question.

This kind of space matters more than it might seem. Even though teens are always connected online, that doesn't always mean real connection. The Center for Bible Engagement reported in 2024 that social media can make people feel connected, but also lonely or unsure at the same time. Online, it's easy to scroll or react, but harder to actually talk about deeper questions or be fully honest. This kind of interaction can leave teens feeling more isolated instead of truly supported, even when they are constantly online.

Maybe what many teens are looking for is not just meaning, but a kind of connection that feels real, something they aren't always finding online.

That's where Youth Alpha works differently. It gives teens a face to face space where they can slow down, think, and actually talk. There's no pressure to perform or say the "right" thing, which makes it easier to open up.

For many teens, that makes the difference.

Ashley explained that being part of Alpha made it easier for her to ask questions about faith. People listen instead of correcting, and no one expects a firm answer. For teens who are unsure, Youth Alpha becomes less about having answers and more about having a place to talk.

"I actually think you belong more if you don't." Ashley said.

That was true for me and many others.

Not My Last Time

At first, I thought Youth Alpha would be uncomfortable and forced. But my experience was different. It was open and welcoming.

Even though I still don't fully believe in religion, what matters most is having a place where I feel safe to ask questions. Youth Alpha may not work for everyone, but it is nice to know that you don't have to have all the answers to feel like you belong. Sometimes, it just starts with having a place where you can talk and not feel judged.

In a world where most of our connection happens through screens, spaces like Youth Alpha remind us what real connection actually feels like. At a time when many teens feel disconnected, even when they are constantly online, spaces like this show that sometimes what people need most is not answers, but a place to be heard.

About The Author

Alicia is a student who enjoys art, design, and creative storytelling. She likes exploring ideas through writing and visual media, and she is especially interested in projects that connect creativity with real world meaning. Through her work, Alicia hopes to share thoughtful perspectives and inspire others.

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Reflection:

I accepted feedback about being more specific and less repetitive. I added details, what the space looks like, and fixed sentences and reorged to make the flow better. I also made sure Chapter 1 connects more to my main question about why the program exists.

I also made the nut graph shorter. And added a bit more of my own experience.

Next, I want to **add more interview quotes**.