



BACKGROUND DATA FOR MISSION

Providing Data for Planning and Ministry

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TOOLS FOR GROWTH

The ongoing decline of the United Methodist Church in the USA can be simply explained by more people dying or leaving the church than are joining. Stemming the decline requires work on both sides of the equation. A key factor at increasing those joining is evangelism, a topic which is interpreted differently across the UMC diversity. Regardless of how it is understood, most people are not natural evangelists and therefore not inclined to be involved in evangelistic efforts. Thankfully there are some tools available to churches to help do evangelism more painlessly and effectively.

One such tool is the Alpha Course. At first blush, Alpha appears to be merely an entry-level course in Christianity, but it is much more. It combines small group dynamics, hospitality, teaching, open discussion, a retreat weekend or day, and an opportunity to follow Christ. In recent years Alpha usage has grown dramatically around the world, starting in the Anglican Church in England. Over 28,000 courses have been offered worldwide with over 5 million attendees. One thousand Methodist churches in England are using Alpha and 1500 United Methodist Churches, mostly in the USA, have used it as well. Many churches have remarkable stories of people coming to faith in Christ and becoming active in the church.

Alpha is geared primarily towards folks we often refer to as unchurched. These include atheists and agnostics. Alpha has also been very helpful for underchurched folks. The Alpha course is an opportunity for anyone to explore the Christian faith in a relaxed, non-threatening manner over ten,

thought-provoking weekly sessions. Each session begins with a meal, often in a home, followed by a teaching time. The teaching can be done using videotapes or dvds. The session ends with discussion time done in an uncritical environment. Several of the discussion times take place in a weekend away. This can be done on a Saturday instead, but is more effective as a retreat. A love feast takes place at the end of the course.

In addition to the combination of factors mentioned, the likelihood of the participant progressing to faith, or in their faith, is enhanced by an undergirding of prayer coupled with the invitation for the Holy Spirit to make an impact. Thus the learning about the faith is accompanied by relational dynamics and an increased sense of God's reality and power. Alpha has been widely successful as an evangelistic tool. A great way to learn more is to attend an Alpha conference. See www.alphacourse.org for more information.

Although Alpha is used by nearly every denomination and thus has broad applicability, the diversity within the United Methodist Church may find some Methodists uncomfortable with Alpha's theological slant. Several United Methodists have collaborated to develop a similar evangelistic tool intentionally sensitivity to the UMC context. Andy Langford and Mark Ralls have very recently assembled *Beginnings: an Introduction to Christian Faith*, available through Cokesbury. The format and materials are similar to Alpha but are different in notable ways. *Beginnings* has less emphasis on the Holy Spirit and more emphasis on a process of

faith development rather than inviting a decision to follow Christ.

Another difference is in course content. Alpha course titles include, “Who is Jesus?” “Why did Jesus Die?” “Who is the Holy Spirit?,” “Why and how do I pray?,” “Why and how should I read the Bible?,” and “What about the church?” Beginnings course titles include “So, Is This All There Is?” “Who is Jesus and Why Did He Come?,” “What Happens When I Die?,” “How Does God Speak to Me?,” “If I Don’t Feel Lost, Why Do I Need to Be Found?,” and “How Can I Make a Life and Not Just a Living?” Beginnings has a few less lessons, shorter meeting times, and no option for a weekend away. Alpha teaching tapes/dvds are done by Nicky Gumbel, an Anglican clergyman whose accent certainly adds an engaging element. Beginnings tapes are done by Rob Weber, a highly successful new church start pastor and fine communicator.

Midland Heights UMC in Fort Smith, Arkansas had tried everything to grow beyond the 60 people in attendance, with no success. Pastor Tom MacMahon attended an Alpha Conference and decided to try Alpha. Church attendance has increased 50% after a few years but more importantly, many lives have been powerfully transformed. Marriages have been saved and many new ministries have been added at the church. “Our people didn’t know how to evangelize before, but now they’re inviting neighbors, friends, and relatives,” notes the pastor. “We have a totally different church life. It feels New Testament like. The people are different. They are changed and approach everything differently now. As a pastor Alpha has revolutionized my life, my ministry, and my church in ways I never dreamed would take place.”

Since Alpha has been in existence for over a decade, its impact is well established. Endorsements include the Archbishop of Canterbury, Desmond Tutu, Richard Foster, and Rick Warren. Many testimonies abound of people

with radically transformed lives. Some of these are noted on the website:

<http://alphacourse.org/runningacourse/tours/pastgusts/default.htm>

Beginnings is very new but has been selling rapidly. It does not have a track record yet but promises to positively impact the United Methodist Church. Endorsements can be found on its website: <http://beginnings.cokesbury.com/>

Both course programs come with many resources to help churches have successful outreaches. These include manuals for participants, leader training manuals, tapes/dvd’s of the teaching sessions, books to supplement up the participant’s guides, and books for the small group leaders. These materials run hundreds of dollars to get the first course run, though Beginnings is less expensive. (Subsequent courses can reuse much of the material.) Furthermore, using either program will require time and effort and leadership to do well. Both require a commitment to reaching people.

For those churches dedicated to evangelism, which should include all churches, but are having troubles doing so effectively, the Beginnings or Alpha course may be just the ticket. Alpha has proven to be very effective and beneficial in many settings. Beginnings promises to be valuable for many United Methodist Churches. Hopefully evangelism will see resurgence in the UMC now that these tools are available.

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