

# **PASTORAL ISSUES INVOLVED IN IMPLEMENTING AN ONGOING ALPHA PROGRAMME IN A LOCAL CHURCH**

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**Module: B2 Theology of Ministry**

**Date: 1/6/06**

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## 1 Introduction

The modern call to evangelism has led inter alia to the development of structured programmes of evangelism such as the Alpha course. We shall consider the pastoral issues that arise in this context, also based on experience of Alpha at Pembury Baptist Church.

## 2 Strategic pastoral issues in evangelism

God loves the world as it says in John 3:16, enough to sacrifice his son; people matter to God. We are under orders to evangelise, with Jesus' strength (Matthew 28:19). And we need to obey to show our love (John 14:21). So evangelism is not an option but an essential element of the church. There are huge opportunities, with over 70% of UK residents claiming to be Christian and less than 10% going to church regularly.

Evangelism is most effective through the local church;<sup>1</sup> look at Paul's commendation in 1 Thessalonians 1:8. The 5 features of the church of Acts 2-4 were worship, discipleship, ministry, evangelism, and fellowship. Churches will be "sick" if they leave one out altogether. The features also highlight the importance of maintenance – bringing the new converts through to maturity. Otherwise it will be like "exposing babies on the hillside".

The pastor has to take some responsibility, see 2 Timothy 4:3-5. Preaching must create an atmosphere of concern for saving the lost; "it's not about us, it's about him and about them". Helpful illustrations include the story of Pastor John Harper who went down with the Titanic (see Appendix). Also, anecdotes and testimonies from the pastor's own evangelism will inspire.

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<sup>1</sup> Alpha International, *Alpha*, 6.

Delegation is also key; the pastor cannot and should not do everything. Ephesians 4:11-13 lists “functions” to be fulfilled by different people. This requires “enabling” wisdom in finding gifts e.g. of course leader, but then trusting. We don’t just need a few “stars”, crucial are the anonymous people as in Acts 11:20-21 – get the widest group involved, also to ensure “ownership” of the church objective and further build the body.

The evangelistic strategy has to be from the pastor<sup>2</sup> and must fit the church’s overall long-term vision. Within the strategy, there is a choice of methods of evangelism, all validated by the Bible – evangelistic meeting (Peter’s sermon of Acts 2) – individual evangelism (Philip and the Eunuch of Acts 8:26) – sustained “course” (Paul in Tyrannus’ lecture room Acts 19:9) - indirectly, community work (1 Peter 2:12).<sup>3</sup> All of these can play a role, not everyone is “won” to Christ by the same method.

Courses have some benefits, for example bringing non-Christians into a Christian atmosphere for long period; giving time to explain message systematically, and a chance for questions; scope for moving people from interest to commitment, and into discipleship.<sup>4</sup> Disadvantages include the need for a high level of commitment by a seeker to come along; courses are demanding in terms of personnel; and entering a church may be off-putting. A true evangelist may not be suited to courses, where people need to find out for themselves. Evangelists may need to be directed to “meetings” and individual evangelism.

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<sup>2</sup> McQuoid, *Sharing*, 64-76 suggests five points for such a strategy: (1) assess the spiritual health of the church, features such as unity, welcoming, flexibility, desire to grow (2) set goals (3) choose methods (4) implement (5) evaluation.

<sup>3</sup> Hybels, *Contagious*, 85-103.

<sup>4</sup> McQuoid, *Sharing*, 52-53.

In choosing a course some points go against Alpha – the working class find it too middle class<sup>5</sup>, possibly an absence of focus on repentance, excessive focus on the Holy Spirit, some say “selling Christian lifestyle not new life.”<sup>6</sup> But there are benefits – it is not as long as Emmaus, less traditional than “Christianity Explored” and better known than Y course. All structured courses have the benefit of avoiding set-up costs from a self-designed course. Then one can choose rolling or one off. Benefits of rolling are that guests invite other guests and the church “gets” the need for evangelism better.

## 2 Features of Alpha

Alpha is a series of 11 weekly talks together with a weekend or day away (Appendix). Each evening there is a supper together, followed by a talk on a Christian issue and finally a group discussion. The awayday involves a series of talks, interspersed with coffee and lunch, also including a time of prayer to receive the Holy Spirit and to have communion.

The basic unit in Alpha is the discussion group. The guests lead the discussion, with the leaders intervening with questions rather than answers, unless pressed. Individuals thereby themselves grasp and understand the Christian faith aided by the group.

Personnel needs for Alpha are quite heavy; a course leader/organiser, administrator, catering coordinator, organiser of advertising, speakers, group leaders, helpers, room arrangers, prayer team and an army of cooks. Personnel need to alternate for rolling Alpha to work – this requires a certain size of church.

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<sup>5</sup> Hunt, *Alpha*, 160-165.

<sup>6</sup> McDonald, *Alpha*, 9.

### **3 Pastoral elements of Alpha**

There are further pastoral choices, generally delegated to the leader. First location – people need to feel at home, which may argue for a home and not church hall if the course is small. The choice of live speakers versus video very much favours the former. The speaker programme has to involve the pastor, which gives authority to the course.

Potential guests can be reached by house to house delivery of adverts (although personal recommendation is key). Other types of link that we have found bring in people are community activities like the Ladies Breakfasts and Toddler Groups.

There is a need for recruitment of volunteers. This is best done on a personal basis for group leaders and helpers “seeking the person who you would trust to bring a friend to Christ”, as in 1 Thessalonians 2:7. Other jobs can also be advertised, notably the cooking slots. The catering aspect proved difficult at PBC; often insufficient cooks come forward, so the coordinator has often been left overburdened and filling the gaps.

Leaders need to bond; one opportunity for this is the training videos from Nicky Gumbel.

Furthermore, there has to be pastoral support of the team by the leader throughout the course, at regular prayer meetings before the sessions, as well as reviews at the end of each session, and also feedback to the prayer team after each meeting.

Dealing with guests who take “too much room” in the groups is partly a matter of prayer and personal engagement with the individual. But it is also a question of appropriate words from the group leaders, perhaps to encourage the person to help in the running of the group, encouraging the shy ones to come forwards.

There is a need to get feedback from seekers as to what works and what does not for them. This taught us to avoid an error in the first course, which was to hold the away day too early, in week 4 before people had bonded; we now have it in week 8.

Then, there has to be follow-up. We initially took on the All Souls discipleship courses on Philippians but this was found to be old-fashioned and not liked by the guests. Accordingly, we have switched this term to Nicky Gumbel's own book on Philippians, "A life worth living". Furthermore, people becoming Christians bring "moral baggage" e.g. ungodly lifestyles and "emotional baggage" e.g. broken homes.<sup>7</sup> They must enter the small group system and/or be offered more specialised pastoral care or counselling.

#### **4 Broader pastoral reflections**

The experience of Alpha raises broader pastoral issues. First let God guide you. We had envisaged a rolling Alpha but let our falling recruitment be the guide to having a "fallow term" system. We also followed his call in doing a follow up course, at short notice. Similarly in Acts 8:26 the angel guided Philip to the eunuch.

Second, there is dealing with volunteers. There can be "desert periods" as for cooks where repeated announcements led to no one coming forward. Volunteers are free to change their minds about speaking or helping at the last minute; there's a need for pity rather than anger!

Third, Alpha brings out powerfully the concept of the "priesthood of all believers". Pastoral responsibility has to be distributed to groups, and trust given to individuals, right across the

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<sup>7</sup> McQuoid, *Sharing*, 104-116.

church.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, delegation is the way for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to manifest themselves, and not holding on to control. But there is a need to be discerning in who is let loose!

Fourth, there is a risk that people ease-off on evangelism because they think, “someone else is doing Alpha”. We didn’t find this although we recognise this could be a risk.

Finally, we reiterate that in terms of mission versus maintenance, that they are complements and not substitutes. The pastor needs to ensure resources are devoted to both, possibly with a special focus on maintenance of new converts, with a separate leader looking after Alpha or other evangelistic approaches.<sup>9</sup>

## **5 Conclusion**

Evangelism is essential to the church, and from our experience, we have concluded that Alpha is a very worthwhile, if challenging, organisational element in our evangelistic strategy. The above issues have hence been addressed as best we could and our next course begins 16<sup>th</sup> September. Just one thing we need to bear in mind in all this is that although we are called to evangelism, God elects and saves – not us<sup>10</sup> as Isaiah 43:11-12 spells out.

**WORD COUNT: 1500 WORDS**

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<sup>8</sup> There is a need for churches to defeat the “20-80” problem where a small proportion of members (“20%”) do virtually all the work, not least as gifts of the “80%” are unused.

<sup>9</sup> I note that omission of maintenance is not uncommon – in his 570-page book on “evangelism through the local church, Green does not devote any room to maintenance.

<sup>10</sup> Green, *Evangelism*, 375.

**Bibliography**

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**APPENDIX:****1 THE STORY OF JOHN HARPER**

On the night the Titanic sank “Harper (who had a life jacket) was seen swimming frantically to people in the water leading them to Jesus before the hypothermia became fatal....Of the 1528 people that went into the water that night, six were rescued by the lifeboats. One of them was a young man on the debris to whom Harper gave his life jacket to give him time to become a Christian. Four years later, at a survivors meeting, this young man stood up and in tears recounted how John Harper had led him to Christ. Mr. Harper had tried to swim back to help other people, yet because of the intense cold, had grown too weak to swim. His last words before going under in the icy waters were "Believe on the Name of the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”

**2 ALPHA COURSE STRUCTURE**

Alpha Supper	Christianity – boring, irrelevant and untrue?
Talk 1	Who is Jesus?
Talk 2	Why did Jesus die?
Talk 3	How can I be sure of my faith?
Talk 4	Why and how do I pray?
Talk 5	Why and how should I read the Bible?
Talk 6	How does God guide us?
Talk 7	Who is the Holy Spirit?
AWAY-DAY	What does the Holy Spirit do? How can I be filled with the Spirit? How can I make the most of the rest of my life?
Talk 8	Does God heal today?
Talk 9	How can I resist evil?
Talk 10	Why and how should we tell others?
Talk 11	What about the Church?