

A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF THE ALPHA AND EMMAUS COURSES

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This dissertation is my own work and has not been submitted
previously in support of any qualification or course

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ABSTRACT

A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF THE ALPHA AND EMMAUS COURSES

Alpha and Emmaus courses have been adopted recently in my Methodist Circuit , and as they are regarded by many as today's most effective means of adult evangelism, I wanted to engage critically with the material and with the outcomes of the courses. Given the limited extent of our local experience, I surveyed the effects of both courses regionally and drew on several other surveys, then adopted a recognised evaluation methodology to examine the issues.

Nationally, Alpha is used in up to one in three churches, Emmaus much less as it is not sufficiently well-known as a viable alternative to Alpha. But take-up of both courses is levelling-off and successors may soon be needed.

Both courses reveal presentational and theological gaps or imbalances but, while requiring serious examination, these are generally not determinative in bringing people to faith and should be kept in perspective. The underlying characteristics that the courses share in common appear more important than detailed differences and both courses produce similar results. Many people come to faith, Christians are moved forward in their faith journeys. Churches change and grow. The impact builds-up the more churches re-run their course, albeit with a vulnerable period after two or three courses, when confidence dips.

Unfortunately, the course materials rather overlook the significant qualitative effects on Christians and churches, especially the added-value of inter-church courses. Their focus on preparing and running courses and their constant success expectation also leave users exposed with little support in key areas: inviting newcomers and responding to their agendas, and helping churches address longer-term issues of vulnerability, change, growth and sustainability.

Nevertheless, they provide a sound, accessible choice for churches to step directly into best practice evangelism, provided they engage every member in the ministry and are prepared to stay for the long haul.

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1 STARTING-POINTS

OBJECTIVES

Context

Finney believes that evangelistic courses ‘have been far and away the most effective means of [adult] evangelism in the past ten years’¹. Nationally, use of the Alpha course has assumed major proportions and Emmaus, the second runner, is climbing rapidly.

The larger part of my Circuit work² has been with these courses, initially with Alpha, but Emmaus was adopted for the largest initiative to date, an inter-church course in Crewkerne³.

The body of research on these courses is building up, although there is relatively little on Emmaus, but I wanted to engage critically with the wider issues of both courses. Techniques used in my consulting background⁴ seemed to offer an appropriate framework for this wider approach and have been adopted for this evaluation.

Why Alpha and Emmaus?

Evangelistic courses are not necessarily the correct or only evangelistic solution, but they are at the top of the agenda locally as well as in a far wider context. Various courses were examined (see page 9) Alpha and Emmaus being selected for this evaluation because they

- ▶ are the two leading evangelistic courses in Britain
- ▶ are established enough to have a known track-record
- ▶ have both been used in my Circuit
- ▶ appear long enough to touch on essential ground, but short enough to retain attenders’ interest and
- ▶ are often used inter-church.

The scope of this evaluation includes the basic Alpha course, but not its follow-up modules or derivatives such as Youth, Student or Prison Alpha; and the corresponding Emmaus ‘Nurture’ course⁵, but not its ‘Growth’ modules. Unlike Alpha, Emmaus is not yet widespread outside Britain and I have not included this dimension.

Emmaus is sometimes perceived as a discipling course for Christians rather than evangelistic, but since using Emmaus I have felt that Emmaus Nurture is very closely parallel to Alpha. Therefore I especially wanted to test if Nurture could be a viable free-standing alternative to Alpha.

¹Finney J, *The decade of evangelism in the Church of England: what can we learn from it?* (address to pastors in Germany, spring 2001, via email from Rt Rev John Finney, 10th June 2001)

²As Mission Supporter with the South Petherton & Crewkerne Methodist Circuit (24/18) since September 1999

³A small market town in South Somerset, population 7,000

⁴As a Director with the WorldTrade Management Services practice of PricewaterhouseCoopers

⁵Subsequent references to Emmaus should therefore be taken to refer to the Nurture course, unless otherwise stated

ABOUT THE COURSES

Alpha

Originating in 1977 at the Anglican Charismatic church Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) this four-week course for new Christians later expanded and migrated to evangelistic mode, being offered to other churches from 1993. It climbed rapidly to become the best-known evangelistic initiative in Britain. The book *Questions of Life*⁶ is the textual basis for the course - 'the Alpha course in book form'⁷.

Alpha comprises 15 sessions, each with a meal, keynote talk (available on video, with bullet-points in an attenders' manual⁸) and small group discussion. The first six sessions introduce Jesus, assurance, the Bible, prayer and guidance. A full day or weekend is dedicated to three sessions on the Holy Spirit. The final sessions cover resisting evil, faith-sharing, healing, the church and Christian lifestyle. The cycle is repeated for newcomers. HTB asserts copyright control over the material and how it is presented.

HTB strongly urges interested churches to attend an Alpha Conference and use its training, organisational and promotional materials. It also provides Alpha variants for children, youth, students and prison use, and a selection of follow-up courses on key issues, Christian lifestyle, revival and family life.

Emmaus: the way of faith

Based on an earlier course, *Christians for life*, the Emmaus 'Nurture' course was developed by five Anglican clergy and published in 1996⁹. Following the catechumenate model and the concept that people come to faith today through an accompanied journey rather than a crisis, the Emmaus Road journey¹⁰ is its centrepiece.

The scope of Nurture is similar to Alpha. Short talks are interspersed with interactive discussion sessions. Detailed attenders' handouts are copied from the course manual. There is no video. Emmaus too comprises 15 sessions: six, on 'What Christians believe', introduce God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and becoming a Christian; four on 'How Christians grow' feature prayer, the Bible, church and holy communion; five on 'living the Christian life' cover lifestyle, service, money, love and faith-sharing. Users are invited to pick-and-mix sessions and adapt freely. Meals or refreshments are discretionary. Courses are meant to be re-run and newcomers invited, possibly accompanied by previous attenders.

'Nurture' is preceded by a small module, 'Contact', aimed at helping churches identify and invite their contact groups, and followed by 'Growth', four manuals containing 15 follow-up courses.

⁶Gumbel N, *Questions of life* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1995)

⁷Email from Ana Lehmann, HTB, 13th August 2001

⁸See Appendix 1 for details of the course resources, programme and follow-up material

⁹See Appendix 1 for details of the course resources, programme and follow-up material

¹⁰Luke 24.13-35

Other courses

Shorter courses than Alpha and Emmaus have not been included in this evaluation as I felt they could not cover the range of topics that would place enquirers in a sufficiently informed position without adding other material (see page 33). I excluded longer courses because obtaining commitment from casual enquirers seems unlikely - interviewees in my regional survey commented that 15 sessions is, if anything, rather too long.

Some short courses have been extended with extra modules, approaching the Alpha or Emmaus coverage, but all seem less widespread and surveys suggest that their take-up is very limited compared to Alpha or Emmaus.

Comparators

Two courses are used as comparators because they are new entrants, offer interesting insights into the evaluation and are the only alternatives mentioned by churches taking part in the regional survey:

- ▶ The eight-session Y Course (1999)¹¹ aims for a highly contemporary approach. ‘It avoids issues relating to the Church and discipleship like Bible reading, prayer, telling others and so on’¹², assuming that users will fill the gaps with other materials.
- ▶ The 14-session Christianity Explored (2001)¹³ carries the strong pedigree of All Souls’ Langham Place, adopting a reformed evangelical approach markedly different from Alpha or Emmaus.

APPROACH

‘Logframe’

The Logical Framework approach to evaluation (Logframe) is a management tool normally used in aid and development projects, offering a rigorous and thorough means of evaluating against five inter-connected criteria. For example, evaluation of an anti-drugs smuggling training programme¹⁴ would pose such questions as:

- ▶ *Relevance* Was there a drugs-smuggling problem?
- ▶ *Efficiency* Was the training course sound?
- ▶ *Effectiveness* Are trained staff back in post and using their new skills?
- ▶ *Impact* Have drug-smuggling detection levels improved?
- ▶ *Sustainability* Is the infrastructure in place to keep it going, e.g. were local trainers appointed and a maintainable curriculum left?

Further analysis confirmed that Logframe could potentially be used for evaluating evangelistic

¹¹See Appendix 1 for details of the course resources, programme and follow-up material

¹²The Y Course Website on <http://www.premieronline.co.uk/pages/ycourse/ycourse.htm>, accessed 30th June 2001

¹³See Appendix 1 for details of the course resources, programme and follow-up material

¹⁴See *An evaluation of Phare Customs programmes* (London: PricewaterhouseCoopers, 1998) on <http://europa.eu.int/comm/europeaid/evaluation/reports/phare/951438.pdf>

programmes¹⁵, but it can be very heavy on process and so, for this evaluation, it has been used in a way that is issue-driven not process-driven. Consequently, the 'Relevance' criterion is rephrased 'Contact', focusing on the need for evangelistic courses to connect with people and their issues as a key measure of relevance. 'Efficiency' is rephrased 'Course materials' as the evaluation focuses substantially on the materials themselves. The evaluation of Contact and Course Materials in chapters 4 and 5 will focus on evaluating the issues, making reference to the surveys, while evaluation in chapters 6 to 8 will be based on the survey results:

- ▶ *Contact* Is contact made with people and do they attend?
 Does the course connect with their issues?

- ▶ *Course materials*
 What is the take-up, suitability and balance of the material?
 What issues arise from this?

- ▶ *Effectiveness* Are people moved forward in their faith journey?

- ▶ *Impact* Does the course change churches?

- ▶ *Sustainability* Does it last?

When a Logframe evaluation is carried out for the originators of a course or other programme, it will look to the future as well as the past, including recommendations of how material might be enhanced and offering alternative approaches. Although this evaluation is not written for the course originators, I have followed this practice in selected instances where it seemed important to lift the evaluation above the theoretical level by suggesting some possible enhancements or alternatives.

Enquiry

Experience of Alpha and Emmaus in my Circuit is quite small and recent, so I wanted to widen the field of enquiry by seeking interviews with some other Methodist churches running these courses in The Plymouth & Exeter District.

A further dimension was added when the Chairman of the District and the Bath & Wells Diocesan Missioner both kindly offered the possibility of a fuller regional survey of Alpha and Emmaus. Including Anglican churches seemed to add value to the survey because they were likely to have more experience of Emmaus, it would add a wider dimension to the research, and the churchmanship profiles of the two denominations are comparable at about one-third each evangelical, broad/liberal and 'other'¹⁶.

As regards secondary research, several surveys of Alpha, some including Emmaus, are now available, three of them newly published in 2001.

¹⁵Freebury C, MA Course assignment 5: *Explore the criteria by which evangelistic projects should be evaluated* (Cliff College, April 2001)

¹⁶Brierley P, 'Churchgoing in England', *Quadrant - Survey special*, January 2000 (no page numbering)

I was also able to interview HTB and Church House Publishing (CHP) staff in London on 18th June 2001 as well as benefit from a regular email dialogue with them and two Emmaus authors.

Assumptions

I have consciously not revisited in detail some issues that have featured regularly in critiques (such as the nature of the Alpha weekend away) in order to make room for evaluating other issues arising from the surveys or desk research. Also, for similar reasons, I have used the following assumptions as starting-points:

- ▶ The journey concept of evangelism: coming to faith is usually a journey or process rather than a crisis. This is foundational for Alpha and especially Emmaus.
- ▶ The concept of belonging before believing: people usually come to feel part of the Christian community before having the confidence to commit themselves and take the step of faith.
- ▶ Relational evangelism as the norm and local churches as the primary agents.
- ▶ The reinstatement of the catechumenate model for evangelism and nurture.
- ▶ Abraham's initiation model of evangelism: 'actions that are governed by the intention to initiate people into the kingdom of God'¹⁷, because this sees evangelism as extending beyond proclamation to grounding in the faith, and aligns with the journey and catechumenate concepts of evangelism as well as the Logframe approach.
- ▶ The arrival of post-modernity, but with a transitional carry-over of scientific rationalism.

¹⁷Abraham WJ, *The logic of evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) p.103

2 ENQUIRY

ORGANISATION

Local experience

Crewkerne Emmaus attenders completed an end-of-course questionnaire, the analysis of which appears in Appendix 2. Churches with Alpha or Emmaus experience elsewhere in the Circuit were included in the regional interviews.

Regional interviews

Personal interviews were held in their home Circuits with Methodist ministers and some course leaders from eleven churches. A twelfth was interviewed by telephone. Their responses were also added to the regional survey.

Additionally, most Anglican telephone interviewees volunteered detailed comments and this added considerable value.

Regional survey

Methodist ministers whose churches had run Alpha and/or Emmaus were invited to complete a questionnaire at the May 2001 District Synod, assuring a good response level. 24 churches used Alpha and 5 Emmaus.

In the 13 out of 18 Deaneries (representing 74% of Parishes) that responded to the Diocesan Missioner's request for information, 56 churches used Alpha and 21 Emmaus. All Anglicans running Emmaus courses were approached for a telephone interview and this was possible with 17. A corresponding 17 Alpha churches were also polled, 11 by telephone interview and 6 by email. The Alpha sample was limited to 17 so as not to skew the data and also for reasons of resource.

Notes:

The regional survey and interviews were carried out between April and June 2001. A blank copy of the questionnaire forms appears in Appendix 3. For reasons of confidentiality churches have not been identified by name where quoted in this evaluation.

Where a single course was held for several congregations, such as for a Section or Benefice, or an inter-church course, this has been counted as one 'church' so as not to skew the data. The results from the total sample appear typical (and probably representative) for the District and Diocese, but the sample is too small to be extrapolated wider. Nevertheless, the findings seem generally consistent with those of other surveys.

Secondary research

The surveys reviewed as secondary research were of St. Albans Diocese (both courses, 2001), Lichfield Diocese (both, 1998-2000) and Reading/Maidenhead churches (Alpha, 1998-2001), together with national surveys by Christian Research/Springboard (Alpha, 1998-2001), Goh (Alpha, 1997-8) and Evangelical Alliance (both courses, 1998)¹⁸.

FINDINGS

Tabulated results of the regional survey appear in Appendix 2 and findings are quoted at appropriate points in the following chapters. A statistical résumé of the regional survey findings appears below, cross-referenced to findings of other surveys:

Take-up

Alpha is used by 13% of responding regional churches, significantly less than Christian Research's figure for English churches of 21% and far less than the 34-39% in other recent surveys¹⁹.

Emmaus seems very new to this region at 4% take-up (other recent surveys 24-27%, but in Southwark Diocese 15%²⁰ - although all included churches using Emmaus Growth as follow-up courses to Alpha, while the regional survey excluded this). Half our Alpha users have run Alpha four times or more, while half our Emmaus users have run Emmaus only once.

Morley's research suggests that take-up of such courses may be lower in rural areas and this may partly account for the difference²¹.

Outcome

- ▶ Most attenders were *churchgoers*, certainly at first (Hunt 77%/80%, Goh 80%), but the proportion of non/irregular churchgoers built-up over time.
- ▶ 59% of churches found that people *came to faith* through the course: 26% of those who had run it only once, rising to 92% of those who ran it four or more times.
- ▶ All churches found that some or many *Christians were moved on* in their faith journey through the course (Hunt found 57%, Goh 30:70 ratio of conversions to 're-

¹⁸Dates in parentheses indicate the start year of the survey and the publication date of the results, if different: Archer W and Finch M, *Diocese of St Albans: adult nurture survey* (Berkhamsted: AW Archer, 2001); Ireland M, *A study of the effectiveness of process evangelism courses in the Diocese of Lichfield, with special reference to Alpha* (Calver: Cliff College MA Dissertation, 2000, edition as supplied by the Office of the Diocesan Missioner, Walsall); Hunt S, *Anyone for Alpha? Evangelism in a post-Christian society* (London: DLT, 2001); Brierley P, 'Church growth in the 1990s', accompanying a letter from Dr. Brierley dated 21st March 2001, subsequently edited and published in *Quadrant*, May 2001, pp.1, 5, see also Jackson B and Warren R, 'The facts: what our research revealed', *Alpha News*, March-June 2001, p.4, Ireland p.41, Warren R and Jackson B, *There are answers* (Abingdon: Springboard, 2001) pp.3, 6 and email from Canon Robert Warren, 31st July 2001; Goh K, *Effectiveness of the Alpha course as an evangelistic tool* (Calver: Cliff College Diploma Dissertation, 1998); *The inaugural report of the EA/EMA Commission on Strategic Evangelism in the UK* (London: Evangelical Alliance, 1998)

¹⁹St. Albans Diocese 2001, Lichfield Diocese 1999 and Reading/Maidenhead churches 1998/9.

²⁰*The Diocese of Southwark Evangelism Review* (London: Southwark Diocesan Board for church in society, 2000), p.11

²¹Morley J, 'What are successful churches and ministers doing?', *Church membership - how does growth happen?*, pamphlet from Adult learning, Methodist Church House, 2001, pp.2-3 (p.3)

commitments’).

- ▶ 41% of *churches were changed qualitatively* - 43% for those running their course the first time - and churches migrated over time from change to growth.
- ▶ Another 22% of *churches grew* numerically or slowed decline (Christian Research 25% for Alpha) - 36% for those running courses four or more times (Christian Research 44-51%).
- ▶ But overall, 37% *remained much the same*.

Staying the course

- ▶ 40% of churches had run their course *four or more times* (Evangelical Alliance 13% for Alpha; St. Albans average for Alpha 4.5 times, Emmaus 2.6 times) and found a progressive build-up of results in all areas.
- ▶ Some churches running their course *two or three times* found a dip in satisfaction and support levels.
- ▶ *The more times* a course was held, the stronger the intention to continue, 78% rising to 92% (Goh 88%) including some churches that decided to change to other courses.
- ▶ 84% of churches established *follow-up groups* for people who had completed the course.
- ▶ Just 17% of churches were *disappointed* (other surveys 78-86% satisfaction, although Lichfield recorded lower levels for Emmaus).

3 OVERVIEW AND CONCLUSIONS

This summary of conclusions is placed before the full evaluation in order to provide a broad overview against which the more detailed coverage in chapters 4 to 8 can be seen in perspective.

Alpha is used in up to one in three churches, Emmaus much less, but they are products of the 1990s and take-up has fallen-off considerably since 1998. Successors may be needed within the next two to four years. Also, while they constitute today's single most effective means of evangelism, it should not be overlooked that two out of three growing churches use neither course.

Although the courses differ at a detailed level, both produce similar outcomes in all major areas due to their common underlying characteristics, especially those arising from the journeying concept of evangelism. Churches can therefore feel confident of using either course, provided they are aware of the choice - an important issue because HTB, for sound reasons, disallows adaptations to Alpha, which some churches find problematic. Unfortunately, the way Emmaus is publicised obscures its potential as a viable alternative.

At the detailed level of content, Emmaus responds better than Alpha to most learning styles, although lacking visual media. Emmaus presents gospel truth assertions more non-directively than Alpha, an important issue in today's culture. However, neither responds well to the many attenders who find it difficult to acknowledge issues of personal sin and guilt.

Both courses reveal theological gaps and imbalances, especially in Kingdom concepts and the dimension of social concern. Alpha balances doctrine with experience better than Emmaus, although with some weaknesses, but both might benefit from giving the celebration of Holy Communion a more central rôle. Although such theological matters have attracted more attention from critics than other issues, they are not generally determinative in bringing people to faith and should be kept in perspective.

The courses depend on Christians inviting newcomers to the course, but churches found this the hardest part of the initiative. Alpha gives little help other than organisational support, while Emmaus' much stronger material still lacks support on this key topic. Once newcomers attend, both courses respond well to their curiosity about Christianity, but set this to the church's agenda, responding inadequately to attenders' questions and big issues such as the problem of suffering.

Nevertheless, the outcome of the courses is in no doubt. Many are brought to faith, although the overall effect on English church attendance is still very small. Many Christians are moved on in their faith journeys, although this is virtually unrecognised in the course materials. This leads to qualitative change in churches and then to growth, disproving common criticisms that the courses are over-individualistic and equip churches to use products rather than do evangelism. Inter-church courses are common and have a renewing and unifying effect, but the materials of both courses are silent on these possibilities.

The changes build-up over time towards strongly sustainable development. The more often churches run their course, the more likely they are to grow and move on in other measures.

However, they become vulnerable to a drop in numbers and confidence the second and third time they run their courses, an issue previously recognised - but not prominently - by Alpha, and only now by Emmaus. Their strong expectation of success also leaves unrecognised the one in three churches that run the courses but do not enjoy change or growth.

Alpha and Emmaus provide support for sustainable development by offering follow-up courses, but regional churches used these differently from the ways intended - and more sustainably - most ignoring Alpha follow-up, and choosing between Emmaus Growth and the many other more visual and varied resources available. Perhaps the publishers might re-appraise their approach. They might also have gone further in helping churches to 'future-proof' their initiatives in other ways.

Summarising, the strong outcome of both courses and similarities in their underlying concepts appear more important than their weaknesses and differences at a detailed level, although the latter have attracted more critical attention. But both could do more to support churches at the three most exposed points: inviting newcomers and responding to their agendas; recognising vulnerable periods such as the second and third time of running a course; and helping churches address longer-term issues of change, growth and sustainability. And it is not too early to look for successors.

So there is no outright 'winner'. Churches can step directly into 'best practice' evangelism which is as accessible as their nearest Christian bookshop. They can have confidence in choosing either course because all respondent churches, even those that discontinued their course, found themselves with benefits in one area or another.

Each course has strengths and weaknesses in different areas and it is a matter of selecting whichever provides the best match for the local situation. If churches are uncomfortable with Alpha's charismatic position, the length of the talks or non-adaptability, then they have a viable alternative. But they should also look at Emmaus on its own merits and not just as a fall-back. It works equally well, albeit with 'more preparation but less cooking than Alpha'²². And churches should not overlook the possibility that the right way forward for them might be something other than an evangelistic course.

But churches need to go into the initiative with eyes open. Accessibility to proven resources does not mean a 'quick fix'. It calls for an every member ministry in evangelism: 'It's good; I'm going; will you come with me?'. Churches need to be in it for the long haul. Experience suggests that things will start to change. The Holy Spirit who energises the mission is full of surprises and no doubt will continue to do the unexpected.

²²Letter from Finney, 17th November 1999

4 CONTACT

Is contact made with people outside the churches and do they attend? When they do attend, do Alpha and Emmaus connect with their issues on their minds?

CONTACTING

HTB²³ suggests that only about 10% of Alpha attenders are attracted through publicity. The remainder come through personal contact with friends. This should not be surprising. It was also a feature of early church evangelism, especially in the second and third centuries when Christianity was a minority religion suspected by many. People needed to trust their friends before testing the water.

But many regional churches reported that the hardest part of all was enthusing their people to invite others. The whole initiative risks falling at the first fence. Why this reticence and how well do Alpha and Emmaus address it?

Thinking outreach

Some regional churches started their courses before they seem to have fully moved to the point where they were 'thinking outreach'. Emmaus ran three times with some benefit, but then stopped, in one church whose background was social activity rather than outreach. In another, it was 'the curate's job'. Many churches - not just regionally - reported people struggling with the idea of inviting others, or lacking the confidence.

This might be thought good reason for postponing a course until the church's thinking had developed, but many churches reported that Christians who attended courses became more enthused to ask friends, and those whose faith journey had moved forward through the course became a strong nucleus of people who 'think outreach'. This suggests that the best way to help churches to 'think outreach' is for them to start doing it, and allow experience to move their outlook forward.

Both Alpha and Emmaus operate on the basis that any time is mission time, provided that, as discussed below, enough emphasis is placed on the necessary preparation. Regional experience suggests this is a sound approach.

Whom to invite?

The first time churches held their courses, almost all attenders were churchgoers, but many churches reported that the next group to come was 'the fringe'. Very positive, but Finney²⁴ suggests that the church and its fringe comprise a very limited target audience, soon exhausted, therefore relying on attracting the fringe can only be a short-term solution.

Looking beyond their immediate constituency, one church had hoped to attract young couples,

²³Gumbel N, speaking at The Methodist Alpha Conference (Cliff College, 18th-19th November 1999)

²⁴Finney J, LRM Course lecture, *Finding faith today* (Cliff College, October 1999)

but had no contacts in that age group and stopped after three courses, disappointed. A number of other churches reported that some enthusiastic churchgoers wanted to invite others but only had churchgoing friends.

Hunt²⁵ observes that some attended Alpha simply through a friend's invitation and had no real interest or commitment, while a 'more willing contingent' knew friends' church connections and were more genuinely motivated to explore. This suggests that there is more to contact than simple invitation.

Whom then to invite, and how? And how well do the courses address this?

Making contact

Alpha seems to focus more on organisation than on invitation, possibly because, in HTB's immediate constituency, typically young professionals, 'the word of mouth is good. It is a self-referring network'²⁶. Also, enormous emphasis is placed on promotional materials. Gumbel's response to Ireland²⁷ on the difficulty of attracting non-churchgoers focused on organisational aspects and did not appear to penetrate to the issue of making effective contacts.

The only Alpha resource to deal with identifying and inviting contacts is one section of a new booklet²⁸, that sets-out 15 suggested ways in ten pages. They appear insufficiently developed to help reserved and hesitant churchgoers break-through their apprehension.

Emmaus offers far more substance in its 48-page booklet *Contact*²⁹, which constitutes 'Stage 1' of the Emmaus initiative (Nurture being cast as 'Stage 2'). Smith considers its content too obvious: 'we all know that we see hundreds or thousands of people in the course of a year'³⁰. I wish. Clearly, churches know whom they know and do see potential new contacts at baptisms and other events, but I found little regional evidence of churches having been able, despite their best efforts, to turn this knowledge into effective action until they had run their courses repeatedly. Even Southwark Diocese found 'There is still a nervousness about the "Contact" phase'³¹.

Contact starts further back than identifying contacts, much nearer to where many churches actually are, by introducing relational, journey and nurture course concepts so that the reason for focusing on personal invitation can be appreciated. It then suggests how to identify and build contacts. But it does not fully address the hesitant. The major issue of 'The contact has been made. How do we get them there?'³² occupies under one page of text. Smith observes 'The gap left unbridged is between having the contacts, and getting people to come'³³.

²⁵Hunt, pp.70f

²⁶Brandreth G, 'The prime minister', *The Sunday Telegraph - Review* 29th July 2001, pp.1-2 (p.2), quoting an Alpha attender

²⁷Ireland, p.27. Gumbel cited the 'seven common mistakes', which have more recently been recast in *Maximising the potential of your Alpha course* (see below) pp.6-12 as 'Seven steps to a successful course'

²⁸*Maximising the potential of your Alpha course* (London: HTB Publications, 2000) pp.13-22

²⁹Cottrell S *et al.*, *Emmaus: the way of faith - Stage 1: Contact* (London/Swindon: The National Society/CHP and The Bible Society, 1996)

³⁰Smith C, *EMMAUS, The Way of Faith*, on <http://home.onet.co.uk/~trushare/JA97BOOK.TXT>, accessed 21st July 2001

³¹*The Diocese of Southwark Evangelism Review*, p.12

³²Cottrell *et al.*, ... *Contact*, p.39

³³Smith

Neither course draws out the importance of contact with those coming back after a long absence. Brierley finds ‘more older people come back to church than leave because they die’³⁴ and Hunt finds ‘Many [Alpha attenders]... appeared to be considering returning ... after a fairly long period of absence’³⁵.

Interestingly, Christianity Explored uses All Souls’ experience to take contacts by stages from a social relationship (through its social programme) to a spiritual engagement. This approach may be especially interesting for Methodist churches, which often have strong social activities but struggle to move this relationship forward. It may be more relevant for Methodists than *Contact*, which majors on the more typical Anglican contact opportunities such as baptisms, marriages and special services.

CONNECTING

Once invited and attending, how well do the courses connect with the issues on peoples’ minds? If attenders do not find the material relevant, then there is little chance of their staying the course.

In today’s post-modern society, course attenders may typically bring belief systems characterised by a strong but unanchored sense of spirituality, interested in God, faith, prayer, religious experience, curious but very uncertain about Jesus, assuming the supernatural and often with some religious baggage.

They will also come with questions, especially on issues such as suffering and other faiths, searching and unsure about the meaning of life, and feeling doubt rather than guilt. They will be highly sensitive to the least hint of being manipulated and doubt the relevance of the institutional churches.

These characteristics do not appear age-dependent. Older people seem as immersed in post-modern values as younger. They ‘pick-and-mix’ at Tesco, digest the relativist ethical values of East Enders and carry the accompanying mind-sets into their spirituality. How well do Alpha and Emmaus respond?

Curiosity to know more

Both courses seem to *start well*. Alpha’s first session addresses, albeit in an less structured way than other sessions, ‘Christianity: boring, untrue and irrelevant?’. Emmaus starts with two sessions on God and immediately discusses God’s existence, relevance and our need of him, in ways that seem to connect immediately with the characteristic post-modern mind-set - although Emmaus opens with the assumption that God is a person rather than an impersonal life-force or undefinable entity, which is a large step for many. The Y Course similarly goes for the connectivity jugular with its opening topic: ‘Life sucks’, leading rather innovatively into the existence and nature of God, although it risks backfiring by giving the impression that Christianity is merely a crutch for failures.

³⁴Brierley P, *12 things to wake up to* (London: Christian Research, 1999) p.6

³⁵Hunt, pp.74f

Both then place a strong emphasis on *Jesus*, as do our two comparators. The person of Jesus is always a point of curiosity about which even sceptical enquirers seem to seek more.

Both focus away from institutional aspects of *the church* onto its relational aspects. A regional minister memorably commented that Emmaus is ‘aiming for an engagement with God rather than a brush with the church’.

Both include issues that are keenly on people’s minds today, for example *prayer, faith and guidance*, but where the Christian viewpoint is much more anchored and focused than many common perceptions such as: ‘Faith is important to me ... I mean having faith in myself and a sense of the spiritual side of life ... I asked the Dalai Lama to pray for her. We cleansed our auras with eagle feathers. We did a feng shui course’³⁶.

But one is nevertheless left with the general impression that the courses are based on where the church is coming from and not where enquirers are.

Alpha is designed to *keep the initiative* and ‘score runs’³⁷. As HTB does not permit adaptation of sequence or content, users cannot directly tailor presentations to connect better with what leaders find are the local attenders’ issues. Emmaus seems to go quite against its ‘belonging before believing’ foundations by devoting the first six sessions to *doctrine*: ‘What Christians believe’, although the content is more sympathetic than the title. Whose agenda is being followed?

There is however room - and encouragement - in Emmaus to experiment. Crewkerne captioned the session on ‘The Holy Spirit’ as ‘Spirituality - with a difference’. This might be taken further: if ‘The Trinity is usually *experienced* Spirit, Son and Father’³⁸ and ‘The church has not yet grasped the full evangelistic potential of starting with spirituality, rather than doctrine’³⁹, one might experiment by starting Emmaus with this session.

Some churches felt that the courses assume a *level of knowledge* and church experience from attenders that is beyond where many have reached, although others considered that Emmaus was more suitable than Alpha for beginners and benefited from not giving a too-glossy image. One leader commented that Emmaus runs at a slower pace than Alpha, helping attenders to assimilate information and experiences in smaller steps.

It would not however appear practical to add extra material so as to start without any assumptions whatsoever. This would stretch the courses beyond a viable length (see page 33). It could also discourage attenders who already had some background. Hunt⁴⁰ found that only 7% of attenders had no church experience, 9% had some experience and the rest were fringe or regular attenders - although this breakdown might suggest that Alpha *did* assume too high levels of prior knowledge, and those with no church experience stayed away or fell away.

³⁶Hall J, ‘I looked up to the sky and I saw heaven (Jerry Hall)’, *The Times - Times* 3, 24th December 1999, p.29

³⁷Meeting with Peter Bellenger and Ana Lehmann, Alpha Team, HTB (London 18th June 2001). Bellenger quotes this as Gumbel’s preferred approach. See also page 23

³⁸Atkins, LRM Course notes, *Preaching in today’s cultural climate* (Cliff College, February 2000) p.4

³⁹Warren R, *Signs of life: how goes the decade of evangelism?* (London: CHP, 1996), p.70

⁴⁰Hunt, p.75

Questions

Attendees generally bring questions as well as curiosity. How well do the courses allow for and respond to *their* agenda? A curate attracting mainly non-churchgoers commented that Emmaus ‘starts in the wrong place, not with peoples’ questions’.

Alpha

The supplementary Alpha book *Searching issues* addresses what Gumbel found to be the most frequently asked questions, principally on suffering, other religions, sex before marriage, homosexuality, faith and science. Hunt’s enquiries⁴¹ produced an almost identical list with suffering (50%) and other religions (15%) predominating. None of these is covered in either course, although suffering and other faiths are covered in The Y Course.

Gumbel⁴² deliberately avoids including such questions in the Alpha programme, arguing that they put the church ‘on the back foot’, because there is no satisfactory full response and they remain a problem for Christians, especially suffering. Instead, by starting with Jesus, the church can ‘score runs’. I understand that Gumbel’s stance arises from earlier HTB experience with a pre-Alpha ‘Enquirers’ course’ that included such issues, where it was felt that leaders were always playing defensively.

This position is tactically very understandable. Unfortunately, it simply shifts the problem to the discussion group leader, because attendees will raise their questions at the first opportunity in these groups: ‘immediately after Gumbel’s address ... Angela asks how Christians deal with people of other faiths’⁴³. Although group leaders are referred to *Searching issues* to help them respond, it is they who are put on the back foot rather than the presenter. It does not seem a satisfactory solution.

Searching issues is offered as a follow-up course and it is very reasonable to suggest that those who have attended Alpha will then be in a better position to appreciate the metanarratives underlying the Christian position on such questions. But this makes a large assumption that people are willing to defer the issues.

Emmaus

Emmaus suggests ‘the appropriate point for letting the enquirer set the agenda completely is first contact’⁴⁴. It opts for the more systematic approach to give a firm foundation, while still providing ‘opportunities for people to deal with their questions’⁴⁵.

Contact includes helpful, wide-ranging guidance on building and listening to contacts, but offers no pre-course material to help users work through enquirers’ questions, nor any framework for this. It is surprising that Emmaus, which otherwise offers such a wealth of material, seems to leave leaders to set-off unaided in territory as hazardous as suffering and human sexuality. The

⁴¹Hunt, p.76

⁴²Bellenger, 18th June 2001, again citing Gumbel

⁴³Llewellyn Smith J, ‘Upwardly mobile to God’, *The Times - Weekend* 21st July 2001, p.13

⁴⁴Cottrell S *et al.*, *Emmaus: the way of faith: Introduction* (London: CHP/The National Society, 2001) p.5

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

process may be an exploration from first contact, but it would be nice to start with a map.

The assumption is that churches will have to find their own material to plug the gap, but resources that have been suggested regionally do not necessarily seem to fit the need to respond well to contacts' questions. One church uses *The Jesus video*⁴⁶ but, despite its undoubted value, its job is not to respond to questions. The Y Course has sometimes been suggested as 'pre-Alpha', but while the material is structured in a more post-modern way, it does not seem to start substantially further back than Alpha or Emmaus, nor allows an open agenda.

One possibility is to follow Green's suggestion for one or two open-agenda sessions at the outset of a course, so 'clearing the ground of brambles'⁴⁷. Christianity Explored takes this approach to open its first session: 'If God were here and you could ask him one question, and you knew that he would answer it, what would it be?'⁴⁸. Another option is to insert into Emmaus the appropriate session from *Searching issues* or The Y Course.

Compressing the catechumenate?

The underlying issue appears that both courses follow the catechumenate model, Emmaus perhaps more purposefully than Alpha, but have run the first phase (Enquiry or Pre-catechumenate) and second (Catechumenate) together.

Extending the course by running these phases consecutively would make it too long for an initial course, but there is also the fundamental difference, recognized by Emmaus, that the first phase is 'a "no strings attached" experience where Christians make themselves available'⁴⁹, with an open agenda mainly set by the enquirer, while the second is more systematic, with agendas set by the church. To run the two together may be pragmatic but will inevitably mean compromise.

One cannot help wondering whether these weaknesses in connecting with and working through people's issues may be linked to the general difficulty in attracting non-churchgoers and the drop-out rate which HTB estimates is as high as 30%.

⁴⁶*Jesus video project* (Birmingham: Agapé, various dates)

⁴⁷Green M, *Evangelism through the local church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993 edition of 1990 original) p.415

⁴⁸Tice, ... *the study guide*, p.11

⁴⁹House of Bishops, *On the way - towards an integrated approach to Christian initiation* (London: CHP, 1995) p.33

5 COURSE MATERIALS

TAKE-UP

How well have the courses been taken-up? What of the future?

The past

Surveys suggest that Alpha take-up in England is at least one church in five. It can be more than one in three although much less in some regions. Emmaus is used in one church in four at most, sometimes much less.

The following analysis is based on data that HTB and Church House Publishing kindly supplied for the numbers of UK churches registering for Alpha and the unit sales of Emmaus handbooks respectively. Because this data is confidential, take-up is represented here in ways that do not disclose actual numbers.

Figure 1 shows the cumulative take-up of the courses from 1996, when Emmaus was first published, to 2000 (total cumulative take-up at end 2000 for each course is expressed as '100'; earlier years are expressed as a percentage of this):

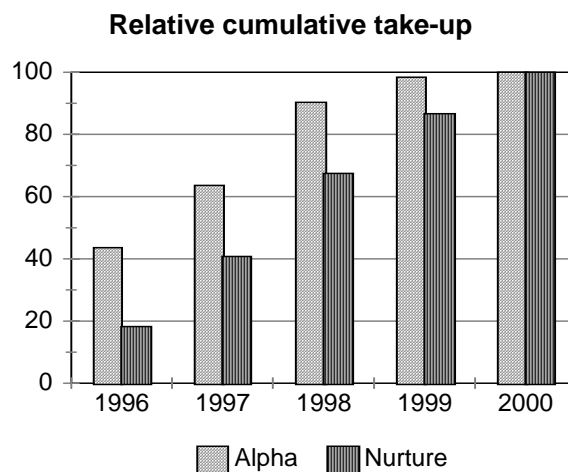


Figure 1

This confirms the growing popularity of evangelistic courses during the second half of the 1990s. But the curve seems to flatten a little over time, suggesting a closer study of year-on-year 'rates of climb'. Figure 2 therefore shows the number of new users added each year, expressed as a percentage of the end 2000 total take-up:

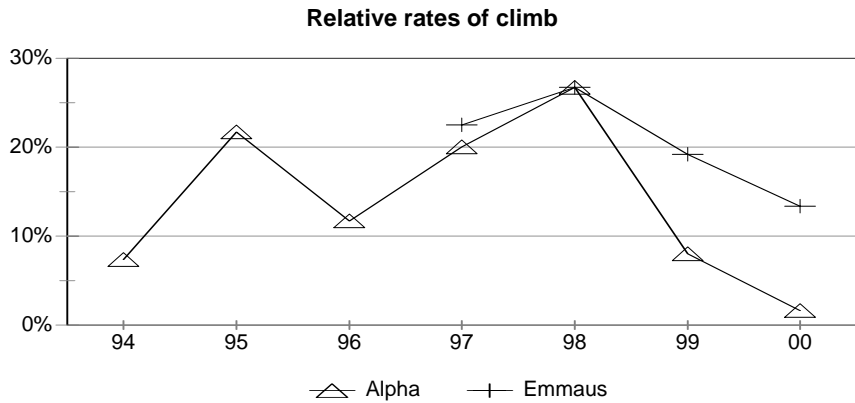


Figure 2

Take-up of both courses peaked in 1998 but has flattened out considerably since then. Does this suggest that the courses will soon reach their 'best-by' date?

1998 may have been an exceptional year. There was a major national Alpha promotional initiative, and Emmaus may, like some technical book sales, have peaked a year or two after publication. Figure 3 therefore takes out 1998:

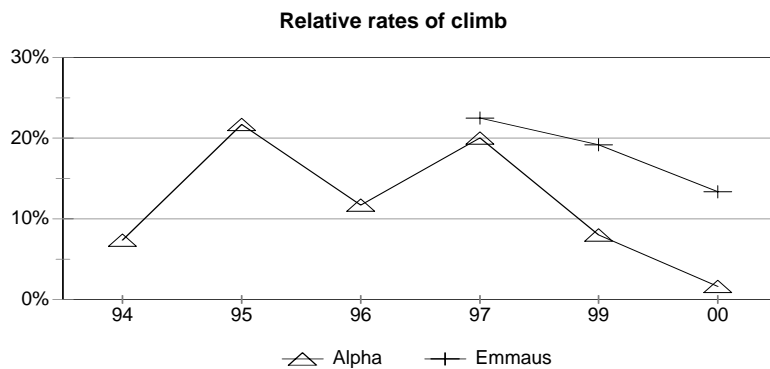


Figure 3

The fall-off in rate of climb is more apparent. It has not been distorted by an exceptional year.

The future?

What does this suggest for the future?

Such a fall-off curve is commonly found in businesses that are riding the crest of a wave with a popular product, but are so tightly focused on this that they do not lay-in innovations for the future. They end up beached. Polaroid, once a stock market star, faced the possibility of bankruptcy because digital cameras had made its conventional instant picture technology out-of-date. Might Alpha and Emmaus be in a similar position?

Alpha went through several phases of major development: 1977, 1981, 1990 and then its release to other churches in 1993. Since then it has been regularly revised, rather like the car

manufacturer's 'new year: new grille and headlights', but not substantially reworked. Although Emmaus was published in 1996 and its approach was clearly much influenced by *Finding faith today*⁵⁰ (1992) and *On the way* (1994), the content of Emmaus Nurture was based on a 1991 course, *Christians for life*. It seems that the base material of both courses has not been reworked since the early 1990s.

Alpha and Emmaus may therefore come to find that, like Polaroid, they are analogue products in a digital age. But when? Some regional churches commented that, after running their course repeatedly for several years, it was 'time for a change'. In many areas, five to seven years is a typical life-cycle and, as the rate of climb of both courses peaked in 1998, it might tentatively be suggested that the courses could reach their 'best-by' date between 2003 and 2005.

HOW THE COURSES ARE PRESENTED TO USERS

Branding

One of the most frequent criticisms of *Alpha* is that adaptations are not permitted beyond the length of the talks and the number of sessions. Many leaders see this as an inappropriate restriction for a Christian organisation to impose.

The issue is brand protection. Brands are hugely valuable. They have become a way for consumers to place trust in their choices. But they can be vulnerable and easily degraded, as happened to the Ratner and Virgin Trains brands.

Without revisiting the debate, I would support HTB's position, for two reasons. First, Alpha is nationally promoted and has acquired a recognised brand identity in a way that Emmaus has not. In a 1999 MORI poll⁵¹, 11% of respondents recognised the Alpha brand and 9% recognised it as a Christian evangelistic programme. It seems important that newcomers visiting their local Alpha course should find that it 'does what it says on the tin'. The standing of the whole Alpha initiative could otherwise easily be degraded. Second, there are perfectly acceptable alternatives in other courses, especially Emmaus, for users that are not comfortable with the Alpha material.

'McDonaldization'

Whether Alpha shares some negative traits of 'McDonaldization'⁵² is a well-rehearsed argument not revisited here. Suffice it to say that time has moved on. Alpha is more Starbuck's than McDonald's, with more and more varieties of the Alpha 'coffee': Student, Prison, Youth Alpha. Emmaus is more Spar than Starbuck's, giving users access to top-brand goods but allowing the grocer freedom to lay out the shop.

Today, the key issue is perhaps accessibility. These businesses offer accessibility to top brands, both to the franchisees who run them at a local level, and to their customers who may find 'a

⁵⁰Finney J, *Finding faith today - how does it happen?* (Swindon, British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992)

⁵¹Hunt, p.1

⁵²See Ward P, 'Alpha - the McDonaldization of religion?', *Anvil 15/4* (1998) pp.279-286, drawing from Ritzer G, *The McDonaldization of society: an investigation into the changing character of contemporary social life* (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1996)

better sort of drop-in centre than most local authorities manage'⁵³. Similarly, both courses are affordable enough to be within the reach of any church with the vision and will to do evangelism, offering quality material to help new users to get started. This is a hugely important factor in predominantly rural regions such as mine. For course attenders, they present an accessible, comfortable, non-threatening introduction to key life issues, instead of an inaccessible and institutionalised church.

Emmaus and the 'big bundle'

Alpha is very clearly positioned as an evangelistic course with add-on modules for follow-up. But Emmaus is positioned as a 'big bundle': a large and comprehensive resource comprising multiple 'building-blocks'⁵⁴, although new graphics in the 2001 edition of its introductory booklet⁵⁵ make the place of the Nurture course clearer than the original edition. This honours the authors' strong commitment to the journey and catechumenate approaches, but the 'big bundle' can be daunting and confusing. Some regional churches were quite unsure which parts of Emmaus they had used.

Positioning Emmaus in this way seems to obscure rather too effectively the possibility of using Nurture as an evangelistic course in the same circumstances as Alpha. Respondents to Ireland's survey saw Emmaus as more appropriate for 'teaching the faithful' than for evangelism⁵⁶. Many potential users seem unaware that there is a choice. Even the name 'Nurture' seems unclear as to whether this is evangelistic or follow-up material.

LEARNING, MEDIA AND PRESENTATIONAL STYLES

The learning cycle

Baumohl⁵⁷ sees adult learning as a cyclical process that takes in information and experiences, reflects on them, updates the relevant concepts and puts the new learning into practice.

Both courses accommodate this cycle well, allowing for input of information, reflection and response, although some regional churches felt that Emmaus better allowed people 'to find [faith] at their own speed'⁵⁸.

Since Baumohl's 1984 work, the linear process of learning has been to some extent supplemented by more episodic approaches. Today this might be termed 'hypertextual' learning⁵⁹. The subject matter of one issue prompts the learner to jump to another and so on towards their goal - if indeed they have a clear grasp of what that goal might be.

⁵³Meades J, 'Behold the success of McDonald's in the land of the defective palate ...', *The Times*, 1st February 2001, p.20

⁵⁴Meeting with Sheridan James, CHP Marketing Executive (London, 18th June 2001); quoted from CHP advertisement copy provided at that meeting

⁵⁵Cottrell *et al.*, ... *Introduction* pp.1,3. The original edition was dated 1996

⁵⁶Ireland, p.15

⁵⁷Baumohl A, *Making adult disciples* (London, SU, 1984) p.25

⁵⁸Finney J *et al.*, *The thinking behind 'Emmaus'* (undated leaflet) provided by Finney, November 1999

⁵⁹Hypertext presents information so that readers 'can jump around a document [or, using hyperlinks, from one document or website to another] by clicking on a highlighted word or icon, rather than being forced to navigate it in a linear fashion': Glossary, *PC Advisor*, September 2001, p.257

Although both Alpha and Emmaus present their material in a conventional linear way, they offer a partly open agenda in discussion groups, which allows leaders to take a limited hypertextual approach. Emmaus, in encouraging attenders to explore together, seems to open the door to this approach more than Alpha. But neither seems to achieve the same linear/hypertextual balance that many attenders would be accustomed to. This perhaps helps account for why discussion groups often seem (to leaders if not to attenders) to zigzag rather than head straight for their goals.

Learning styles

People learn in different ways: activists like buzz groups and workshops; reflectors prefer discussions and video; theorists like lectures and pragmatists like meeting the experts⁶⁰.

Crewkerne Emmaus attenders were asked ‘what did you enjoy most/least?’. The response in Figure 4 reflected the above balance but suggests that the earlier didactic methods of evangelism would not have connected with many (top bar for ‘most enjoyed’, bottom for ‘least enjoyed’):

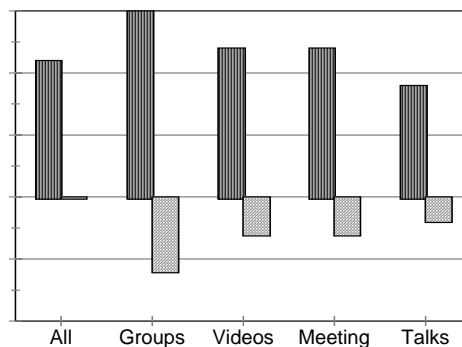


Figure 4

The mix of activities in both courses ensures that people of all learning styles have something that they can respond to. But the 45-minute length and lecturing style of the Alpha talks are likely to appeal only to theorists, posing a constraint to others which perhaps accounts for a very common criticism of Alpha, that its talks are too long.

The content of Emmaus is balanced quite differently. The talks are much shorter, the attenders’ handouts are much fuller than the equivalent Alpha manual and there is a variety of activities for attenders to engage in their groups.

Media mix

Alpha

Alpha, like some other Christian resources including The Y Course, features ‘talking-head’ video with hard copy notes. The videos accounted for many negative comments regionally and in other surveys. Apart from this approach’s only connecting with one in four learning styles, even

⁶⁰Ashton C, LRM Course notes, *How adults learn* (Cliff College, February 2000)

the best video presentation style cannot suit all audiences. One viewer's 'humourous' and 'non-threatening' can be another's 'permagrin' and 'targeting our emotions' - all are comments from Alpha leaders or attenders. But some churches suggested that, in any event, Alpha talks play a very minor part in what attenders gain from the course, relational rather than didactic components appearing more formative.

Many attenders will be far more familiar with the style of a television documentary, including film-clips and interviews, and may respond better to this. A discipling course, *Open home, open Bible*⁶¹ features mainly home-based discussions and interviews with guests, hosted by clergy from All Soul's, Langham Place, rather than didactic presentation.

The media style of Alpha appears rather dated by comparison. The video includes no graphics and regional churches did not rate its accompanying *Alpha manual* highly. But an interesting experiment might be to use (subject to copyright) programmes from the reality television series *Alpha - will it change their lives*⁶² as the video input for an evangelistic course. The edited versions of the Alpha talks followed by fly-on-the-wall footage of the group discussions may engage people more readily, especially if attenders were encouraged to read *Questions of life* between sessions.

Emmaus

Emmaus focuses more on mixing its presentation and discussion styles than on media. One regional church favoured Emmaus over Alpha because it gave attenders 'more questions and things to do'. Others liked its varied input. But some commented that the material can be unexciting unless it is used creatively. One church became rather bored after a time due to the same style of material; another thought it 'quite dry' unless extra material was added; another that it needed 'lightening-up' and multimedia; another said they had to work hard to make Emmaus work and that Emmaus expects a lot of the course leader. Good media is an expected resource and Emmaus risks progressively falling behind by including none.

Simple steps could help remedy this: pages that could be photocopied as overhead projector slides accompanying the short talks; a CD-Rom of the handouts (as helpfully provided by Christianity Explored) so that users could contextualise the material as Emmaus encourages. Two regional churches suggested that a web-based Emmaus user group would help users to exchange their ideas and materials.

A recent Internet-based trial of an Emmaus Growth module⁶³ has experimented with the e-learning medium. Triallists' initial responses were generally similar to typical 'live' course attenders. Most found it stimulating, engaging and challenging, but the medium did not appear to give better results than live courses.

However, Emmaus shines in one medium, the photocopyable attenders' handouts. These contain far more information and topics than the *Alpha manual* and regionally were far more used and

⁶¹*Open home, open Bible* (Worthing: CPO/CTA, 2000)

⁶²*Alpha - will it change their lives?* (Moore Television, 2001) shown on ITV1 in summer and autumn 2001

⁶³*e-learning Emmaus module: Knowing Jesus* on www.allbelievers.org/emmcourse, accessed 21st July 2001; supplementary information from organiser Peter Nicholls, 14th August 2001

valued.

Assertiveness

This is a major issue. A common criticism of Alpha is that it appears too assertive, invading the attender's personal space. Some suggest that the argumentation of Alpha can make attenders feel backed into an intellectual corner: 'as a former atheist, Gumbel understands your prejudices; as a former barrister, he knows how to demolish them ... Far more alarmingly, I find myself being convinced'⁶⁴. One regional minister suggested that the real difference is not in content but in Alpha's 'directive' approach. Emmaus did not suffer from this criticism, by far the most common regional term for its approach being 'gentle'.

A Staffordshire minister commented about Alpha: 'The course ... is very robust - but then so is the gospel'⁶⁵. While evangelists in the New Testament were anxious to debate what they had preached, their preaching constituted a series of assertions postulated as facts. How well do the courses maintain the Biblical but counter-cultural character of evangelism as truth assertions, without alienating attenders?

Journeying

The journey model of evangelism embeds assertive content into a context of exploration and allows attenders to find their way through the issues. Both courses use this model, but the more prominence is given to the didactic element, the weaker will be the sense of exploration for the attender.

Alpha's substantial didactic presentations are quite dominant. Emmaus presentations are shorter, with much less material in the presentation and more in the group exploration, so appearing better to embed the didactic elements. Emmaus nevertheless presents them assertively, even in sensitive areas, for example: 'Not everyone will enjoy eternal life'⁶⁶ and 'The devil is real'⁶⁷.

Belonging

Early church evangelism, especially in the third century, took time to develop relationships both before and after introducing enquirers to the church. In an environment of ignorance about Christianity and mistrust of Christians, they had to.

Similarly today, the more developed the relationship with the friend who invites them, the more likely attenders are to hear out the course's truth assertions. Hunt suggested (see page 20) that Alpha attenders who simply came through a friend's invitation stayed the course through loyalty, but those who come as positive enquirers had more commitment. One church using Alpha found that some attenders 'built over a long time'.

⁶⁴Llewellyn Smith

⁶⁵Ireland, p.72, quoting Rev. Philip Wootton

⁶⁶Cottrell S *et al.*, *Emmaus: the way of faith - Stage 2: Nurture*, (London/Swindon: The National Society/CHP and The Bible Society, 1996) Handouts p.10

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, handouts p.44

Finney’s research⁶⁸ showed that church events such as courses were only the fifth main factor in people’s coming to faith, relationships being far more important. But church events then became a proportionally higher supporting factor (Figure 5):

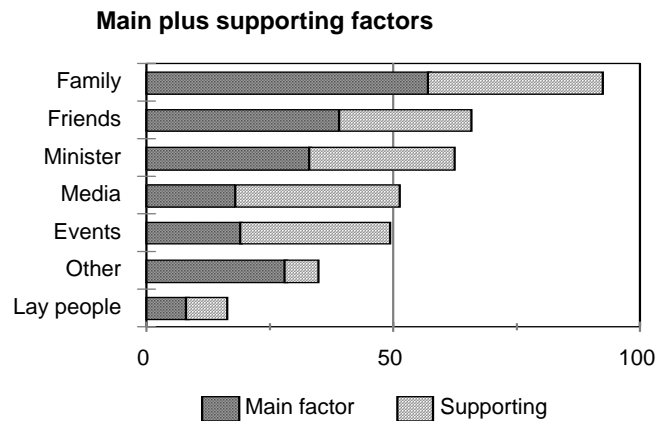


Figure 5

This suggests that more account should be taken of the time needed to develop relationships, rather than bustling contacts into the first available course. Alpha seems in rather a hurry to ‘pack them in’. Emmaus⁶⁹ illustrates the point through the three-year journey of a fictional ‘Mary’, from her baby’s christening, through toddler group, pram service, and family service, all before her Emmaus course.

Ways of presenting

In several ways, the courses attempt to use the manner in which they present their truth assertions to help attenders assimilate these without reacting against them.

The Alpha presentations are humorous, reasoned and reasonable, although sometimes seem to back attenders into an intellectual corner, for example on ‘Who is Jesus?’, closing with CS Lewis’ ‘mad, bad or God’ passage, and on ‘Why did Jesus die’, closing with an account of Wimber’s testimony and the ‘sinner’s prayer’. This leaves attenders in no doubt as to the speaker’s position, but may not be guaranteed to carry them along.

Emmaus starts its session ‘Jesus - his ministry and his death’ with group discussion, only presenting pictures of the atonement to close the session and ending with the question ‘Do you agree?’. The discussion groups are let loose before being presented with the assertions and then left a question with which they are free to disagree.

Both courses let scripture speak for itself. Alpha often cites scripture and includes optional Bible studies. Emmaus asks discussion groups to look at scripture passages repeatedly to explore the session themes. Christianity Explored is wholly based on Mark’s Gospel.

Both courses are open to the possibility of attenders’ taking the initiative and asking their group leaders for some ‘steer’. This may become a more prominent feature of the courses.

⁶⁸Finney, *Finding ...*, pp.36f. The chart is constructed from data on these pages

⁶⁹Cottrell *et al.*, ... *Contact*, p.14

Moynagh's⁷⁰ 'choice agent' concept suggests that people who are confused by too much choice will increasingly seek out choice agents to help them non-directively through the choice process.

CONTENT

How to measure

Because I have adopted Abraham's initiation model of evangelism (page 11) it seems appropriate to evaluate the content of the courses against the elements that Abraham suggests are necessary for thorough evangelism: experiential (conversion), communal (baptism), moral (love, the rule of life), cognitive (creed), operational (spiritual gifts) and disciplinary (worship, holy communion *et al.*) all leading towards initiation into the Kingdom of God.

But before proceeding, it seems necessary to take on board six related issues that will influence and somewhat moderate the evaluation of content. They all suggest that the detailed make-up and balance of course content, albeit important, is not determinative in bringing people to faith.

Surveys consistently show that the *outcome is similar*, despite differences in balance and content. Attenders seem to be progressed towards faith by more by other factors than the precise mix of facts with which they are presented (see page 44).

Respondents suggest that a *15-session course is the maximum* that enquirers are likely to endure. Many consider this to be on the long side. Alpha and Emmaus are both 15 sessions. The Y Course and some others are shorter, but consciously omit large amounts of content which churches must add themselves. This limitation will inevitably restrict the range and depth of issues that are covered.

Finney's research⁷¹ showed that most people's *journey is longer than the course* (Figure 6). The content of the course does not therefore have to be comprehensive. It is not 'The Compleat Christian'.

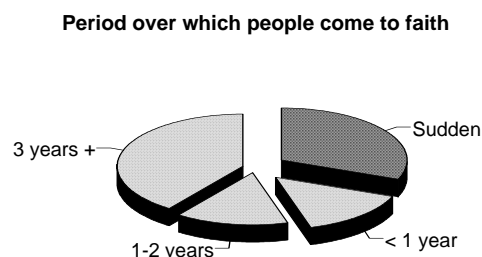


Figure 6

⁷⁰Moynagh M, *Changing world, changing church* (London: Monarch, 2001) pp.35-39; Moynagh M, speaking at *Towards a model of where society is going* (Bristol: Conference of The Evangelical Forum for Theology in Methodism, 13th November 1999)

⁷¹Finney, *Finding ...*, p.24. The chart is constructed from data on p.24

The *effectiveness of apologia* in early church evangelism is in some doubt⁷². This suggests that the comprehensiveness of content that many critics wish to see in Alpha and Emmaus might not be the key to bringing people to faith, although the importance of fuller coverage later in the faith journey is undisputed.

Many criticisms of Alpha seem to view it in isolation from its *church-based context*, as if the course were the church in microcosm. At HTB, Alpha is one activity of a worshipping, sacramental, pastoring and serving community. The fact that some of these areas are not fully covered on the course does not mean that they are considered unimportant to attenders' faith journeys. Because Emmaus is not the product of an individual church, it helps users to set the course into a church-based context by means of sponsors and 'celebrations along the way'⁷³, albeit cast in a rather Anglican mould.

Both Alpha and Emmaus are intended for *cross-denominational use* and this places limitations on how specific they can be on issues where denominations differ materially, notably the sacraments.

Evaluation of content

The Kingdom of God

Abraham argues that evangelism should be seen as Christian initiation into the Kingdom rather than, say, into the church. It is the backdrop for all the individual elements making-up evangelism. Taking this as an underlying concept for evangelistic courses would considerably help avoid unbalanced presentations of Christianity as, say, entry into the institutional church, an individual experience, intellectual assent, or new behavioural patterns, all of which fall short of any rounded concept of evangelism. Hunter believes the Kingdom dimension 'needs to be interpreted meaningfully to this insecure generation'⁷⁴.

But explicit content on the Kingdom is virtually absent in both courses. Emphasis on the Kingdom may come and go with theological fashion, yet 'If we search the Gospels for the most important ideas used by Jesus in connection with His mission, we are constantly brought back to the theme of the Kingdom of God'⁷⁵. It seems a glaring omission.

Some individual Kingdom topics feature in the courses, with the advantage that these shorter narratives are easier to accept for post-modern people who would distrust sweeping metanarratives such as the Kingdom concept. But there are important omissions: no coverage of the incarnation, ascension or return of Jesus; little or nothing on adoption as the 'The King's Son', eschatology, eternal life and social concern. When compared with Snyder's⁷⁶ six polarities central to the Kingdom, a material imbalance is evident.

⁷²Green M, *Evangelism in the early church* (Crowborough: Highland, 1984 edition of 1970 original), pp.281f. and MacMullen R, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1984) pp. 21, 33, 104, 106

⁷³Cottrell *et al.*, ... *Nurture, Leaders' Guide* pp.69-81

⁷⁴Hunter GG III, *How to reach secular people* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) p.63

⁷⁵Bowen R, ... *So I send you* (London: SPCK, 1996) p.60

⁷⁶Snyder HA, *Models of the Kingdom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) p.16. Snyder's polarities are: present vs. future, individual vs. social, spirit vs. matter, gradual vs. climactic, divine action vs. human action and the church's relation to the Kingdom

Conversion

The call to conversion features in both courses. Emmaus does so more directly than Alpha by devoting session 6 to 'Becoming a Christian' and including an act of commitment, with the possibility of one-to-one discussions after the session. Alpha is lower-key and simply includes a 'sinner's prayer' in *Questions of life*⁷⁷ - although rather early, in session 3.

Most people will inconveniently not come to faith on demand, and some churches have expressed concern at the way in which both courses progressively address attenders as if they are believers once the issue of conversion is dealt with. However, the structure does allow enquirers to 'see over the fence' the Christian position on issues that are widely thought about today, such as prayer and guidance. The importance of this opportunity should not be underestimated.

The cognitive dimension

Abraham underlines the importance of setting-out 'the facts' - truth claims and minimum propositions - many of which will be completely new to enquirers: 'deeply reduced fragments'⁷⁸ will not do.

Both courses include sizable coverage within the limitations of their 15 sessions. Alpha's eleven hours of talks, derived from around 60,000 words in *Questions of life*, is not exactly inconsiderable. But the sparse content on God the Father in Alpha sessions seems more yawning chasm than simply a matter of balance, as possibly does its lack of reference to the sacraments during the course sessions⁷⁹. Another issue that seems to approach this situation is the lack of explicit coverage of Trinity in either course.

Other gaps are identified elsewhere in this evaluation. But otherwise, when the various moderating factors are taken into account, and without underplaying the importance of doctrine, there seems some justification for suggesting that the courses' content gaps are more matters of balance than life-critical omissions. Matters of balance are addressed later in this chapter.

The rule of life

Many attenders who become Christians will need to work out, over time, a substantial change in values, lifestyles and how they handle their big issues. Even where their lifestyle may not be very different from before, their motivation - 'an ethic of active love toward God and neighbor'⁸⁰ - is quite different.

How this is worked out in practice will differ widely with context and so courses cannot lay out the 'rule of life' in any great detail. However, the concepts of changed motivation and lifestyle need to be introduced and some flesh laid on the bones.

Alpha's coverage is limited to guidance and resisting evil. Emmaus covers more ground in

⁷⁷Gumbel, *Questions ...*, p.57

⁷⁸Abraham, p.141

⁷⁹Although Communion is often celebrated during the weekend away, and is covered in *Questions of life*, pp.241-242

⁸⁰Abraham, p.137

several sessions of its final module 'Living the Christian life'. Its session on 'Learning to love' seems especially appropriate in an environment where many attenders will have experienced broken relationships within their family and wider network.

But neither course makes any substantive reference to the personal and social cost of the commitment. This is a major consequence of the *metanoia*, the radical change of mind that people are invited to make, and Jesus was very careful to highlight the cost of commitment⁸¹. Leaving such issues to follow-up courses does not seem to place attenders in a properly informed position to make their 'go/no-go' decision.

Empowerment

The operational gifting of the Holy Spirit equips new believers for the lifestyle and service to which they are committed as collaborators with God in establishing the Kingdom. This is treated quite thoroughly in both courses, mainly in the sessions on the Holy Spirit - there are three in Alpha.

Emmaus' single session on the Holy Spirit covers the issues broadly, sensitively and robustly. Its coverage is more evenly weighted than Alpha's, but a large amount of content is crammed into a single session, compared with two Emmaus sessions each for Father and Son. This makes it a quite difficult session to lead, especially if audiences include churchgoers from several traditions, whose differing positions call for skilful handling.

The Christian community

This covers Abraham's two dimensions of Baptism and Disciplines, including the sacraments, prayer, Bible reading, worship and giving. Apart from the issue of Alpha and the sacraments, both courses progressively set matters into the context of the Christian community. But it seems that the ecclesiology of Alpha and Emmaus must by definition be rather sketchy. They are short courses meant for use by differing traditions.

Understandably, given their focus on relational aspects of Christianity, both courses major on the *ecclesia* model, the 'called-together community', while rather briefly describing other models of body, bride and temple and the four levels of universal church, denomination, congregation and small group. I have also suggested below that celebration of Holy Communion during the course might be especially significant and on page 48 that the courses are not, as is sometimes claimed, over-individualistic.

The nature of the church will become more evident to attenders experientially through the groups, worship where included in the sessions, and their growing sense of belonging, rather than through the transmission of doctrine.

A missing element in both courses is the dimension of social concern as an integral part of the church's being. This is not a matter of theological balance or churchmanship. Many evangelicals are as strongly persuaded as others about the place of social concern in the life of the Christian community and its members. Emphasising its place in the initial course would help

⁸¹E.g. Luke 9.23-26, 14.26-33

to ensure that the Kingdom values are retained, and avoid presenting Christianity as internalised to individuals or the church.

MATTERS OF BALANCE

Doctrine and experience

The cognitive, rational and in this context doctrinal approach, and the experiential or empirical approach are seen as two different dimensions of epistemology, how people learn and acquire knowledge - although, in the context of evangelism, I would prefer to see them as channels of revelation.

Course attenders are likely to bring with them both a carry-over of scientific rationality from our earlier culture, and a strong sense of post-modern spirituality from the new: the old desire to prove everything and the new to know through experience. Courses will need to provide elements of both, but focusing particularly on the experiential, given its importance in post-modern society. The issue is more than two-dimensional. Mellor, referring to the 'Wesleyan quadrilateral' of scripture, tradition, reason and experience, suggests that the last three should be 'tempered on the anvil of scripture'⁸². Both courses refer repeatedly to scripture to validate their truth claims.

Both courses allow for some experiential dimensions through journeying together and, where used, worship. Emmaus is particularly strong on exploring together through scripture and discussion, which have both cognitive and experiential facets. But an experiential approach means more than this.

Alpha makes a clear division between the rationalistic approach of most talks and the experiential approach of the weekend away, which may handicap other sessions. For example, treatment of Christ's resurrection is confined to retailing the conventional rational proofs. Given that, today, the supernatural comes naturally, and that the concept of Jesus as alive and knowable underlies the whole course, it seems a missed opportunity, very underplayed. Emmaus cites the same resurrection proofs, but proceeds to elaborate on the experiential meaning of knowing Jesus. It seems at least some way closer to the scriptural balance.

Otherwise, experiential content is a little hard to find in Emmaus. The only sessions offering any explicit experiential dimensions are 'Becoming a Christian', with its opportunity for commitment after the session; 'Learning to pray', which includes time to pray in groups; and 'Sharing Holy Communion', where including the sacrament in the session is an optional extra. One minister felt that the presenter has to 'make Emmaus become experiential and go beyond interesting discussion'. One wonders if the fact that some regional churches found Emmaus rather dull may be partly due to this low level of experiential content.

⁸²Mellor H, *A question of balance* (Calver: Cliff College Publishing, 1997) p.9

Churchmanship and theological balance

The charismatic churchmanship of Alpha attracts many criticisms of imbalance. These may or may not be valid criticisms of charismatic emphases in general, but I would take the view that it is inappropriate to fault the Alpha course for taking a charismatic stance. Alpha was never designed to reflect an even-handed mixture of traditions. It emanates from a strongly charismatic church and bears the stamp of not only HTB's churchmanship but its history, for example Wimber's influence. HTB makes no secret of Alpha's stance and does not pretend that Alpha is other than what it is.

Taking a similar approach, *Christianity Explored, from All Souls'*, Langham Place, adopts the reformed evangelical position and Tice confirms that he did not aim for 'balanced' coverage⁸³.

Churches that find either of these courses inappropriate or divisive, especially in a mixed churchmanship environment, may simply have chosen the wrong course for their situation.

Emmaus, on the other hand, strenuously seeks to be even-handed. Many regional churches commented positively on its 'broader appeal'. The authors confirm that its basis 'embraced the different traditions within the Church - catholic, charismatic and evangelical'⁸⁴. Although some traditions are not included in this list and 'we can perhaps detect the differing agendas of the authors pulling against each other'⁸⁵, I know of no church that has declined to use it on theological or churchmanship grounds. Nevertheless, it does not come across as a compromise. Crewkerne's inter-church Emmaus course included enthusiastic supporters from Pentecostal, evangelical and pluralist backgrounds.

One particular advantage of Emmaus is that users are invited to 'pick-and-mix' their material and this enables them to adjust the balance in line with their churchmanship. For example, charismatic churches can add a weekend away and use the Growth module 'Come, Holy Spirit'. Sacramentalists could do the same, using the module 'Understanding the sacraments'.

Atonement

Both courses include pictures of the atonement as lawcourt (justification), market (redemption) family (reconciliation) and temple (sacrifice). Alpha precedes this by outlining the substitutionary model, but not exclusively nor as dominantly as critics seem to perceive. Emmaus takes the sin/forgiveness theme forward into its session on 'Becoming a Christian'. The material of both courses assumes that enquirers will appreciate the meanings of sin and guilt, but in a post-modern culture this can no longer be assumed.

Finney's research found that 39% of those who came to faith had some sense of guilt⁸⁶, therefore some will be aware of their shortcomings. One Anglican minister suggested that 'it could be

⁸³Discussion with Rev Rico Tice, Curate of All Souls', Langham Place and author of *Christianity Explored* at the Christianity Explored conference (Exeter: 26th June 2001)

⁸⁴Finney *et al.*, *The thinking ...*

⁸⁵Smith

⁸⁶Finney, *Finding ...*, p.34

approached in terms of “getting your life in a mess”⁸⁷. But many would resist any notion of right and wrong as absolutes, and find offensive any suggestion that their lifestyle condemns them before God, while others’ lifestyles do not.

How can this be approached? Avoiding the fact of sin and atonement dishonours the Cross. Raising it risks alienating enquirers before gaining a hearing. Neither course appears to resolve this question, but there may be some ways that might help to address it.

If people come to faith over time as on a journey, they cannot be expected to have a mature awareness of sin until they have come to perceive something of the *holiness of God*. As Finney’s research found⁸⁸, people’s perception of God will often take some time to move forward this far. Therefore, while not putting sin ‘on the back burner’, presenting other aspects of atonement may help to bring the issue to life earlier for enquirers. Such an approach is not new. Paul majored on other aspects than sin and forgiveness when addressing cultures with no developed theologies of sin, for example at Lystra, Mars Hill and in quoting an early hymn⁸⁹.

Of the four pictures of the atonement presented in the courses, stronger emphasis might be placed on *reconciliation*. This relational aspect may be more likely to connect with post-modern people than the others.

The four pictures might be supplemented by emphasising the value Jesus placed on us through the Cross, directly addressing post-modern feelings of *self-doubt and lack of self-worth*.

Green⁹⁰ argues that the *Cross and the resurrection* cannot be separated. Holding them together balances the seriousness of sin and condemnation with the new Kingdom life brought by Jesus. Alpha de-links them and places them in different contexts. Emmaus covers both in order and appears to strike a better balance.

Both courses rather play down the *consequences of sin* and major on affirmation rather than condemnation. Understandably, because as soon as condemnation is mentioned, many will see the Christian offer as coercion. But, because the issue is generally played-down, neither course spends time on helping attenders over this hurdle. Experience with Christianity Explored will show whether a more thorough treatment of the issue better helps enquirers over the barrier. It balances ‘We’re more wicked than we ever realised’ with ‘but more loved than we ever dreamed’⁹¹, and spends two full sessions on the implications of the choice.

A greater attention to *social sin* may connect very strongly with post-modern people, who often see personal ethics as relative and perspectivist, but have a strong social conscience. It could also help to balance out the tendency in both courses towards individualistic views of atonement, and support Kingdom values.

Nevertheless, in the long run, conviction in respect of sin is the *Holy Spirit’s job*, which suggests that while course leaders need to be sensitive, they can ultimately leave the issue in safe hands.

⁸⁷Hunt, p.63

⁸⁸Finney, *Finding ...*, p.85

⁸⁹Acts 14.15-17, Acts 17.22-31 and 1 Timothy 3.16 respectively

⁹⁰Green M, *The empty cross of Jesus* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995 edition of 1984 original) especially pp.11-18

⁹¹Tice, ... *The study guide*, p.17 *inter alia*

Holy Communion

This is central to the Christian faith and can be a 'converting ordinance', although clearly, neither course could include set teaching or liturgies in the material and still retain cross-denominational acceptability. But a more positive focus on celebrating the sacrament during the course might add value in various ways.

How it is approached locally would depend on whether Holy Communion is reserved or open. If it is reserved, for example for confirmed church members, then the course guidelines might draw out the potential - as in the early catechumenate system - of seeing the mystery of Holy Communion as a milestone along the faith journey that needs to be travelled towards for some time.

If the church's position is to open the Table to enquirers as well as existing Christians, then Holy Communion could link closely with other aspects of the course, while helping attenders on their faith journeys, provided of course that arrangements are sensitively made for those who do not feel ready to partake.

In a *post-modern culture*, people are likely to connect strongly with the symbolism, visual and experiential focus of Holy Communion. Emmaus helpfully suggests involving attenders in making preparations for the sacrament.

It *centres people on Jesus*. It links the past (the historical event) with the present (reenacting the sacramental meal) and the future ('a foretaste of the heavenly banquet').

It emphasises *call and response*: 'Draw near with faith' and 'We thank you Lord, that you have fed us in this sacrament ...'.

It demonstrates that all kinds of attenders, at any stage of their faith journey, are *travelling together*.

It '*provides a balance* between encounter with Jesus in his word (the journey on the road) and encounter with Christ in the sacrament (the supper at Emmaus)'⁹².

It can provide an appropriate setting for *associated acts* such as such as prayer for healing and wholeness. During a weekend away covering sessions on the Holy Spirit, the *epiclesis* prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit might take on special significance: 'Send now, we pray, your Holy Spirit, that these gifts of bread and wine may be for us the body and blood of Christ', with the response by all: 'Amen. Come, Holy Spirit'⁹³.

⁹²Cottrell *et al.*, ... *Introduction*, p.35 (my italics)

⁹³*Methodist worship* (Peterborough: MPH, 1999) p.217. See also Migliore DL, *Faith seeking understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) p.223 and Peterson DG, 'Holy Communion in Common Worship', *The Theologian*, Internet journal on http://www.geocities.com/the_theologian/content/pastoralia/cw_communion.html, accessed 8th September 2001. The other standard quotations from the liturgy are also taken from *Methodist worship*

6 EFFECTIVENESS

The effectiveness of Alpha and Emmaus is evident through numbers coming to faith, but many course attenders are already Christians. I therefore wanted to probe how well Alpha and Emmaus helps all types of attender to move forward on their faith journey.

SURVEY RESULTS

Existing Christians

Some ministers noted underlying environments such as ‘a sad lack of basic knowledge in the parishes’, or that even long-term members had not previously had a consistent course of instruction, experience and fellowship. But two in three regional churches responded that ‘some’ Christians had found themselves moved along in their faith journey; for one in three churches, ‘many’ Christians had moved on. None gave a ‘nil return’, even churches that had only run one course. This is consistent with other surveys and Crewkerne’s experience (Figure 7) seemed typical:

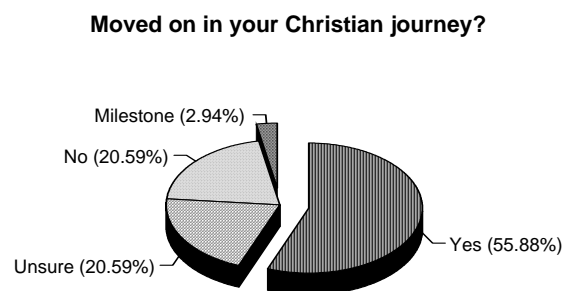


Figure 7

The effect took many forms: a renewing experience, hearing about the Holy Spirit for the first time and encouraged to ask others, filled with the Holy Spirit, re-examining their faith and encouraged, more motivated and stirred up. One church that did not have a missioning culture and discontinued Emmaus still reported ‘a number of people have come to a deeper faith’.

People coming to faith

One in six?

Aggregating the Lichfield and St. Albans surveys shows that 18% of Alpha attenders came to faith and 14% of Emmaus attenders, although Ireland⁹⁴ suggests that Lichfield’s responses might include some people who were already Christians. Hunt’s survey found that 17% came to faith through Alpha, although he suggests the reality is lower because ‘the great majority of those answering “yes” were already in the church’⁹⁵. However, he does not acknowledge that people

⁹⁴Ireland, p.18

⁹⁵Hunt, p.97

often come to faith after they have connected with a church and gives no other grounds for reducing the figure to as low as 3-4%.

Or, seen another way ...

I did not ask regional churches for numbers that had come to faith. Other surveys already showed this, and counting numbers who come to faith during a course seemed to me to be a little out-of-step with the journey concept of evangelism.

In Finney's research⁹⁶, most respondents took over a year to come to faith (see Figure 6, page 33). For some of these the process was ongoing. Consequently, many attenders will move forward on the course but come to faith later, or will not be able to say quite when they came to faith. There will also be some fallout, as predicted in the Sower parable⁹⁷ - wisely recognised in the Emmaus course which introduces a discussion on the Sower immediately after the session 'Becoming a Christian'.

In Acts, references to specific numbers coming to faith are outnumbered five to one by indicators such as 'many' or 'few', therefore I simply asked churches whether 'none', 'some' or 'many' had come to faith through the course.

Even after running a course only once, one in four churches found people coming to faith, while nine out of ten of those who had run their courses four or more times found so. Only 12% of churches that had run four or more courses reported 'many' people coming to faith. Nevertheless, of the churches that had run their course only once, less than one in ten were disappointed, while one in four found it exceeded their expectations. Over eight churches in ten that had run their course four or more times remained satisfied.

EVALUATION

It is difficult to think of any other initiative in recent years that has proved such an immediate and significant instrument of renewal. A conservative estimate of one in six course attenders coming to faith is a very substantial figure. It should be an encouragement to any church to begin Alpha or Emmaus. Although it would be statistically highly unreliable, extrapolating this figure nationally could mean well over 150,000 new Christians through Alpha alone since it started.

However, to put this in context, 150,000 would boost the 1998 levels of church attendance by only 4%. The few regional churches reporting that 'many' had come to faith suggests that they were seeing their results in this context. There is still a long way to go, suggesting that sustainability and eventual successors to Alpha and Emmaus, discussed in chapter 8, are critical issues.

In comparing the relative effects of Alpha and Emmaus, every survey has found the effects of these courses, and for that matter of other published courses, not only significant but also similar to each other. Warren commented: 'I have never picked-up that any one approach works better

⁹⁶Finney, *Finding ...*, p.24

⁹⁷Luke 8.4-15

than another'⁹⁸. Although the Lichfield and St. Albans surveys show a slightly smaller percentage of attenders coming to faith through Emmaus than through Alpha, their true figure for Emmaus will be closer to Alpha's, because attendance numbers in both surveys included Emmaus Growth courses as well as Nurture.

The regional survey likewise showed no statistically reliable differences between the outcomes of Alpha and Emmaus, nor, as it happens, between the outcomes of Methodist and Anglican courses. Although the courses were much less used regionally than in other areas, there is no suggestion that they were less effective.

Why have the courses produced such similar effects? Critics tend to focus on content and balance, but it is in their underlying characteristics that the courses seem to share more in common than they have differences and this may account for the similar results. Clearly these characteristics include the foundational principles taken as assumptions for this evaluation (see page 11) although these are not present in all evangelistic initiatives. But some specific features of both courses can also be identified as supporting the effects examined in this chapter, in the following ways:

Christians moved on

Three features will be common to any sound evangelistic initiative: they help Christians to look outwards rather than inwards and this is always a healthy sign; they imply that, to a greater or lesser extent, Christians are open to change, however hesitantly; and they refocus people on the basic essentials of the faith and how these relate to daily life.

Four additional features seem characteristic to both courses:

They help *assemble the fragments*. The teaching conveyed through Sunday preaching can often be rather disconnected, especially in smaller Methodist churches with different preachers each week. Any degree of consistency is very difficult without adopting a strict approach to planned preaching or the lectionary. Home group meetings follow a more thematic approach but often examine small Bible portions in detail and by no means all churchgoers attend. These factors could help account for the lack of basic knowledge that was identified by some regional churches. A course that identifies the main pieces, fits them together and gives an overview of the whole could be highly significant in helping Christians move forward.

They give people *time* to reflect and discuss. This was one of the most frequent comments from Crewkerne Emmaus attenders and some other churches. Christians are often expected to busy themselves in endless church activities or sit listening to speakers. The courses allow time to explore with each other the most important foundations of faith.

Many regional churches, not all of which would describe themselves as charismatic, reported that Christians had been introduced more deeply and experientially to *the Holy Spirit*.

Helping people to faith

⁹⁸Email from Canon Robert Warren, an Emmaus co-author, 31st July 2001

In *presentation style*, both courses dismantle the stereotyped images of evangelism and preachers. Despite criticisms of Gumbel's presentation style, it is the antithesis of the authoritarian preacher hiding behind a pulpit, six feet above contradiction. Emmaus breaks into questions and discussion so frequently that presenters have little opportunity to give this impression. Attenders can always bite back. Also, both courses anchor the course in the local church without bringing institutional aspects to the front. Their structure and approach make it hard for attenders to perpetuate their perceptions of the church as remote, cold and irrelevant.

In *content*, both 'tell the story'. This may appear facile, but many newcomers will know little about even the elements of Christianity. Also, both bring Jesus to the front - who he was and is, what he did and what this means - in a fresh and compelling way. Both set people exploring scripture and so allow the Bible to speak for itself. Both courses, in the words of a Devon minister, 'present the moments', to help attenders take a series of small steps in their own time.

In *spirituality*, both courses unashamedly focus on the spiritual and supernatural and so connect with the orientation that post-modern people are seeking. And both open the door to the Holy Spirit. Although Emmaus devotes only one session to the Holy Spirit compared to Alpha's three, its coverage is robust and challenging.

In *environment*, the potential Christians are among friends. The Christian community welcomes them not from a distance but as travellers alongside each other.

A unifying concept

The journeying concept brings together into a theological unity the effects both on Christians and those not yet Christians.

Christians can easily come to a halt in their faith journeys. Methodist preachers will often have heard the response 'Oh, much the same thank you' as they greet and ask after people in the churches they visit. Christians can sometimes step backwards. The journey concept is an important reminder that those who have become Christians should be always on the move and looking ahead.

Those who come to faith through a course have reached the most significant milestone on their journey. It speaks for itself.

A third, important category not yet surveyed (except at Crewkerne, see Appendix 2⁹⁹) is that of people who were not Christians by the end of the course, but had journeyed positively towards that point. As suggested by Finney's research (Figure 6, page 33) this could include significant numbers. One church noted that some enquirers who attend a course, or even just part of one, 'build over a long time' and need to come back later, still seeking.

The journey concept sees all three groups as *together on the journey*. This helps avoid several common perceptions: that Christians have arrived and others have to follow; that moving

⁹⁹The Alpha questionnaire, completed by attenders at the close of a course, includes a similar question but I am not aware of any published results

Christians forward is simply a fortuitous side-effect, separate from the main job of bringing people to faith; and that those who have not come to faith by the end of the course are second-class citizens who failed to make a decision. The unity of the journey concept acts as a reminder to continue accompanying and encouraging each other as fellow-travellers.

That all are on the same journey should not however provide reason for softening the *robustness* of the gospel proclamation. Jesus emphasised that there are in reality two roads and two destinations¹⁰⁰. Alpha and Emmaus recognise this, although their approach is more one of affirmation, accompanying and steering attenders towards or along the 'narrow road'. They spend rather little time on the alternative destination, as has already been discussed on page 39.

Milestones or staging-points are important in journeys. Alpha and Emmaus, in 'presenting the moments', both drop the *kairos* moments into the linear *chronos* journey. They are the pivotal points in the journey. Alpha does this more subtly than Emmaus. It allows attenders the possibility to respond at the close of Session 3, 'Why did Jesus die?', during the weekend away and at the closing session of the course. But this is quite low-key, it is invitation rather than confrontation and does not press the point. Emmaus is more definite in its Session 6, 'Becoming a Christian', offering a follow-up one-to-one meeting, although likewise in a non-confrontational way.

The courses include *Kairos* moments for the Christian as well as newcomers. In Alpha this is mainly during the weekend away with its Holy Spirit focus, while the Emmaus sessions on 'Sharing Holy Communion' and 'Learning to love' have proved significant for Christian attenders.

However, the course preparatory materials devote little space to the potential effect of the courses on *existing Christians* and this seems a regrettable omission as this fails to maximise the unifying effect of the journey. Alpha is virtually silent on the issue, while Emmaus only briefly refers to it¹⁰¹ and then discusses the effect on Christians in the context of the Growth courses rather than highlighting the effects that Nurture can have.

In one sense, downplaying this effect is wise, because it is only too easy to divert a local course from outreach to 'inreach'. Hext wrote: 'I think it is no accident that Alpha has been so effective for some ... Sadly churches quickly make it useless by turning it into an activity for those within the church'¹⁰². But such downplaying will conceal an important outcome which deserves to be more widely known.

The effect on Christians needs not only publicity but guidance. Emmaus material suggests that some churches might run an initial course for churchgoers as a 'pilot'¹⁰³. At least one regional church that adopted this approach found it less than satisfactory. Apart from focusing people away from outreach, it risked dampening the effect on Christians, who are likely to attend for detached evaluative reasons rather than making the journey themselves. Another regional church asked churchgoers not to attend unless they brought newcomers and this, as well as seeming rather clandestine, would hide the possibility that Christians themselves might be changed. It

¹⁰⁰Matthew 7.13-14

¹⁰¹Cottrell *et al.*, ... *Introduction*, p.27

¹⁰²Hext K, *Agenda of the spring Synod* (Exeter: Plymouth & Exeter District, 2000) p.3. Rev Ken Hext was chairman of the Plymouth & Exeter Methodist District until August 2001

¹⁰³Cottrell *et al.*, ... *Introduction*, p.43

all detracts from the unity of the journey.

The Holy Spirit

Both courses, in their content and underlying approach, recognise the lead rôle of the Holy Spirit in taking initiatives and leading the mission.

In the preparatory materials, both underline the importance of prayer and so open up the course to the Spirit. The Spirit's lead rôle is strongly emphasised in the Alpha conference session *The principles of Alpha*¹⁰⁴. Emmaus' *Introduction* confirms that 'we ... need to develop a sense of working in partnership with the Holy Spirit (and one in which we are the very junior partners)¹⁰⁵, but otherwise focuses on the continuing journey of discovery with Jesus on today's Emmaus Road, adding little on the Holy Spirit's distinctive attributes and activity.

In their own ways, both courses clearly recognise that the Spirit, not the courses, ultimately brings about the effects, whether these are similar or different. They reflect Newbigin's affirmation that 'Another is in control, and his fresh works will repeatedly surprise the church ... the Spirit ... goes before the church ... The church's witness is secondary and derivative'¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁴*Alpha conference: speaker notes* (Methodist Alpha Conference) pp.3-5

¹⁰⁵Cottrell *et al.*, ...*Introduction*, pp.44f

¹⁰⁶Newbigin L, *The open secret* (London: SPCK, 1995) p.61

7 IMPACT

Do Alpha and Emmaus change churches? I was interested to see how well the courses helped churches to move forward in qualitative ways as well as growth. I especially wanted to probe whether the courses yielded special impact when held inter-church, as this has been the trend in my Circuit.

SURVEY RESULTS

Qualitative change

Even after running a course only once, more regional churches were changed than stayed the same. Changes took the following forms:

Church life and culture: ‘a complete challenge’, ‘culture change’ and a ‘new grip’; opened to the Holy Spirit and revitalised; a sense of commitment and expectancy; erosion of the gap between newcomers and traditional churchgoers.

Deeper fellowship: becoming aware of the enjoyment of fellowship groups; ‘warmer and more welcoming’; moved from a casual ‘hello’ in church to a ‘great sense of family’.

Worship: enlivened; saw prayer differently; new styles of Sunday evening worship - at one church, a 45-minute service, mainly exposition, followed by coffee and discussion, at another, planned preaching.

Service: people more willing to serve; witnessing, practical responsibilities, giving; ‘no difficulty in filling places’; an all-day ‘open all hours’ ministry in church.

Outward-looking: a new ‘mission focus’ and more open culture.

There were surprisingly few negative impacts to counterbalance the frequency of positive comments. In only one or two cases had Alpha had proved divisive in the church, although this might be expected when a course with a strong charismatic emphasis is held in a mixed churchmanship environment. In two other cases, some attenders had moved on to other local churches that they felt better reflected what they had experienced on the course.

Growth

There are two aspects to numeric growth: holding or reducing decline and then increasing numbers. I combined ‘decline slowed’ with ‘grown’ into one category.

22% of regional churches that ran Alpha either slowed decline or grew, 23% for Emmaus. This is lower than Christian Research’s¹⁰⁷ national figure of 35%, made up of 14% holding decline but not growing plus 21% growing - significantly, this 21% rose to 25% for those running Alpha and

¹⁰⁷Data from this research is spread across a number of sources (see footnote, page 14)

fell to 20% for the rest.

The impact regionally was progressive: qualitative change migrated to numeric growth, and growth increased over time. This sustainability issue is revisited in chapter 8 (see page 53).

The inter-church dimension

The inter-church dimension is important in a mainly rural region of villages and small market towns and over 40% of churches reported an inter-church dimension to their courses.

In many rural areas, the Parish church was alone in the village, with the result that 13% of courses that were held by one church included attenders from other denominations. Another 29% of courses were run inter-church, Methodist churches being prominent in these initiatives.

Several initiatives were owned by Christians Together rather than individual churches. In a larger commuter community, churches ran Alpha individually but joined for prayer, preparation and the weekends away. By contrast, a market town, population 12,000, held three Alpha courses and one Emmaus with no co-ordination. One cannot help thinking that something has been lost here, but the closeness and enthusiasm of the local clergy and inter-church relationship will determine what is possible.

Every church that had held their course inter-church reported that the course was better for it. None said that it had been hard going, even though two had found some practical difficulties. No church reported inter-church difficulties arising from churchmanship or the theological content of the courses.

EVALUATION

Change and growth

Newbigin notes that ‘mission changes not only the world but also the church’¹⁰⁸. The fact that the effects on individuals worked through to changes in the church as a whole raises a number of important evaluation issues.

Individualistic?

The impact on regional churches suggests that the courses are not, as is often claimed, over-individualistic. Every impact on churches that was identified in the regional survey is of a kind that will enrich and deepen the corporate nature of the church. Interestingly, the survey showed that social concern beyond the church was also reinvigorated in spite of the courses’ lack of attention to these issues.

I would in any case question the view that the courses suffer from over-individualism. While both courses major on the need for a personal and individual *metanoia*, they are firmly set into a corporate context. Attenders are not a collection of isolated individuals, as if they were

¹⁰⁸Newbigin, p.59

attending a theatre - or even an evangelistic crusade. They grow together in small groups and in plenary as the course proceeds. Both courses include full sessions on the church.

Newcomers may often have a more real experience of *ecclesia* in their groups than when going on to attend traditional church worship. The fact that so many Christians are moved on, the ways in which they are moved on and the consequential impact this has on the church all suggest that the experience of *ecclesia* on the course may be deeper than what Christians had previously encountered in their churches, and carries forward into a deepening of the church's life.

Using a product?

It has been suggested that the courses encourage churches to use products rather than do evangelism. If that were so, the qualitative effects and impact would not show through in the way they do. But people have clearly been inspired and changed by their experience. Further, we have seen that the initiative is invariably driven by the local church which starts to 'think outreach' by doing it, and that courses depend almost entirely on people inviting others to attend. This is not using a product, this is doing evangelism.

Those who have examined the characteristics of growing churches find that it is qualities not products that help churches to grow¹⁰⁹. Only one such reviewed source directly includes Alpha as a driver of growth. Interestingly, the listed growth drivers have much in common with the type of impact on churches described in this chapter, as well as strongly reflecting characteristics found in Alpha and Emmaus.

The expectation of success

Both courses operate on a success expectation, very 'gung-ho' and not without good cause. But in doing so they tend to leave behind churches that find it less easy to climb out of long periods of decline. Many regional churches start from a low base. They are not HTB. The course materials are consequently rather silent in a number of important areas, for example:

The regional findings show how important *qualitative change* is to a church. Churches need the affirmation and encouragement that these changes bring before they can even think about growth. Several churches pointed out that it would take a major turn-around simply to level-off the natural decline caused by deaths, moving away, or removal from membership of those who had 'ceased to meet'. The regional survey showed that churches migrate from change to growth as they re-run their courses, but they need to appreciate that it is a long haul, not a 'quick fix'.

Much attention is focused on churches that grow, but very little on those that, despite their best efforts, *do not 'succeed'*. Nationally, three out of four Alpha churches are not yet growing. One in three regional churches was still 'much the same' and even for churches that had run their course four or more times, a few had still not seen people come to faith and 28% were still 'much

¹⁰⁹Schwarz CA, *Natural church development handbook* (Moggerhanger: BCGA, 1998) pp15-48; Stafford M, 'Church growth - the facts', *Methodist Recorder*, 20th October 1977, p.10; Clarke PA, 'See how they grow ...', *Cliff Today*, Issue 28 Spring 1998 (1998), pp.16f; Clarke PA, *Evangelism and the local church* (Calver: Cliff College Publishing, 1995) pp.23f; Carey G quoted by Clarke P, MA Course lecture *Missionary-minded congregations* (Cliff College, January 2001); Edwards J, quoted by Gledhill R, 'Less is more when it comes to worshippers', *The Times*, 17th March 2001, p.10; Wallwork N, 'Twelve marks of a growing church', *Keeping in touch*, Spring 1999, pp.23f

the same’.

Although the impact of the courses builds-up over time, it is not just a matter of keeping going until results show through. Moynagh¹¹⁰ suggests that some churches may never see the kind of change and growth that they seek. He suggests alternative ways in which they can support mission and growth elsewhere in the Kingdom and so find affirmation of their rôle in the wider church. Alpha and Emmaus do not make such suggestions and a good many users may be left with the impression that they have failed.

Finally, the courses’ understandable enthusiasm for their own success tends to give a *disproportionate impression* of their contribution to church growth. They certainly seem to constitute the single most effective means of evangelism and Alpha churches are more likely to grow than others. But they are not the only tools at churches’ disposal. Figure 8¹¹¹ shows that more churches are growing without Alpha and Emmaus than with them, and the recent slow-down in take-up of both courses (see pages 25f.) suggests that this will continue.

Churches growing with/without courses

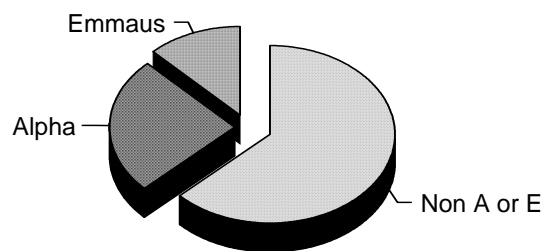


Figure 8

This is not only a case of recognising that there are other effective means of evangelism. It is also necessary to recognise, perhaps rather more than is done in the course materials, that some people prefer to listen and reflect, and are uncomfortable in a discussion group (see Crewkerne’s experience, Figure 4, page 29). Others prefer to make their journey to faith unaccompanied in an environment that is more anonymous and protects their personal space, as witness the marked increase in attendances at Cathedrals¹¹².

The inter-church dimension

It is hard to think of any other type of initiative that would have yielded the impact and depth of inter-church collaboration that these courses have brought about. I know of none that appears

¹¹⁰Moynagh, pp.133-135

¹¹¹Constructed from growth data in the Christian Research survey, and Emmaus course numbers proportionate to Alpha in Lichfield and St. Albans’ aggregated surveys

¹¹²Finney, *Flowering ...*; Ireland, p.35

to come close to Alpha and Emmaus in doing so. How well do Alpha and Emmaus support this inter-church dimension?

Both courses are intended for use in different denominations including Roman Catholic churches¹¹³. But this is a quite different matter from the dimension of an inter-church course. Emmaus material seems to assume that the course is run by individual churches, usually Anglican, while Alpha appears silent on inter-church possibilities. This seems quite odd, given the evident frequency and value of inter-church collaboration on both courses. Is this so important that the courses should be making more of this dimension? The evidence suggests that they should.

In principle

To run Alpha or Emmaus in a single church context, especially in rural areas and small towns, seems to me to risk diminishing the Body of Christ. I have repeatedly been drawn back to Ephesians 4.1-16 which depicts some aspects of the inter-church dimension that are especially relevant to Alpha and Emmaus.

This passage sets scriptural inter-church initiatives firmly within the framework of the wider Body (v12-13) accountable to the Body but under the headship of Christ and the empowerment of the Spirit - features that are prominent in both courses. The necessary mix of gifts is mobilised where one church, say, may have gifts of evangelism and another of teaching (v11). Protection is offered against instability in teaching or emphasis (v14). The passage disallows a static view of unity, because the Body is always dynamic, moving and growing. Growth is progressive (v12) both qualitatively (v15) and quantitatively (v16). Most importantly, the essential combination of truth and love (v.15) is held in balance.

In practice

Collaboration in mission seems to have a unifying and renewing impact: 'There are few more powerful or biblical stimuli towards real church unity than being engaged and "on the line" for the gospel in evangelism. Few things draw churches together in quite the same way as working together towards this common goal ... the experience moves the ... church ... forward'¹¹⁴.

Earlier attempts at localised inter-church mission often foundered on differences of theology or churchmanship. It was difficult to partner with another local church that had a quite different understanding of conversion or mission. As recently as 1990, Egner¹¹⁵ highlighted theology as a potential barrier and set-out suggestions of how to approach this. Hand¹¹⁶ is still adamant on the significance of such differences for some reformed evangelicals.

But times have changed. Alpha and Emmaus are two prime examples of how many churches seem to have moved on to a depth of collaboration in which differences of doctrine and

¹¹³At the time of writing, Alpha is acceptable for use in Roman Catholic churches, to the extent that a Catholic Alpha Office has been set-up. However, although CHP has been in discussion with the appropriate Roman Catholic departments, the same level of acceptance has not, at the time of writing, been given to Emmaus Nurture, although I understand it is more a matter of time than substance

¹¹⁴Weston P, *Planning a church mission* (Warwick: CPAS, 1993) p.5

¹¹⁵Egner M, *Mission: possible* (London/Kidderminster: SU/BYFC, 1990) pp.181f

¹¹⁶Hand C, *Falling short? The Alpha course examined* (Epsom: Day One Publications, 1998) pp.92ff

churchmanship are recognised but not considered an impediment to evangelism. This is a large subject, to which is attached an equally large debate on whether such collaboration has come at the expense of a perilous downgrading of doctrine, and this is outside the scope of this evaluation.

The issue that touches directly on Alpha and Emmaus is why they have both been able to be used with good impact in inter-church situations. Both omit or give low-key coverage to areas where denominations have very different positions and leave them to cover these issues separately. But neither course tries to fudge the theological issues. Nor do they compromise down to the lowest common denominator.

Nor is it even a matter of deft handling of theology and churchmanship. Emmaus works very hard to be acceptable to a wide variety of traditions, but regionally 83% of inter-church courses ran with Alpha, which does not exactly play down its charismatic evangelical position. One inter-church course was reported to have encountered some sensitivities that may have been rooted in their differing traditions. But this seems to be the exception.

The environment of increasing closeness, mutual understanding and networking between denominations at the local level clearly offers a positive framework in which churches can mission together. Also the journeying concept undergirding both courses will act as a reminder that belonging comes before believing and believing comes before every nuance of doctrine and tradition has been signed-off. But perhaps the key reason is simply the marked effect that the courses clearly have on Christians from the different churches, and the impact on their churches. Put together, they form a strong combination.

8 SUSTAINABILITY

This is the acid test: will it last? How well do Alpha and Emmaus equip churches to stay the course and bring about lasting improvement?

SURVEY RESULTS

Re-running the courses

In Christian Research's survey, the percentage of Alpha churches that grew (or held decline) increased progressively, the more they ran their course. Warren and Jackson suggest that 'the same conclusions hold for other courses, such as Emmaus, Credo, etc.'¹¹⁷. This effect was repeated for both courses in the regional survey. Figure 9 compares these trends:

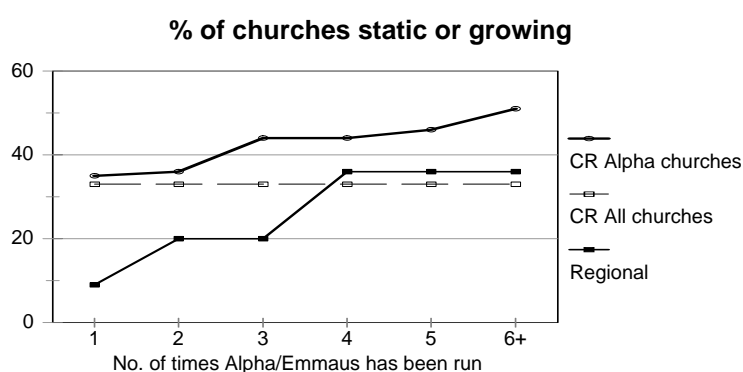


Figure 9

Other effects built-up similarly. Regional churches' intentions to continue with their courses also strengthened as they re-ran them - even when no-one had come to faith - as did levels of support from the church.

The regional survey however uncovered a vulnerable period for churches that had run their courses two or three times. The effect and impact continued to build-up steadily, but several important indicators dipped. Relatively more churches were disappointed with their course. More decided to discontinue it. Fewer held follow-up groups. Levels of support fell slightly. But all these indicators then recovered for churches that had run courses four or more times. It was a dip, but not a slide.

Finally, some regional churches were coming to feel that it was 'time for a change', not due to any dissatisfaction with the course materials, but the much-repeated activity had become routine and lost its freshness. Mostly they changed from one course to another, but some churches kept the same course while changing the setting: one church changed venue to a rugby club and was considering proposing Alpha to their local College as an adult education course.

Follow-up groups

¹¹⁷Warren and Jackson, *There are answers*, p.3. Warren adds (email, 31st July 2001) that they arrived at this conclusion on the basis of Ireland's research and Warren's own experience

Most regional churches had established follow-up groups for those completing Alpha or Emmaus. Over three-quarters of churches that had run only one course had such a group. Only one church that had run four or more courses did not have a follow-up group.

But the regional survey showed that hardly any churches used the Alpha follow-up material - three out of 63 respondents. Over 40% of churches that had run their course up to three times used Emmaus Growth, many of these to follow-up Alpha - other surveys also show that Growth is regularly used in this way. Two-thirds of those that had run four or more courses used their own material.

Future-proofing

Many regional churches were concerned to ‘future-proof’ their Alpha or Emmaus initiatives against risks that undermine sustainability - surprisingly, leadership fatigue was not one of them.

The ‘Big Ship’

A risk cited by one church, but typical of many, was that the church supported the courses as long as they did not interfere with anything else running in the church. Emmaus courses had changed a larger church, but turning around a ‘big ship’ from its traditional approach and towards ‘thinking outreach’ had not been achieved after three courses and Emmaus was discontinued.

Integration with the worshipping community

A number of regional churches found that it was not always easy for newcomers and traditional churchgoers to integrate with each other. Churches mainly approached this through bringing newcomers into their house group structure and through Sunday worship (see page 47). One experienced a renewed Sunday worship life and worked hard on offering newcomers a seamless transition to this. Another started using Willow Creek’s¹¹⁸ guest service principles.

Change and pressure

Times of clergy change were an issue for some churches due to the different reactions of clergy to Alpha. One church that over some years had grown, built-up a strong evangelical emphasis and introduced Alpha entered a quite different situation following a clergy change: Alpha was discontinued and some of the congregation moved to other churches. The very strength that it had built-up seemed to have worked against it. It fell harder from a position of high expectations. Conversely, a church that introduced Alpha, and where some felt this had less than wholehearted clergy support, found following a clergy change that their new minister had run Alpha regularly and to good effect.

Some churches were in areas where the population shifts quite regularly and so key leaders tended to move on. Others had pressing and conflicting priorities including funding or fabric

¹¹⁸A large Chicago church, Willow Creek pioneered the use of ‘seeker services’ in evangelism. See Hibbert A, MA Course lecture *Seeker services evaluated* (Cliff College, January 2001)

issues as well as a growing shortage of clergy. The minister of seven rural churches commented that it took a lot of energy to do anything beyond maintaining the church's presence and fabric in the area. He nevertheless ran Alpha, is now considering Emmaus and established a follow-up course.

Churches generally approached issues of change and pressure in one or more of three ways. They emphasised the importance of strong clergy support, the initiative's being nevertheless church-owned rather than clergy-owned, and/or the empowerment of course leaders to run the initiative while accountable to their church leadership.

EVALUATION

Rerunning the course

The strong, progressive nature of the results leaves no doubt as to their important contribution to sustainable development. The outcome also confirms that the materials themselves are sufficiently robust to stand repeated use over long periods, as most churches that felt it was 'time for a change' did so for reasons of freshness and not dissatisfaction. Further, re-running the courses not only strengthens the churches' ability to attract newcomers, but also provides for the many people whose journey to faith takes several years and who need to revisit the issues (see Figure 6, page 33).

This is not simply fortuitous success or an outcome of good management or tenacity. Beneath the figures is a theological underpinning. By progressively absorbing the concept and practice of mission, allowing themselves to be changed, and seeing the results build-up, local churches are directly engaged in building the Kingdom, albeit from a mustard seed in their locality, and looking to the future as well as present Kingdom polarities. They are also becoming a more genuinely incarnational community, present, connecting and witnessing where they are.

This is a further reason why one would have liked to see more attention in the courses, if only in the preparatory material, to the Kingdom dimension that would set the context, and to the dimension of social concern that would better reflect the scriptural breadth of churches' incarnational presence. But the courses' impact on regional churches included a strengthening of both dimensions, and this perhaps speaks for itself.

'The weak spot'

Although Christian Research's data had shown something more akin to a straight line progression in church growth (see Figure 9 above) some Alpha material (see below) had referred to the possibility of much smaller numbers on the second course than the first. This caused me to reflect on how seriously this could undermine the confidence of churches that had experienced a good first course but felt disillusioned by few attenders on the second. I therefore asked respondents about the outcome of their second and third courses.

The vulnerability discovered during the second and third courses is disturbing but not surprising. The first course gives a fresh dimension to church life and shows immediate results. When it has been run more than a few times, it has become an established part of church life and the results are clearly evident. But it is almost inevitable that the second and third time of running could

mean a much smaller group. The keener churchgoers will have been to the first course, but may not yet be accustomed and enthused to invite newcomers, therefore numbers may fall considerably until the course begins to acquire its own momentum.

Alpha material recognises this but tucks it away in a conference handout: ‘the second course may be very small - possibly five or six people ... First course 50-100 .. Second course 10-15 .. Third course 15-20 .. Fourth course 20-25 etc’¹¹⁹.

The 2001 edition of Emmaus’ *Introduction* handbook gives the opposite impression: ‘Normally, you will find that the next group is slightly larger and more promising’¹²⁰. However, Finney, an Emmaus co-author, now writes ‘the next two times mainly attract church people and ... probably, not in such numbers: it all seems less exciting’¹²¹ and confirms that this is the current view of the authors.

The key is possibly as simple as awareness of the weak spot. Once aware, churches could extend their horizons beyond the third course and gain encouragement to reach this threshold. Regional churches that knew from experience their course’s positive effect and impact clearly did regain confidence. While 22% discontinued their course after the first run, and 27% after two or three times, only 8% of churches that had run courses four or more times discontinued them.

Unfortunately, although the recently-published *Maximising the potential of your Alpha course* places emphasis on re-running the course, it does not repeat the findings of the earlier conference handout. As regards Emmaus, although readers of the newly-published *Introduction* are still left with the authors’ earlier view, the authors plan to include the ‘weak spot’ in forthcoming Emmaus conferences.

‘Time for a change’

It is a compliment to the courses that Churches that thought it was time for a change did not do so out of dissatisfaction but simply in search of freshness. Provided that there is a choice of other courses *and* that churches are aware of the fact, then ‘time for a change’ should not pose a risk to sustainability.

Finney¹²² considers that a choice of between five and eight courses is appropriate to meet the range of environments in English churches. At present, I am aware of eight in more-or-less regular use: Alpha, Emmaus, Credo, Saints Alive, Good News Down The Street, Just Looking, The Y Course and Christianity Explored. Lichfield’s and St Albans’ surveys suggest that usage of Credo, Saints Alive and Good News Down The Street is falling-off, and none of these were mentioned by respondents in the regional survey. The much more recent Y Course and Christianity Explored seem to be attracting attention instead.

The choice and, more importantly, the range of styles and emphases, do seem to exist. Whether the awareness of this choice is widespread is an open question, especially appreciation of

¹¹⁹Your questions answered, handout supplied by HTB at The Methodist Alpha Conference

¹²⁰Cottrell *et al.*, ...*Introduction*, p.49

¹²¹Emails from Finney, 31st July 2001 and 16th September 2001

¹²²Finney J, speaking on *Flowering into the world*, (Taunton: Lee Abbey Friends of Jesus Area Conference, 19th May 2001) and email from Finney 31st July 2001

Emmaus Nurture as an alternative to Alpha. Emmaus deserves much more than to be the fall-back for churches that are uncomfortable with Alpha. But, as discussed earlier, the ‘big bundle’ approach seems to obscure rather effectively the possibilities of Emmaus Nurture as an evangelistic course in its own right.

Follow-up groups

The establishment of follow-up groups by such a large majority of churches is a fundamental indicator of sustainability. By doing so they are far more likely to continue to change and grow. But why should so few regional churches have found Alpha’s follow-up materials appropriate? And why are Emmaus Growth and other materials used in such a mix of contexts?

I suspect that it is again necessary to look at Alpha in the context of its home church. After experimenting at the church with a follow-up course ‘Alpha 2’, HTB decided that it was better for people to step directly from Alpha into HTB’s pastoral structures and so the initiative was discontinued. Within these pastoral structures, a selection of courses was developed on key issues, which are now offered as follow-up material (see Appendix 1). They sit alongside other courses at HTB on topics such as money, workplace, marriage and recovering from divorce or separation.

In this sense, the ‘follow-up’ courses are disconnected from Alpha and form part of the wider pastoral ministry. They are not, strictly speaking, follow-up to Alpha. By connecting with key questions on peoples’ minds, they fit well into the pastoral framework but they do not constitute a programme of systematic discipleship learning. This will come from the overall combination of learning and service activities within the pastoral framework.

Emmaus has a very different approach. Its Growth material is huge (see Appendix 1) and is intended to form a seamless transition from Nurture course to dedicated Growth group in the catechumenate model.

But regionally, most churches approached the issue in the same way as HTB. They integrated Alpha and Emmaus ‘graduates’ into their pastoral structures and particularly into their *existing* home groups. Churches would then feel more free to use a variety of home group study material that did not necessarily connect directly back to the course. Hence, perhaps, so few Alpha churches feeling that they had to use HTB’s ‘follow-up’ material, and so many using Emmaus Growth or other resources irrespective of whether they had run Alpha or Emmaus Nurture.

There seems good reason for supporting this approach. It is not only more realistic in smaller churches that would have difficulty in supporting numerous groups, but helps to protect against the difficulties of integrating newcomers into the church that are discussed below. The possible exception is for inter-church courses, where a dedicated follow-up group in addition to individual churches’ home groups will maintain the valued inter-church dimension.

The regional lack of use of Alpha follow-up resources is evidence in itself that churches feel free to choose from a wider range, but a closer examination of the take-up of Emmaus Growth is necessary to reveal its more complex position. Figure 10 shows the take-up of Growth outstripping Nurture, confirming its increasing use as follow-up to other courses as well as Nurture. But the year-on-year ‘rate of climb’ of Growth in Figure 11 suggests that this is not the

complete picture.

The rather flat rate of climb for Growth suggests that churches are becoming more aware of the many alternatives that are available in a quite crowded

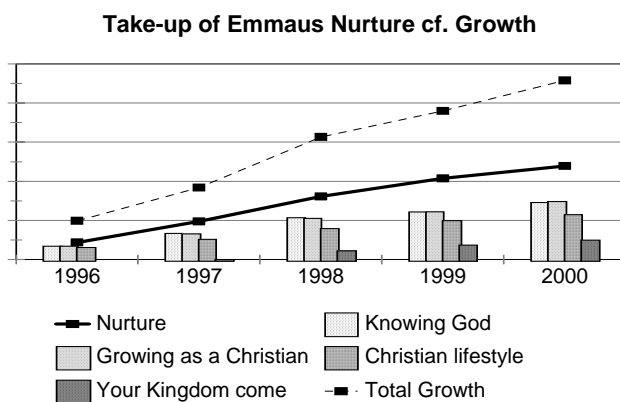


Figure 10

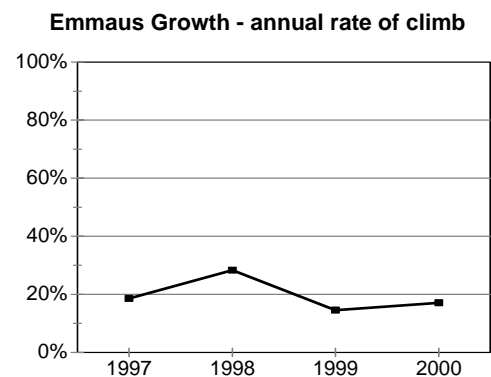


Figure 11

and competitive market for discipleship materials. Although, like Nurture, Growth is very interactive and gives attenders plenty of different things to do, it seems to suffer from a lack of variety and media compared with available alternatives such as *Open home*, *open Bible's* 10 courses (60 sessions) with videos in discussion format (see page 30), or the 34-session (extendable to 66) video-supported *Disciple* course¹²³.

Some regional churches discontinued Growth after a while as they found the approach rather repetitious, suggesting that churches may not be inclined to stay with Growth longer-term. Even for churches that are satisfied with Growth, a desire to vary the style from time to time is only to be expected.

These factors, if taken together with the discussion below on integrating people into the church, suggest the approach of both courses to follow-up materials might be due for re-appraisal. The casual way in which HTB offers follow-up materials is very different from how follow-up operates in its own pastoral structures. Emmaus' catechumenate approach, while comprehensive and flexible, does not quite fit with the way it is being used which, although not the way intended, seems in some respects to offer greater sustainability.

Future-proofing

The 'Big Ship'

Emmaus materials are helpful in urging users to clear the ground of too many other activities and cover this important point well. But it is easier said than done. Both courses could benefit by drawing more attention to the time and tenacity that will be needed, in large or traditional churches, to turn the ship around. It is not a complex issue. Keeping the rudder hard over and allowing plenty of time seem to hold the secret to turning the Big Ship. For one minister this had taken ten years. It seems to cry out for a special mention.

¹²³*Disciple* (Peterborough: Foundery Press/BRF, 1996)

Integration - from course to home group to community

As has been noted, some regional churches found it difficult to integrate newcomers with traditional churchgoers in the established structures, and in two churches course ‘graduates’ left for other churches that they felt better reflected the ethos of their course.

Although most regional churches did not find integration a problem because they moved ‘graduates’ directly into their home groups, some commentators feel that stepping straight from Alpha or Emmaus to the church’s home group structure is a step too far. Administry suggests ‘The leap from an *Alpha* course to an existing home group appears to be too large, so some churches have set-up a post-*Alpha* home group as a bridge’¹²⁴. Coyne notes ‘new Christians ... have found the transition into house groups too great a leap’¹²⁵.

How well do Alpha and Emmaus help users protect against such risks?

Alpha gives detailed advice on integrating people into the church, both in the *Alpha conference* and in a separately available video of Sandy Millar’s¹²⁶ conference talk on *Integrating Alpha into the church*. This seems to reflect HTB’s emphasis, as discussed above, on moving Alpha ‘graduates’ into the pastoral structures rather than on running an ‘Alpha 2’.

Emmaus is emphatic in some respects about integration into the church, especially in its concepts of the accompanied journey, sponsors and initiation. However, *Introduction* depicts a dedicated Growth group in which Nurture ‘graduates’ will join others who have earlier completed the Nurture course. In doing so, it does not draw attention to the risks that may be present when such groups become discrete ‘congregations’ within the church. The same risks are present in Alpha churches: one minister in rural Shropshire proposed ‘Halfway houses, a sort of mid’week church, to nurture new believers until they are ready ... to storm the churches’¹²⁷.

Such dedicated follow-up groups can develop a life of their own that may make it harder, not easier, for people to be integrated into the whole church. Moynagh¹²⁸ foresees a more regular incidence of such discrete congregations within a church, and is aware of the problems as well as the opportunities.

Further guidance would also have been helpful in integrating newcomers into the worship life of the church. It has already been noted in chapter 7 that newcomers may feel a greater sense of *ecclesia* in their groups than in traditional worship and several regional examples were reported in which Sunday evening services and guest services were adapted to respond to this. It is a major issue that is wider than this evaluation, but more coverage of the possibilities in the course materials would have been helpful.

Change and pressures

The courses strongly emphasise the importance of clergy support, whole church ownership of

¹²⁴Farnhill J, Norman R and Seward M, *From Alpha to eternity* (St. Albans: Administry, 1995) p.6

¹²⁵Coyne, p.45

¹²⁶Preb Sandy Millar is the vicar of HTB

¹²⁷Ireland, p.74, quoting Rev Adrian Struve

¹²⁸Moynagh, pp.114-118, 128-130, 152-155 and especially his presentations on *Towards a model of where society is going*

the initiative and empowerment of leaders: the same strategic measures as regional churches adopt to protect against these risks.

Change can bring some quite damaging and hurtful situations and it is of course inappropriate for the course materials to be specific about sensitive issues. Nevertheless, other issues are less sensitive, especially that of conflicting pressures. Those encountering such pressures would no doubt value some recognition of their situation in the course materials, to balance the success expectation that is otherwise conveyed.

Handbook or encyclopaedia?

At many points in this evaluation, it has been suggested that the course materials could helpfully elaborate on certain topics and fill certain gaps. It is easy to be theoretical and not practical. This kind of enhancement could turn what are now manageable handbooks into encyclopaedias. It is unreasonable to expect the introductory materials to be expanded further. They need to major on the underlying concepts and on how to set-up and run the courses, rather than how to manage the risks and issues that arise later on.

Yet it seems important that users should have some framework in which such issues can be opened-up as they arise. Also, the situation is fast-moving and even new hard-copy manuals can rapidly be overtaken by events. Perhaps some other conduits might be adopted to give ongoing support to course users.

These could include more dynamic use of *websites*. At present, Alpha's is mainly promotional while Emmaus' includes feedback and tips but coverage is very thin.

Second, Emmaus might helpfully follow Alpha's practice of compiling a *small range of videos* on key topics - such as *Integrating Alpha into the church* - which could be updated regularly. To video a conference presentation is not the most complex or costly exercise and could give substantial benefits to many more users than can attend Emmaus conferences.

Third, as some regional Emmaus course leaders have suggested, a *web-hosted user group* could be especially helpful for Emmaus users to exchange not only updates and guidelines but also the supplementary and multimedia material that Emmaus encourages them to add to the courses.

The next generation

Longer-term sustainability will depend on new generation initiatives to supersede the present courses. Alpha and Emmaus seem to reflect the 1990s rather than the 2000s and I have tentatively suggested that they may reach their best-by date within the next four years.

A successor or successors may be re-worked versions of the present courses, or they may not take the form of a course. Successors would doubtless need to retain core characteristics rediscovered during the 1990s and built into Alpha and Emmaus, such as the local church-based, relational and journeying concepts.

They may also need to get to grips more with enquirers' big issues, build-in more time for developing trusting friendships, include a more hypertextual learning approach, updated media

and presentation styles and a give leaders a stronger role as choice agents.

They would certainly seem to need a more fully post-modern approach. The Y Course, up to a point, ventures creatively towards a more post-modern style, especially in the structure of its talks and accompanying book, but in most respects it is still a conventional evangelistic course. Christianity Explored might seem to take a cultural step backwards in focusing on systematic Bible study and a sin/grace/forgiveness motif, but it will be interesting to see if, as Tice suggests, 'the country is sick of spin'¹²⁹ and will respond well to its thematic balance of human sin and God's love.

Moynagh's 'future-watching' would no doubt provide valuable insights in developing successors. His scenarios include a reworking of the church context into which evangelistic initiatives are set and so those developing any successor will similarly need to think 'outside the box'. At the same time, much can be learned by looking backwards into comparable periods such as the first three Christian centuries when Christianity was, as it is fast becoming today, a minority, unrecognised religion in a rapidly changing culture - but when the Christian community saw rapid growth.

That would make for some very interesting research.

Word count: 19,834

¹²⁹Promotional circular issued by Tice, 20th August 2001

APPENDIX 1 - COURSE PROGRAMMES

ALPHA

Main resources

HTB produces a comprehensive resource catalogue. The following are those that I have used:
Gumbel N, *Questions of life* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1995)
Alpha conference: speaker notes (Cliff College: Methodist Alpha Conference, 18th -19th November 1999)

The Alpha team training manual (London: HTB Publications, 1998)

Maximising the potential of your Alpha course (London: HTB Publications, 2000)

Alpha manual (London: HTB Publications, 1995)

The Alpha course - video set (London: HTB Publications, various dates)

Gumbel N, *Searching issues* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1998)

Other main resources, in video or booklet form, include *How to run an Alpha course*, *Telling others - the Alpha initiative*, *Integrating Alpha into the church*, *Developing ministry on Alpha*, *Prayer and Alpha*, *Introducing worship to Alpha*, and the *Alpha administrator's handbook*. There are Alpha derivatives for Prison, Student and Youth courses.

Follow-up courses:

A life worth living (nine sessions, based on Philippians)

Searching issues (seven sessions, based on the book of the same name)

Challenging lifestyle (19 sessions on the Sermon on the Mount)

Heart of revival (10 sessions on the second half of Isaiah)

Course programme

1. Christianity: boring, untrue, irrelevant?
[typically at the Alpha supper, ending one course and starting another]
2. Who is Jesus?
3. Why did Jesus die?
4. How can I be sure of my faith?
5. Why and how should I read the Bible?
6. Why and how should I pray?
7. How does God guide us?
8. Who is the Holy Spirit?
9. What does the Holy Spirit do?
10. How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?
[8-10 take place at the weekend or day away]
11. How can I resist evil?
12. Why and how should we tell others?
13. Does God heal today?
14. What about the church?
15. How can I make the most of the rest of my life?
[15 sometimes takes place during the weekend away, after 10]

EMMAUS

Main resources

Cottrell S *et al.*, *Emmaus: the way of faith: Introduction* (London: CHP/The National Society, 2001). The original edition was published in 1996.

Cottrell S *et al.*, *Emmaus: the way of faith - Stage 1: Contact* (London/Swindon: The National Society/CHP and The Bible Society, 1996)

Cottrell S *et al.*, *Emmaus: the way of faith - leading an Emmaus group* (London/Swindon: The National Society/CHP and Bible Society, 1998)

Cottrell S *et al.*, *Emmaus: the way of faith - Stage 2: Nurture* (London/Swindon: The National Society/CHP and The Bible Society, 1996)

Follow-up courses

Stage 3: Growth - knowing God (four courses, 16 sessions)

Stage 3: Growth - growing as a Christian (five courses, 21 sessions)

Stage 3: Growth - Christian lifestyle (four courses, 19 sessions)

Stage 3: Growth - your Kingdom come (two courses, 17 sessions)

‘Nurture’ Course programme

Part 1: What Christians believe

1. God is there and he matters
2. We need God in our lives
3. Jesus - his ministry and his death
4. the Resurrection of Jesus
5. The Holy Spirit
6. Becoming a Christian

Part 2: How Christians grow

7. Learning to pray
8. Reading the Bible
9. Belonging to the church
10. Sharing Holy Communion

Part 3: Living the Christian life

11. Living God’s way
12. Serving the Lord
13. Your money and your life
14. Learning to love
15. Sharing the faith

THE Y COURSE

Main resources

Meadows P *et al.*, *Beyond belief?* (Bletchley: Word, 1999)
Leader's handbook (Bletchley: Word, 1999)
Group leader's guide (Bletchley: Word, 1999)
Participant's notes (Bletchley: Word, 1999)
Video set (Bletchley: Word, 1999)

Course programme

1. Is there more to life than this? [existence and nature of God]
2. Can anyone know what God is like? [existence and person of Jesus]
3. Are we expected to believe what happened so long ago? [the gospels and the resurrection of Jesus]
4. If Jesus was so good, why was he executed? [sin and atonement]
5. Why so much suffering and why so many religions?
6. Is there really life after death? [heaven and separation from God, faith and becoming a Christian]
7. Can God make a difference in my life? [commitment, devil, born again, the Holy Spirit, conversion]
8. Who wants to be stuck with a bunch of boring old rules? [God's love, relationship, forgiveness after conversion, growth]

CHRISTIANITY EXPLORED

Main resources

Tice R, *Christianity Explored - the handbook* (Carlisle: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001)
Tice R, *Christianity Explored - the leader's guide* (Carlisle: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001)
Tice R, *Christianity Explored - the study guide* (Carlisle: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001)
Tice R, *Christianity Explored - the audio cassettes* (Carlisle: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001)

Course programme

1. Introduction
2. Jesus - who is He?
3. Jesus - why did He come?
4. Jesus - His crucifixion
5. Jesus - His gift of grace
6. Jesus - His resurrection
7. The church family
8. The Holy Spirit
9. Prayer
10. The Bible [7-10 take place at the weekend or day away, with additional Bible study]
11. What is a Christian?
12. The devil and assurance
13. Choices - King Herod
14. Choices - James and John

APPENDIX 2 - REGIONAL SURVEY RESPONSES

This Appendix includes responses from

The regional survey (first three sheets)

Local feedback from Crewkerne Emmaus attenders (final sheet)

APPENDIX 3 - QUESTIONNAIRE FORMS

This Appendix includes:

- ▶ ‘Interview topics - Alpha and Emmaus courses’ as used for face-to-face interviews in the Methodist District
- ▶ ‘Questionnaire on the Alpha and Emmaus courses’ as used for the regional survey at the Methodist Synod. For consistency of the data, this was also used for the telephone interviews with Anglican respondents, and their additional comments logged separately

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