

Editorial

by the Revd Dr Paul Beasley-Murray

Over the years I have been a great fan of the evangelistic potential of Alpha courses, and used to run two every year. As a result, I had the joy of baptising people who came to faith through these courses. However, increasingly I have become aware that Alpha has its limitations when it comes to reaching people who have no experience of church.

In my book *Reaching Out to God's World* (the third volume of *Living Out the Call*), with specific reference to the UK, I divided the world beyond the church into six groups.

The first three groups are open to evangelistic initiatives of one kind or another:

1. The near fringe is made up of people who are happy to come to church at Christmas and for other special events.
2. The middle-distance fringe used to go to church and have some limited remembrance of the Christian faith and are open to attending an Alpha course.
3. The far fringe are linked to the church by attending activities run by the church for mothers and toddlers or for the active retired, but have so little understanding of the Christian faith that attending an Alpha course is a step too far. Some kind of 'stepping stone' course is needed to get them to the point of seeing the need to answer the kind of questions that Alpha seeks to answer.

Another three groups cannot normally be reached by church programmes, but rather through what has been termed 'friendship' or 'life-style' evangelism.

4. The 'neo-pagans' have no link to the church and pursue 'the sacred' under a variety of weird and wonderful guises.
5. The followers of other main-line religions.
6. The secularists see no need for God whatever.

In the light of such diversity of belief and unbelief, we need to develop what Roger Standing termed a 'mosaic' approach to evangelism: "Like the Byzantine icon of Jesus that emerges out of the countless pieces of small tesserae in the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, so a picture of contemporary evangelism for Britain

emerges out of diverse and creative engagements in evangelistic activity that seek to meet our fellow citizens in the context of their own lives. Such an approach, only when all the different pieces are taken together, presents a truly incarnational engagement with the evangelistic task that will have a hope of reaching everyone with the good news of Jesus”.²⁵ Precisely because people are at varying distances from the Christian faith, Standing argues that “We must dispel the myth that, if we are doing Alpha, then we have evangelism covered and we can sit back”. In this respect, I read with great interest *Making New Disciples* (SPCK, 2015) by Mark Ireland and Mike Booker, who in their chapter, “Alpha Revisited”, point out that, for the most part, it is the ‘low-hanging fruit’ which Alpha ‘reaps’. They quote the research of James Heard (who was on the staff of HTB for five years), the results of which are found in his book *Inside Alpha* (Paternoster 2009). Heard concludes that the sudden conversion stories, so prominent in Alpha News, are the exception rather than the rule. Of those attending the courses in his survey, 86% were either already regular churchgoers or were from the ‘open-dechurching’ category; i.e. they had been baptized, had generally grown up with some church involved, had left at some point and were open to the possibility of returning. This is not to ‘knock’ Alpha, but as Ireland and Booker make clear, “it does suggest that although Alpha is effective in evangelism, in the UK it predominantly draws from a fairly small – and shrinking – part of the population.”

The question then arises, how then can we reach those whom Alpha cannot reach? In *Reaching Out to God’s World*, I give an example of the innovative ‘stepping stones’ courses developed by Leesa McKay, such as *Well Springs* (Baptist Union of GB, 2014), a pamper course for women.

Mark Ireland and Mike Booker, in their chapter ‘Courses: shorter spans, longer bridges’, suggest that “rather than expecting those with the first glimmering of interest in the Christian faith to commit themselves to a single course of 15 or more sessions [such as Alpha], it is more realistic and effective to invite them to take part in a shorter initial course and then encourage them to sign up

²⁵ *Mosaic Evangelism* (Grove Books 2013).

for a variety of subsequent courses”. In terms of what is available for the pre-Alpha stage they give four particular examples:

- *Start*, originally produced by CPAS, but now taken over by *Leading Your Church Into Growth*. This is a six-session course with a consciously working-class non-book culture edge. A follow-up to *Start* is *Moving On!* (a seven week interactive course).
- *Uncover*, produced by the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship, equips people to read Luke’s Gospel with an interested friend once a week for seven weeks. It is a beautifully produced tool with on-line resources that can be accessed by a smart-phone.
- *Table Talk*, published by the Ugly Duckling Company, is a conversational card-game which creates space to ‘explore’ the questions of life. A variety of *Table Talk* packs are available. A follow up to *Table Talk* is *Puzzling Questions*, a video-based six week course.
- *Essence*, published by Share Jesus International, is a six-week course “to stimulate a deeper spiritual life, drawing from the teachings of Jesus and the Christian mystics”. The style is laid-back and experiential – and includes relaxation exercises, making bracelets, smashing pots and modelling in dough.

I confess that I am not familiar with any of these four examples, but I am greatly encouraged by Ireland and Booker’s review. There is no one way to win people for Jesus. We need to develop diverse mission strategies if we are to reach the world in which God has placed us.

The Greatest Challenge Facing the Church: Ministry as Empowerment

Rowland Croucher

Australian Baptist minister and founder of John Mark Ministries. The following article appeared in his book 'Your Church Can Come Alive' (JBCE, Melbourne).