



Pastor's Update

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LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

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By Pastor Merv Thompson

"To all God's beloved in Rome (or West Des Moines), who are called to be saints.
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 1:7

Something new is stirring at Lutheran Church of Hope. Have you heard the buzz? While it would be easy to discuss many different ministries and "ahas", the buzz I am hearing has to do with Alpha. New doors are flinging wide open.

What is Alpha? Two years ago in an "Update, April 9, 2004", I described the specifics about Alpha. I am sure every reader remembers it well. But in case some of the pertinent details have faded, let me revisit some specifics.

Alpha originated in 1973 in one of the most unlikely places on the planet (a God thing), namely an Episcopalian (Anglican) church in London, England. Neither England nor Anglicans usually come to mind when focusing on spiritual renewal. This specific congregation was Holy Trinity Brompton, and the leader was and is Pastor Nikki Gumbel. Almost by accident he discovered that a particular program the church was offering began attracting non-members, unchurched folks, and so Gumbel decided to expand and adapt this program for people he came to call "guests."

Gumbel wanted this program to provide an opportunity for anyone who wished to explore the Christian faith to do so in a safe and relaxed, and even fun environment. Holy Trinity soon realized, as have thousands of subsequent congregations, that there is something about Alpha that attracts two kinds of people no other Bible study or adult education program has ever reached, those between the ages of 21 and 40 and those on the fringe of the congregation.

According to a recent survey, 22,000 people under the age of 35 attended the London Alpha courses in just the fall of the year. Contrast this with the fact that the average age of church attenders in England is about 70 years, not unlike that of Lutherans in the U.S. Since I wrote the initial article two years ago, Alpha has grown exponentially, now being used in some 32,000 congregations. Just in the U.S. it has grown from 5,000 to 8,000.

Interviewing two of our key Alpha leaders, Barb Crist and Lora Trost, I was able to try and understand just what is happening in Alpha. They told me that Alpha in the beginning at Hope did not explode out of the blocks. Several early classes roused only the typical faithful few. Even as late as five years ago, Alpha was on the margins of consciousness of the congregation, basically assigned to the intern, who just happened to be Pat Quaid. Pat recalls how he was a one-man staff for the Alpha classes, the teacher, the set-up person, the cook and bottle washer, the cleanup person, the leader of small groups and recruiter of anyone who would help.

But shortly after Lutheran Church of Hope moved to its new site, just about the time that worship attendance and membership began to soar, Alpha suddenly kicked into high gear. One major reason was that Pastor Mike saw the enormous potential in the program and decided to become the major presenter along with Pastor Caroline in the large-group sessions. Attendance almost overnight jumped from 20 in a class to more than 150.

Of course since that time Alpha has continued to expand; now close to 1000 people participate in a given year. Presently Alpha is offered three times a year, ten weeks in the fall, winter and spring. Fall and winter take place on Sunday evenings, spring is on Wednesdays. I asked Barb and Lora if they were running out of people to attend; after all if a thousand people attend the courses each year, that means most Hopesters have already attended. They assured me that there is no slowdown in sight, in fact in the present group it appears that at least half of the participants are brand new to Hope. Of course that constituency is unlimited.

The way Alpha is implemented is not rocket science, but something seems to click like no other previous program. Four basic elements of each class include a meal, a short time of worship, a large-group presentation and a small-group breakout. All the data suggests that younger adults gravitate toward experiential learning rather than the old "talking head" lecture series, and Alpha is unequivocally centered in the experience.

One of the key events in Alpha is the Holy Spirit retreat, which takes place about the sixth week out of ten. During this time people seem to be ready to hear about and even experience the Holy Spirit, and some very transforming decisions are made. I have run into many men at Hope who have said that it was at the Holy Spirit retreat that they finally "got it"; everything about Jesus, faith and grace made sense to them.

Alpha is scheduled each school year to follow immediately after our three major outreach times. The first begins right after Rally Day, following on the heels of the two major outreach events of Vacation Bible School and Taste of Hope, the second is right after Christmas when we have 357 services, and the third is right after Easter, when several thousand new people flock to Vets Auditorium.

Why do people come to Alpha? The reasons are many and varied. Some people sense they are missing something in life, some have deep hurts, some are looking for ways to get connected, some are curious about the Christian faith, some are invited by friends or family, some want to experience more spiritual depth, some want to learn more about the Bible.

One of the amazing things about Alpha is the number of people who have been through it who want to continue in leadership roles. At the present time there are some 50-60 small group hosts who are sharing the love of Christ, and then there are another 60 or so volunteers who do a myriad of work to make Alpha happen. Lora has organized an Alpha Squad, a group of people who are willing and able to jump in at any time and do what needs to be done. Naturally preparing for and administrating a program with 1000 people in one year is huge, and so the growth in volunteer leaders has been critical.

Well, what is new in 2006? Why the buzz at this time? Lora and Fritz Trost recently visited Holy Trinity Brompton to attend an Alpha International Conference. What they found was that the mother church of the program is very excited about what Alpha is doing at Hope. In fact it is becoming clear that Hope probably has one of the largest Alpha programs in the U.S, along with Hosanna Lutheran in Lakeville, MN.

What the leaders shared with Lora is that Alpha wants to move more toward a "teaching congregation" model of expansion, and Lutheran Church of Hope is seen as vital in this shift. In fact on July 22 of this year the

Alpha Iowa regional team will partner with the Alpha Twin Cities regional team to host a one-day Alpha Training Workshop. Over 550 regional congregations have been invited to attend this opportunity to help launch their Alpha courses well, or to receive guidance on how to make their courses more effective.

Also at the same time Pastor Mike Housholder has been invited to be on the national board of Alpha, joining nine other senior pastors (including his brother David), giving vision and leadership to the program. That will also tie us more closely to Holy Trinity in London and the entire program. Of course all of this fits very nicely with the vision of Hope to become a part of the renewal of the church and the transformation of the world.

Parenthetically, perhaps another reason why Hope is being asked to accept greater visibility and responsibility is because of a new book to be released this month. The title is "America's Most Influential Churches: The New Century, 50 High Impact Churches How They Grow", by Dr. John Vaughn. (For more information go to www.churchgrowthtoday.org.) Amazingly, Lutheran Church of Hope is on this list of 50, joining such luminary congregations as Willow Creek, Saddleback, Lakewood, Crystal Cathedral, etc. It is breathtaking to think that just 13 years ago Hope worshipped 20 people, and is now on this list of 50 most influential congregations.

Perhaps this is also why Willow Creek asked Hope to be a host congregation for The Leadership Summit, to be held August 10-12. We are one of about 110 congregations who will broadcast by satellite world-class speakers from Willow Creek. Last year some 70,000 people participated. Stay tuned for more information.

Back to Alpha. If you have not participated in Alpha, plan to do so in the coming school year. If you have gone through Alpha, come back and bring a friend, family member or co-worker with you. Also if you have experienced Alpha, become a volunteer leader. There is a buzz going on around Alpha at Hope. Listen and you will hear it.