
The Alpha Course

An Example of Church Growth Through Enthusiasts

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What is the Alpha Course?

The Alpha course is a world-wide phenomena within the Christian church, currently operating in over a hundred countries. The intention of the course is to teach the basics of the Christian faith to unchurched people in a series of ten meetings and a weekend using videos and books. The course originated in Holy Trinity Brompton Church London, a parish church of the Church of England, who produce the videos and books that resource the course. Although originating within a specific denomination it is used by churches of many denominations including a number within the Roman Catholic Church. Theologically it is evangelical and charismatic yet it is endorsed by church leaders who would not normally fit into these categories. Although aimed at unchurched people it also acts as a “refresher” course for existing Christians and is a significant vehicle for spreading charismatic renewal¹.

How Large is the Alpha Course?

It is impossible to estimate accurately how many people have been through an Alpha course. Alpha’s own estimates are that 1.5 million people had attended a course world-wide by 1998.⁸ However the number of courses operating is better known. It started with one course in the late 1980’s in Holy Trinity Brompton. By 1994 this had become 4 courses operating in different centres. A year later, after making the course national in the UK, there were 200 courses operating, rising to 750 the year after. So far in 2003 there are 25,435 courses operating around the world, most in English speaking countries, and 7,091 registered in the UK²³.

¹ There are other Christian basics courses operating such as “Christianity Explored” and Emmaus”, teaching non-charismatic versions of Christianity

² Figures from Alpha Office, Holy Trinity Brompton, London, September 2003.

³ (Update June 2008) 192,00 people attended Alpha courses in the UK in 2007, a 15% increase on 2006. The number of courses worldwide in 2008 is 35,289 a significant rise on 2003, with 6,913 in the UK, a small drop on 2003. Quoted from Alpha News, March-June 2008. Figures researched by Christian Research.

As such it is a significant revival-type movement within the Christian church, yet only recently has received much media attention outside of the church itself. Thus it is possible to be reasonably confident the course has not grown through secular media exposure. Indeed it is not clear *how* so many churches came to know about the course so quickly. Its initial exposure probably came through adverts in the growing Christian magazine market, the large number of Christian conference/holiday weeks in the UK, and personal contacts between clergy.

How Does the Alpha Course Work?

The main mechanism of growth within each course is that the people in the church who run the course invite friends and relatives onto the course. Some courses are advertised locally, but anecdotal evidence suggests this brings little in the way of recruitment to the course. Although the Christian teaching comes from the video presentation, the course is intensely relational. The evening starts with a meal with much opportunity for conversation. The invited people have an easy opportunity to widen their circle of friends, which will now include more Christian people.

The meal is followed by a video presentation, of about 45 minutes, on a different Christian topic central to the faith. Topics include: “Who is Jesus?”, “Why did Jesus die?”, all presented by Nicky Gumball, the current leader of Alpha. Participants follow the talks using a booklet containing all the Bible references, and space to make notes about important points raised. All Alpha courses use the same video (with the exception of Holy Trinity Brompton itself where Nicky Gumball speaks live). Thus the presentation of Christian truth is the same on each course, regardless of the knowledge and experience of the local leaders of the course. Therefore the videos and booklets act very like a catechism. Although not as doctrinal in content as, for example, the Shorter Catechism, nevertheless they contain far more Christian doctrine than many churches would normally see, and give the opportunity to work the doctrine out in practice.

After the video, people are split into small groups and the video content is discussed. There is no attempt to coerce people to believe what they have been taught, but to find out what they think of it and compare it with their current beliefs. It is part of the ethos of the course that the views of people are respected and not belittled in any way. There are numerous opportunities for people to become Christians; however there is no high pressure “altar call”. Many who become Christians do so outside the regular meetings.

Crucial to the course is the weekend away, which in many churches is shortened to a day for practical reasons. The weekend focuses on the person and work of the Holy Spirit, and invites people to receive the Holy Spirit. It is at this point that the course functions as a renewal course as the teaching, and experience, is as relevant to mature Christians as it is to new ones, or unbelievers. Much

of the weekend is spent in corporate worship, and it is during these times that people often have an encounter with God⁴.

Those who become converted on the Alpha course are encouraged to help on the next course and invite their non-church friends, thus tapping in to new networks of unbelievers. There are usually three courses a year, though some churches offer less. It is quite common for converts to end up as leaders on subsequent courses, especially when the growth is fast. Thus leadership is often in the hands of those who are fresh in the faith and full of enthusiasm.

The Alpha Course and the Limited Enthusiasm Model

In terms of the model presented in this paper the enthusiasts are those that run and help on the Alpha course. The unbelievers are the unchurched people who, if converted, become enthusiasts themselves helping on the next course inviting their friends. The success of the course is twofold:

Firstly, the potential number converted is higher as Alpha is a more intelligible meeting to invite non-church friends to, compared to a Sunday service. As such there is a greater possibility of believers being converted or at least being retained by the church even if only part of a fringe. Thus even if a believer invites the same number of people to Alpha as they do to Sunday services, their conversion and reproduction potentials are higher, and thus the threshold of revival type growth is lower.

Secondly, the initial number of potential unbelievers is higher. One feature which sets the Alpha course apart from other church based courses is that it is beneficial to both believers and unbelievers alike. Most other courses are aimed exclusively at either one or other categories, either purely renewal meetings or purely evangelistic ones. Those aimed at renewing, or teaching, believers are not conducted in a way that are meaningful to an unbeliever, so few un-churched people get invited to such meetings. There were many such renewal meetings in the charismatic movement of the seventies and eighties but they burned themselves out as their potential pool of recruits did not include many unbelievers. The other sort of meetings, aimed purely at evangelising unbelievers, fail to attract or hold believers, who receive little benefit from it themselves. As such the meetings can run out of believers to help and recruit before enough unbelievers have been converted. Even worse, the new converts often take no further interest in the course, thus failing to tap their contacts with unbelievers.

⁴ It is because of this weekend that Alpha attracts much of its criticism, both because of the charismatic phenomena and the supposedly hypnotic nature of the worship “manipulating” people. However charismatic phenomena are not controversial to those who believe in such things, as clearly Alpha, and many other Christians do. Also corporate worship is always open to the criticism of manipulation and mind control, whatever form it takes. It is interesting to note that Evan Roberts was accused of using hypnosis in his meetings in the 1904/5 Welsh Revival, and George Whitefield was accused of using his tremendous powers of oratory to influence people. The passing of time enables people to take a less emotive view of such behaviour and judge it by its fruit.

By contrast a typical Alpha course starts with nearly all believers, injecting them with new enthusiasm for the faith. Many of these stay for the second and later courses, enthusiastically bringing their unbelieving friends along, yet still receiving benefit from the course themselves. Any converts resulting from the second course remain with subsequent courses, because of the benefits obtained, as well as bringing their unconverted friends. Indeed the course can become the "spiritual home" for new converts for some length of time. Thus the pool of potential converts is much larger than the more specialist courses, enough to push the growth over the threshold of revival-type growth. The ability of the course to "infect" existing believers, while being meaningful to unbelievers, could be the key to its success.

Prospects For the Alpha Course

Enthusiasm cannot last indefinitely as people run out of non-church friends to invite, or they can only take helping on so many Alpha courses before repetition and exhaustion make them change their commitments⁵. According to the model the numbers attending the Alpha course will peak at some point and start to decline. The course will not be maintained indefinitely and will burn out for a lack of enthusiasts. Thus Alpha would find it helpful to keep a record of the number of leaders and helpers on the courses, both nationally and locally, to look for their decline as an early sign of the course burning itself out. Alternative ways of "re-infecting" existing Alpha helpers to make them more effective could substantially improve its future prospects. This already happens for some people through attendance at Christian conventions such as New Wine, which have a similar theology and ethos to Alpha.

In order to sustain growth on the course either the revival growth threshold needs to be reduced - enthusiasts to have a higher reproduction potential - or the number of unbelievers that could be reached must be larger. Alpha is frequently the subject of billboard advertising, including buses and London underground. It has featured a number of times on TV and radio programs, including a broadcast of the talks and a documentary following those who attended a course. Nevertheless the main way it opens up pools of unbelievers is through its adoption by more churches and outside bodies such as prisons, schools and universities⁶.

⁵ The Alpha course is a large commitment for those who help: one meeting a week; prayer meetings; training evenings and a weekend. Some churches run the course three times a year, the recommended number. This can leave little time for any other activities in church.

⁶ (Update June 2008) This last section has been interpreted by at least one website to explain the "success" of Large Group Awareness Training (LGAT), and includes a long quote from this article. The website says: "*This last quote is fascinating. Basically it enunciates clearly how and why all LGAT (whether Alpha is or isn't is irrelevant here) have such a voracious appetite for new entrants*". In this they have missed the point of the Alpha Course, which is to see people converted for their own sake, not to increase the growth of an organisation. Alpha, like most evangelism, has compassion, not recruitment as its "raison être". There may well be cult-like organisations that use LGAT as a means to sustain themselves, but nothing in the experience of the author would suggest this is the case with the Alpha course. The motive of its leadership and grass roots workers is a sincere interest in the people they want to see converted. As such the author would want to distance himself

Other Benefits of the Alpha Course

The Alpha course can act as a vehicle to renew a church congregation, bringing in new spiritual life and evangelical doctrines.

Many Christians who share the beliefs of Alpha belong to churches that have little enthusiasm for either its evangelical or charismatic leanings. Although these churches are not actively opposed to Alpha, they are often churches that have drifted from the initial purity of the Christian faith into various forms of moderation. Dean Kelley has described this process in his book “Why Conservative Churches are Growing”. He claimed that churches gradually move from strictness in belief to leniency, a form of increasing social entropy. Such churches become weaker and, as Kelley noted, cease growing through their increasing lack of enthusiasm for mission.

Nevertheless some of these churches are willing to allow members to run Alpha courses within the church even though the “Sunday experience” is a long way from the vitality of the course. As such the Alpha course can be a refuge from an impure church life for enthusiastic believers. The course becomes the place they meet with God and other likeminded believers who are true to the pure faith. It is thus from the course rather than the regular meetings that they receive their encouragement, treating the main church more like a mission field of people suitable for inviting onto Alpha⁷. With repeated applications Alpha can gradually make a church pure again as all the new converts, as well as renewed members, embrace the Alpha ethos and doctrine, thus shifting the balancing of the church’s ethos.

This article was adapted from the paper:

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and the modelling work from anyone who would seek to use it to support a cult-like view of the Alpha course or its use of LGAT. The author states very firmly that the results of the church growth modelling project do not support such a view of Alpha or any other form of Christian evangelism.

This article was quoted at <http://forum.rickcross.com/read.php?12,24738,28532>.

⁷ Such an approach to impure church life is not new. Pentecostal, Keswick and holiness meetings have all functioned in a similar capacity over the years. The original Methodists class and society meetings had a similar role in the Anglican church in the 18th century.