

Alpha And Start Courses In A Rural Context

From 1988 to 2000 I was Vicar in rural communities in Derbyshire. From 1988 I had charge of two former mining villages between Ripley and Ilkeston with populations of between one and two thousand. From 2000 to 2007 I had charge of four villages in the High Peak between Buxton, Chapel-en-le-Frith and Tideswell with a total population of fewer than two thousand. Two of these were quarry villages, and two were farming communities (sheep and cattle) which were becoming Peak District idylls with housing bought up by well-heeled incomers.

I first used Alpha in the mid-1990s when it hit the headlines as the answer to church decline. The first course was well-attended by many in the congregation, and one or two enquirers. Undoubtedly many benefited. But afterwards, to my utter shock and disbelief, the enquirers who had tasted the power of God did not continue in the life of the church. I would later learn (from George Lings at an REN Conference) that this was because Alpha is post-modern and church is modern. We did not have the strength in numbers nor the time to keep Alpha going as a new group, so the new converts fell away. Is this a particular rural problem? Perhaps so, when you are working with small numbers to begin with, and you cannot start going to church in a village without everyone knowing.

Many subsequent Alpha courses dissolved themselves before the end of the course. I once heard Nicky Gumbel say at an Alpha conference that HTB loses one third of all those who start a course by its end. So if you start with 900 you finish with 600. But, if you start with 6, and end with 4 or fewer.... So I decided there was little point in starting a course unless you had 12 at the beginning, and, with one exception, I could rarely get 12.

The exception was a Youth Alpha course in one of the farming communities. A group of teenagers, mostly siblings and cousins, had grown up together, and I was asked, by a parent who was also churchwarden, to prepare them for confirmation. I said they would have to do Youth Alpha and take it seriously. So they were under a three-line whip! I think eleven started the course, aged between 13 and 22. Two girls fell away early on because their mother believed they would get religious mania! The rest stayed the course and were duly confirmed. I brought in a youth worker from Buxton to run the course, and only joined them for the Holy Spirit day, and for some specific preparation for confirmation after Youth Alpha had finished. Three months after the confirmation (in July) one of the girls went off to York University. In her second term, through the ministry of the Christian Union and St Michael-le-Belfrey, Christ became real to her, and she started to run an Alpha course! She later told me the Youth Alpha course had not meant a great deal at the time, but she could see it had been a step along the way.

When CPAS published Start! I went to a launch event and bought the pack. We ran it in two of the villages, starting with a meal, as in Alpha. Being shorter than Alpha it's easier to finish. Again, those who came (not all regular churchgoers) found it helpful, but I cannot say many became disciples. And this, I think, is the problem. People come to church, stop coming to church and start coming to church for all sorts of different reasons. All struggle with the distractions Jesus describes in the Parable of the Sower. In some hearts the seed falls into good soil and bears fruit. Alpha, Start!, Emmaus and the like all have their place in this process. So does traditional church and Fresh Expressions. Somehow, the Holy Spirit has his way, and he surprises us. One of my adult Alpha graduates who was confirmed (a married woman in her early forties) had been a lifelong atheist whom God picked up and literally brought her into church one Sunday morning. The saving work was done before she enthusiastically joined the course.

For nineteen years I struggled with old and cold buildings, resistance to change and reordering, diocesan bureaucracy and lack of financial resources. Small congregations

make newcomers stand out like sore thumbs, inside and outside the Christian community. I fear for the future of many of our village Churches of England (and not a few urban ones). Should we spread clergy ever more thinly, or should we close the churches. I honestly don't know. But on the Rock of his Sonship, and with his faithful followers, Christ will build his church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

David Phypers, 06/01/2008

Posted on the Rural Evangelism Network Website
www.ruralevangelsim.net

Added Comment:

Dear David, what an interesting article and insight into rural Alpha and Start. I was speaking to a couple just last week who had started coming to the village Church (Charismatic) I was running at the time. They came because they were visited and a friendship was formed. Since then I've moved on into a mission called 'Home Evangelism,' but God has wonderfully converted this couple. It was a joy to catch up with them, and hear what God has done - for me it was a reminder that it's not the courses that are important, but the work of God's Spirit. We need more prayer and more of Gods Spirit at work in our communities. This doesn't mean we don't use courses, but God is able to convert without them. Sometime a one to one approach works better, but it may mean training other to do this ministry too. I pray that you will be blessed and encouraged in your ministry, yours, Trevor Dickerson. 'Home Evangelism' (Outreach UK)

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