

Using Alpha And Christianity Explored - Minus And Plus

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For the past 21 years I have worked as an evangelist, in a number of different surroundings, and with many types of churches.

My first 15 years were spent working with 'Home Evangelism', a mission that has been involved in the work of evangelism, and training others to do this vital ministry. The mission itself has been in existence for 134 years, and was founded as the Christian Colportage Association in 1874. Its main method of outreach was 'door to door' evangelism and it's interesting to note that 1874 was the year that saw the founding of the Jehovah's Witnesses, and their main recruitment method has been through using door to door visitation. Over the years, for them and for me, it has proved a good way of meeting many who would never come within the normal reach of the local church.

Many churches find it difficult to meet and influence those outside the normal sphere of 'the fringe.' These are those who have, or have had some contact with a church through friendships with members, marriages, baptisms and funerals. Having once decided to meet the needs of this fringe, through events that seek to move the 'warm' contact nearer to hearing the claims of the Christian gospel, there is sometimes a vacuum, a vacuum because no other contacts have been made through outright evangelism. If, as Christians, we are going to start taking ground from the enemy of souls, then we need to be prepared to step out of our comfort zones and reach outward. It's a bit like being in a battle, where you can cope with having to look at the enemy from within the trench, but to win the battle, you need to get out of the trench, and cross no-mans land into enemy territory. I am not saying that those outside of the church are against the church, or Jesus Christ, but their ruler is. Satan is not interested in peoples welfare, as someone once said, but their downfall. Christ is interested in everyone's welfare, and their eternal destiny.

What is needed, in many churches, is not so much the odd, occasional, dip into outreach, running Alpha courses or Christianity Explored, brilliant as they are, but a cohesive, integrated programme that reaches people where they are, and seeks to put before them the wonderful claims of Christ. It is putting into effect a building project, a project that moves people from where they are, to a step nearer knowing Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. It's about moving them, step by step along the path of faith by showing interest, concern, love and compassion. This can be started with the people you meet most, perhaps in your work place, or those neighbours who you talk to over the garden fence during the summer, or those you meet out walking your dog, or in the local corner shop. Wherever we are meeting people, we need to take an interest in them as individuals, families, and friends. What makes them tick, what are their interests, when is their birthday, what concerns do they express, what fears burden them down. It is in seeing them as God sees them that we begin to pick up and hear God's heart for them.

Having moved out of our comfort zone, and taken the plunge into the new world, we can then, by understanding people, what will be beneficial in helping them find faith in Jesus. What many look for in the Christian is consistency, a life that matches the words that we speak. As the saying goes, 'I can't hear your words because your actions are shouting too loudly.' In this aspect we will all need the prayerful support of those in our churches, our brothers and sisters, those we worship with, or meet on a regular basis in bible study, or house groups. Mutual support and understanding is vital, we don't need those in our Christian community to be tearing us apart, but encouraging and building us up. We are travellers together, sometimes making mistakes, stumbling or even falling, but living out our faith, and seeking to become more like our Saviour. What we all need is understanding

and compassion, the same type that Jesus showed to those who got things wrong. We don't encourage paths of sin, but steps into the light, however small they might be.

So what of the new friendship, they are not just seen as potential new Christians, but a folk who we care for and love, whether they find faith in Christ or not. The 'Engel's' scale shows how some move down towards that time when Jesus Christ is welcomed as Lord and Saviour, but many bridges may need to be crossed, and much love and patience shown before that day arrives. Sometimes, in our eagerness, we don't give people time to develop and nurture seeds of faith. Like any new plant, the seeds need time to germinate, to mature, to grow and then to produce fruit. Our programs don't always take this into consideration. We are programmed to expect instant results. We seem to have crossed the tee's, and dotted the l's, so why hasn't this friend found Jesus yet? How long was my journey, or yours? As for me, I was brought up in a Christian home, where faith in God was understood, and spoken of on a daily basis, but for many this is not the case, and therefore the germination time might be considerably longer. Understanding, encouragement and sometimes space are needed before faith is birthed.

Having worked in a number of different denominations, and run Alpha and Christianity Explored courses, it is apparent that people need to be given time to express their thoughts, doubt, or unbelief, and if necessary, to go over some sections again, or to pause, and take extra time so that questions can be answered, and thought processes given time to mature, and form.

I have run, or been involved with running a number of both courses, in village and town settings. They are both excellent courses, and the format works for many. The relaxed atmosphere created by having food, and general conversation to start is good, but in some small communities, it must be understood that it could be difficult for participant to speak freely. A sudden openness and trust may not be forth coming. This is not only outside the church, but within too. In some cases it may be advantageous to encourage friends from another church to be in charge of the discussion time, this can lead to more openness and a willingness to think, and express feelings not normally forthcoming.

In the times we live, we need to take into consideration the fact that many know little or nothing of the Christian faith, and certainly the bible. This is often shown during a TV quiz when bible questions are posed and few know even the simple answers, - or simple to those of us who have been brought up to know the bible. I feel that Alpha fails to encourage knowledge of the bible, but simply expresses ideas from it without encouraging participants to look things up for themselves, and therefore to see the authority and central place it has in the life of the Christian. Christianity Explored should be commended in that it encourages the participants to read, to explore and challenge what the bible says, in so doing the Christian faith can be seen as rational, and firmly based on the teaching of the bible. In other words, we don't just believe any old idea, but only what the bible teaches it's self.

I believe that the emphasis put on the Holy Spirit is too great in the Alpha course, considering its overall length. He is an important subject, but not to the extent, certainly at this point, in the walk of discovery for the enquirer. Perhaps he should be give special treatment in a follow-on course, which could leave more time to give to Jesus, and understanding the bible. At one church, we found it helpful to use Christianity Explored as the main course, and then used some of the Alpha material for a follow-on course which we called Christianity Explored Plus. This second course lasted for six weeks and was more like a home group, and started with light refreshments only. On another Christianity Explored course, we stopped after week seven, and asked if people wanted to go on and do the further weeks. For example weeks 8 to 10 and the away-day material were run as a separate course, but you could only do those if you had been on the previous seven week

course. This again proved helpful, and also enabled the hosts to have a short break from the intensity of running the course, before embarking on the next group of weeks. Although it's important to keep to the materials produced for each course, especially if you are advertising them as Alpha or Christianity Explored, there must also be flexibility, the ability to adapt to the needs of those on the courses.

I have also found that by far the majority enjoyed the home work suggested for the Christianity Explored course. Some may find it difficult because of time or other pressures, but its benefits are well worth pursuing. It encourages the study of the bible, and the personal understanding of its message. Many have found that, far from being unintelligible, it is informative and understandable when given a few basic pointers, which the questions and articles in the study books give to the course member.

We must not forget, that time for many is often short, so the courses should be run to time, and participants able to leave on time at the end of each session. Having used the videos from both Christianity Explored and Alpha, and having done the talks myself on occasions, I find that people either love or loath Nicky Gumbels presentations, this is not the case for Rico Tice and his videos of Christianity Explored. They seem to be universally approved of, and of course, they are also much shorter, which does give longer for discussion time, or a shorter session altogether.

What to do afterwards? Well, there are a number of other courses which can be found through your local Christian Book Shop, or on the Net, but it is important that attendees are not just dropped and left to fend for themselves, but encouraged to be part of the local church, and involved if possible in it. Someone once spoke to me about how they had been treated. They were the centre of attention during the course they attended, but as soon as it stopped, because they hadn't found faith in Christ, they were dropped, almost ignored, as the church moved their attention to those who had found faith, or those attending the next course. Love, care, attention and time are needed to continue to build strong relationships, ones that might lead, in time, to conversion. If necessary, before looking for and building new contacts, make sure you can cope with the ongoing demands of those you already have. It may be that some church members are good at making new contacts, but others are better suited at building on and loving those relationships already made. Use the gifts of each church member in their most useful place, which may mean it is not the Vicar, Pastor, Elder who leads a course, but someone else. It might also be just the encouragement they need to see their faith develop. Many ex course members, who have discovered faith in Christ, go on to be good course leaders in time. They are new to the faith, but are also fresh with energy and excitement about their faith, and this can be contagious.

I hope that by putting some of these observations down you might find them helpful, and they will further enable you to be effective in making Christ known and knowable. I am open to be contacted through 'Home Evangelism' and have also had many years of experience in training for evangelism and have also trained group leaders for Alpha and Christianity Explored courses.

Trevor Dickerson, Outreach UK - 30/01/2008

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