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THE POWER OF ALPHA

By Rebecca Barnes

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An Alpha course brought 55-year-old Jim Geiger to church for the first time in years. He arrived at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in Louisville, Ky. (stpetersepiscopal.org), asking questions.

"I guess I came mainly because I don't go to church, and I wanted to understand the Bible better," he says. At this second meeting of the St. Peter's group, church members invite Geiger to enjoy a free meal with them and join a small group discussion.

"Welcome to Alpha, again," Father Larry Minter announces to the crowd of 65. "I hope you brought your questions."

The group of men and women gather around tables still strewn with remnants of coconut pie, as the "Why Did Jesus Die?" lesson begins. Alpha course (alphacourse.org) teacher Nicky Gumbel, a clergyman at Holy Trinity Brompton Anglican Church in London (htb.org.uk), begins to speak from a video playing on a large TV screen placed at the front of the fellowship hall.

"I find it so hard to admit that I do anything wrong," Gumbel says. Geiger identifies with the speaker: "Basically, I think I'm a good person, just like he was saying."

Gumbel continues talking to both the audience in the cathedral on the screen and those gathered at St. Peter's. "When people say, 'I lead a good life,' it depends, doesn't it, with whom we're comparing ourselves?"

Basics

Over the last 20 years, the Alpha course—a 15-session study of the validity and relevance of the Christian faith—has reached millions of people like Geiger. The course introduces the basics of the Christian faith through a shared meal, a large group session and a highly interactive small group discussion in which participants are encouraged to "ask anything."

Five out of nine people in Alpha leader Mike Underwood's small group at Crossroads Christian Church in Corona, Calif. (crossroadchurch.com), aren't Christians. Two have never opened a Bible. But they're asking questions about Christianity and blind faith, Underwood says. "We're having some great discussions." He has learned that questions—not answers—are key to an Alpha course. "

As a leader, I have to step back and just let the discussion run. The key is getting everyone involved and making sure they know they can bring any question to the table and not be judged."

A four-time Alpha small group leader, Gabriela de la Rosa agrees with Underwood. The free exchange of ideas and lack of judgment enables group bonding and community, she says, after leading her group's third Alpha session at Crossroads Christian. "I believe in the safety of Alpha, which enables people to come to Christ. They have a lot of freedom to ask questions and be themselves, which is really what Christ allows us to do when we come to Him." The curriculum that Gumbel has reworked, and in a sense reinvented, not only tackles today's tough cultural questions from seekers, skeptics and churchgoers wanting to learn more, it answers who Jesus is, why He died and questions about a secure faith, Bible reading, prayer, the Holy Spirit and God's guidance.

Last year, more than 30,000 people in the United States found answers to these questions and indicated they experienced a personal life change through Alpha.

The course is running in 152 countries in 54 languages and braille with more than 7 million worldwide participants. In North America alone, nearly 1.5 million people have participated in the program over the last 10 years.

Since coming to the United States in 1996—the same year the Bishop of London appointed Gumbel Alpha chaplain—Alpha has grown exponentially. The number of U.S. churches hosting the course has increased from 200 the first year to more than 7,500 in 2005. Alpha USA (alphausa.org) now offers dozens of training conferences throughout the country each year,



and has 15 offices from coast to coast. In May 2004, former Vineyard USA National Director Todd Hunter joined Alpha USA as its president, excited about the marriage of spiritual formation and evangelism that Alpha brings, he says on his blog (toddhunter.org). He calls the Alpha course “the most holistic approach to evangelization available in local churches.”

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