

ABCs of faith: Beginning with Alpha

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

At an Alpha training conference in Detroit, a dozen people came forward to testify to the power of the Alpha program. One couple had been close to divorce when they encountered Alpha. The course inspired them to salvage their marriage and become active in a church. A young man said he had tried various spiritual paths, including “the cult route,” until through Alpha he found Christian friends and a direction that “fits.” An Alpha leader in his 40s talked about episodes of violence, about failed marriages and about the years of estrangement from his family. When he first walked into an Alpha course, he said, he was scornful of all things Christian. But people didn’t get upset with him. They simply acknowledged his anger, let him speak, and then invited him back. He did come back, became a Christian, and now sets up Alpha ministries in Britain’s prisons (80 percent of Britain’s prisons have an Alpha program).

Alpha is drawing skeptics and seekers to the Christian faith and into the church. The genius behind the program—and in front of the camera—is Nikki Gumbel, a 48-year-old Anglican priest. Since 1980 this former barrister has shared his faith, via video, with over 5 million people in 124 countries.

The Alpha course originated in 1973 at Holy Trinity Brompton Church, an evangelical Anglican church in a fashionable section of London, when pastor Charles Marnham decided to design a course for new Christians. When Gumbel joined the church’s staff in 1986, he noticed that unchurched people were attending Marnham’s class. He adapted the series for “guests”—people who knew little or nothing about Christianity—and recorded it as 15 video lectures.

The Alpha program advertises itself as “an opportunity for anyone to explore the Christian faith in a relaxed, nonthreatening manner.” An Alpha video is currently playing in one of 25,000 churches worldwide, and often to an audience of young adults. According to a 2002 survey by the London-based Christian Research organization, 22,000 people under the age of 34 attended London Alpha courses in the fall of 2001 alone. Contrast this fact with the age of the average church attender

in the UK—between 65 and 74—and you can understand the excitement many have about Alpha’s potential for fostering church growth and renewal.

Alpha’s North American initiative is directed by former management consultant Alistair Hanna, whose wife, Nancy Hanna, has led Alpha as a pastor at St. Bartholomew’s Episcopal Church in New York City. Over 5,000 Alpha courses are running in the U.S. and about 1 million people in America and Canada have participated. In October, Gumbel appeared live via satellite to North American churches that had signed up for an “Introduction to Alpha” day.

Alpha’s smartly designed Web site invites visitors to link to Alpha sites around the world, or to register for one of 40 two-day training conferences held in the U.S. annually. And there are Alpha posters, Alpha recipe books and sing-along Alpha music cassettes—all adding up, reports *Time* magazine’s Europe edition, to an annual revenue of \$8.3 million.

So what’s special about Alpha? As an explanation of the faith and an invitation to conversion, perhaps not much. And that observation probably wouldn’t bother Gumbel. “Our society has changed. We don’t need to change the message but we need to change the way we put it across,” he told *Time* (Europe edition, June 16).

The first thing a mainline church viewer may notice in the video lectures is that every member of the Trinity, including the Holy Spirit, is a “he.” And evil is personalized as “Satan.” The rest of the material is familiar evangelical apologetics. Affirming the resurrection as a physical reality, Gumbel takes on alternative theories—that Jesus wasn’t killed, that someone took the corpse, that the apostles were imagining things—and rejects them one by one. While Gumbel admits that some prayers go unanswered, he asserts that God often responds dramatically to prayers, as he illustrates in numerous anecdotes. Gumbel prays with a list in his hand, and the conviction that “we should expect God to heal miraculously today.”

Alpha puts particular emphasis on the experience of the Holy Spirit, which not all churches will find congenial. In the three lectures intended for Alpha’s weekend retreat, Gumbel focuses on the power of the Holy Spirit and its bestowal of spiritual gifts. Journalist William Scholes, writing in the Anglican journal the *Churchman*, suggests that Alpha overemphasizes a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit, making it “a second conversion experience.” Gumbel does focus on the gift of tongues, although he has said that his emphasis is meant not only to prepare Alpha

students for receiving the gift, but also to prepare them to understand what they may hear around them. Less miraculous spiritual gifts, like the gifts of teaching or administration, are largely ignored.

Martyn Percy of Christ's College, Cambridge, worries that Alpha presents a privatized faith and fails to acknowledge the complexity and paradoxes of the Bible. Alpha, he says, offers no "real social mandate, no prophetic witness and no serious appreciation of theology or ecclesiological breadth and depth" (*Financial Times*).

But there are, obviously, lots of appreciative users across the denominations. Thomas W. Bentum, pastor of two United Methodist parishes in New Hampshire, finds Alpha's theology "consistent with orthodox Wesleyan theology. I think Wesley would be pleased at its appeal to the heart and the head. It is intelligent and yet there is concern that we experience our faith in Christ."

Peg Donner, Alpha coordinator at Laguna Presbyterian Church in Laguna Beach, California, reports that her church has adapted the course to fit its Reformed theology. It has "condensed the three Holy Spirit talks into two. . . . We make a reference to the gift of tongues, but only as one of many gifts given to believers. We have no conflict with Alpha's emphasis on the centrality of Christ's redeeming work and the importance of reading the Bible to a growing faith."

David Jamir of Baker Memorial United Methodist Church in St. Charles, Illinois, is on his eighth round of using the Alpha series. "This course is a mission, a ministry. Alpha is a great exposure for those who are willing to be vulnerable and say, 'I need to learn about what I believe.' It is a first step toward learning something deeper. After Alpha, I encourage them to take something more solid, like the 38-week Disciple Bible Study."

Some pastors, including Paul Stunkel of Joy Community Presbyterian Church in Lake in the Hills, Illinois, find Alpha's discussion of the Holy Spirit "refreshing" and use it as an introduction to teaching on the Holy Spirit. He has used Alpha for five years in this newly developed church. When people visit Joy, he reports, they are invited to try an Alpha class. "The program jump-starts people's faith," says Stunkel. "It creates community and small groups."

Others, such as Dan Baumgartner of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington, have customized the Holy Spirit presentation for their churches. "While Alpha's lectures on the Holy Spirit don't conflict with our denominational theology,"

says Baumgartner, “some of our churches are more comfortable than others with the emphasis on the Spirit’s charismatic nature. Acknowledging that this is a sensitive area, we decided to present our own material on the Holy Spirit instead of using the tape.”

What happens at Alpha? Here’s how it is described on the Web site:

6:15 p.m.: The team meets to pray and prepare while members of the task force set out the chairs, prepare the dinner, etc.

7: 00: Supper is served and the guests eat around tables in small groups.

7:40: A leader welcomes guests and leads the group in several praise songs.

8:00: Leaders and guests watch a video presentation on topics such as “Who Is Jesus?,” “Why Did Jesus Die?,” “How Can I Be Sure of My Faith?” and “Does God Still Heal Today?”

8:45: Coffee and cookies are served.

9:00: Guests split up into small groups of 10-12, with one or two people leading and two others helping. Guests may study the Bible, discuss the talk and ask questions. As the weeks progress, they may decide to pray together.

9:45: The evening ends promptly.

The program calls for a weekend retreat at the end of the fifth week focusing on the role of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the course, a “celebration” or elaborate dinner is shared by all.

At the alpha classes I attended, one key benefit was apparent right away: Alpha puts strangers together at the table. Each week one person cooked a main dish while the rest provided cheese, cookies, fruit or bread. We sang a few songs, prayed together and turned on the video player. Afterwards we talked about Gumbel’s message and closed by sharing personal concerns and prayer.

The serendipitous mix of people gives each class a different personality. During one course session, the children of a single mom joined the class for supper, and we

looked forward to hearing the four-year-old lead us in table grace. Another class was composed entirely of women—and the postvideo conversation began with comments on what Gumbel was wearing, but ended up with an invigorating discussion on the nature of the Holy Spirit. And along the way a parent received advice on her daughter's middle-school struggles, and a young mom found an older woman who was eager to baby-sit.

All this is no small accomplishment, especially in suburbs where people find themselves isolated and lonely. Routines of hospitality and fellowship that are key to church and community life once included Sunday dinners, church suppers and ice cream socials—but such events are largely obsolete these days. Those of us who grew up in church may know how to put together a tuna casserole and lead others in a hymn or two, but the basics of hospitality are a foreign language for many: How do I extend an invitation? How do I make conversation with strangers? How do I prepare a meal for 12 people? The idea of inviting people into one's home may induce panic.

Alpha has found solutions to these problems and shares them in its supplementary materials. The recipe book includes “never fail” recipes for dishes like macaroni and cheese that can empower noncooks. The Alpha song cassettes encourage group singing.

The second plus of Alpha is—to quote Barbara Sholis, associate pastor of Worthington United Methodist Church in Worthington, Ohio—“Nikki, Nikki, Nikki.” A slim, clean-cut Gumbel appears onscreen in a button-down shirt and jeans, leaning casually against a lectern. He sounds like the lawyer he once was as he sifts through evidence for Christianity, weighs arguments and shares conclusions. This is not Billy Graham-style oratory, designed to impress a stadium full of people. It's more like a friendly conversation in Starbucks. “Have you thought about this?” “I've found this helpful—can I tell you about it?” Gumbel's personal charisma and his passion for Christianity propel the Alpha message of good news into one life after another, into one church after another.

Gumbel tells stories about meeting his wife, Pippa, his adventures as a fitness freak, and his futile attempt to understand the American “casserole.” He talks about his disastrous attempt to run a marathon without training for it. He recalls how scornful he used to be of Christianity and laughs at how his atheistic self was caught in his own game. Exuding sincerity and enthusiasm, he quotes C. S. Lewis, Lesslie Newbigin and John Stott while guests panned by the video camera beam back

smiles. They are absorbed, entertained and hopeful. Hear my story, Gumbel urges. I too thought that Christianity was dreary and boring, and look what's happened to me. Read the Bible for yourselves. Look at the life of Jesus. Consider this invitation to know Christ personally.

Much of the faith is left unexplained, and the manuals and follow-up classes are definitely on a conservative track. But in the video series, Gumbel's goal is to issue the invitation: Get started. Recenter your life around Jesus Christ, and watch what happens.

A third plus of Alpha is Gumbel's ability to prompt others to talk about faith. The video format brings Gumbel's passionate testimony into the room while giving viewers a safe distance from which to watch and wait. With the evangelist removed from the discussion, people are able to respond, to push or pull against the Christian offer. Even taciturn church veterans can be induced to jump into a conversation about Christ. Leaders are trained to respond calmly and patiently to even the most inflammatory or cynical comments, to care for the guests, and to invite everybody back.

At the sessions I attended, guests listened carefully to each other and respected those who were silent. When we moved into prayer, many shared personal concerns. People chatted afterwards, making friends. Some challenged Gumbel's approach, recalling their own beginnings in the faith and their journey thereafter. For some, the course was familiar stuff, but for others it offered a chance to review both beliefs and doubts.

Is there a guaranteed fourth result? Are churches that use Alpha gaining members? Yes, says Church Research, reporting that British churches that have run Alpha are seeing an average growth rate of 15 percent. At an Alpha training conference, leaders caution that this happens gradually, and only with commitment to the program. At first the Alpha course brings in church members who are keen on renewing their enthusiasm for the faith. Then, if the retreat is included with the class, and if the leaders continue to offer the Alpha course for at least six months, Alpha "insiders" will begin to invite friends outside of the church. Alpha leaders insist, however, that Alpha must be run with little or no deviation—that means all 15 lectures over ten weeks, with the weekend retreat.

An informal survey of mainline pastors using Alpha brought mixed feedback on the question of church growth. Thomas W. Bentum says, “We’re targeting key members in the two churches that I serve. Many United Methodist members do not know the basics of the Christian faith because . . . we have focused on membership and not discipleship. Alpha is setting the standard higher. . . . Check back in a couple of years to ask about Alpha reaching non-Christians.”

David Jamir is further along in the Alpha journey. He reports that the Alpha formula is working. At his church, he says, first-time church “shoppers” are attending along with members.

Pastors Carol Breimeier and Fred Nelson of Redeemer Lutheran Church in Park Ridge, Illinois, report that Alpha is “vitalizing” members who find themselves “going deeper in their understanding and broader in the influence of the faith in their lives.” Don Wink, senior pastor of Lutheran Church of the Atonement in Barrington, Illinois, agrees. “At Atonement, Alpha has been a revitalizer for those with some previous life in the church. ‘Unfaith to faith’ conversions have been less frequent for us.”

And in Laguna, California, Alpha coordinator Peg Donner says, “I can’t really separate the benefit to members vs. non-Christians. Our classes remain a mix of ‘arm-chair members,’ visitors and people off the street. All are looking for a safe place to ask questions they’ve always had. From members I get comments like, ‘I’ve always referred to myself as a Christian, but now I truly know what it means to be one.’ A visitor’s comment is typical: ‘I was trying to walk alone in my faith, but I was stumbling a lot. Now I feel part of a family.’ From the unchurched, if they don’t make a commitment to Christ, we hear things like, ‘I am growing stronger in my faith, but still in need of work. I need to study the Bible more.’”

Alpha is not for everyone. Worthington UMC, near Ohio State University, did a test run of Alpha and decided not to use the course. For one thing, says Barbara Sholis, the seeker type of worship experienced during the Alpha class would have ended once the course ended, and that didn’t seem fair to Alpha guests, who sing praise songs during the course. Members also had trouble with Alpha’s theology, and decided that it could not easily be “reframed” for the congregation.

Alpha supporter Don Wink agrees that “the course shouldn’t be offered if a church is compromising its best theological understandings or changing the content of the course.”

If a congregation finds that Alpha is compatible with its theology, its congregational style and its outreach vision, then there is post-Alpha to consider. What happens if Alpha does bring people into the church? What's waiting for them there? As Donner says, the Alpha course is usually "one of many waterings for a person's seed of faith. Consequently, we also realize how important it is to feed the [Alpha] graduates into our 'After Alpha' offerings such as other Bible studies, mission projects or just coffee with a leader to pursue unanswered questions."

Without such follow-up, Alpha can stir hearts and bring people in only to send them, confused, back out the church door. Is the church prepared to make a long-term commitment to new Christians and make them a part of the congregation or fit them into a small group? Alpha is the invitation: it's up to the congregation to care for the guests after "the Alpha event," to shape habits of prayer and worship, activate individual ministries and help people to form Christian friendships.

Alpha is not an "evangelism solution on tape" or "evangelism in a can," but an effective tool of education and evangelism that can rejuvenate longtime church members and encourage them to share stories of faith and doubt. Alpha helps churches learn or relearn hospitality—how to invite outsiders in, and how to communicate one's enthusiasm for the Christian faith comfortably and authentically. When a congregation has done this work, it will want to invite visitors, and can prepare to guide them "back" into learning its history, theology and corporate personality, and "forward" into Christian life lived in one particular church community.

Dan Baumgartner sees all this happening. "Alpha has given many of us a renewed sense of our dependence on God. We have visible testimony that God really and truly is at work today, in real life, with real people. The kingdom is being built before our very eyes and in our very midst." That's the real drama—not only when God stirs an individual in a moment of conversion, but when God incites God's communities to continuing transformation.