



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF HOPE

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

925 74th Street ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ April 9, 2004

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." 2 Cor. 13:14.

Since being called to Lutheran Church of Hope, a congregation where the worship attendance has grown by 1000 in the past 18 months, many people have asked me to explain the reason for the growth. When I mention it is because of the Holy Spirit, those doing the asking almost always respond, "Yes, but." yes, you are not saying anything new, the same could be said about many congregations, including those which are not growing. Of course there is the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. But now tell me, really, why is the church growing like that?

So I explain that while there are a multitude of reasons for a thriving congregation, in my opinion one of the most important is the presence of Alpha. When I was a senior pastor of a large church we could never quite find the spiritual growth dynamic that we needed, although we tried. It was much easier to grow a mile wide and an inch deep in terms of spiritual maturity and depth. We tried Bethel and Search and Crossways, and numerous other resources, but none of them brought transformation to the congregation. Most of them reached only the core believers, hardly touching the less committed, or the fringe or the unchurched.

But into this huge void came the incredible blessing of a program called Alpha. I believe that when the history of this period of the church is written, and particularly when the story of Hope is recorded, that Alpha will be seen as pivotal to the spiritual growth and vitality. More than 800 people attended Alpha in the year 2003, and the response in the current year is expanding.

In my previous parish in Duluth, Minnesota, we started Alpha a couple of years ago in a congregation which is well over 100 years old, a place where most Bible studies attract the same crowd year after year. But at First Lutheran, Alpha had a huge response, particularly among the people from ages 21 through 40 and among people who had been on the margins of the congregation. In fact even though congregations over 50 years of age are the most difficult in which to see transformation and renewal, Alpha was bringing this into our midst.

The Christian Century magazine this past week had a very enthusiastic article about Alpha. Usually The Century, being primarily a liberal Christian mouthpiece, tends to devalue that which is embraced by evangelicals. On

the other hand Christianity Today magazine tends to do the opposite. But this time The Christian Century acted against type, when an article by Debra Bendis, a Century senior editor, gave a well-balanced and supportive treatment of the Alpha phenomenon. I would like to include some excerpts from the article, so I paraphrase:

At an Alpha training conference in Detroit, a dozen people came forward to testify to the power of the Alpha program. One couple had been close to divorce when they encountered Alpha. The course inspired them to salvage their marriage and become active in a church. A young man said he had tried various spiritual paths, including the "cult route," until through Alpha he found Christian friends and a direction that "fits."

An Alpha leader in his 40's talked about episodes of violence, about failed marriages and about the years of estrangement from his family. When he first walked into an Alpha course, he said, he was scornful of all things Christian. But people didn't get upset with him. They simply acknowledged his anger, let him speak and then invited him back. He did come back, became a Christian, and now sets up Alpha's ministries in Britain's prisons (80% of the prisons in England have an Alpha program.)

Alpha is drawing skeptics and seekers to the Christian faith and into the church. The genius behind the program is Nikki Gumbel, a 48 year old Anglican priest. Since 1980, this former barrister has shared his faith and program with over 5 million people in 124 countries.

The Alpha course originated in 1973 at Holy Trinity Brompton Church, an evangelical Anglican church in a fashionable section of London, when Pastor Charles Marnham decided to design a course for new Christians. When Gumbel joined the church staff in 1986, he noticed that unchurched people were attending Marnham's class. He adapted the series for "guests"—people who knew little or nothing about Christianity, and recorded it as 15 video lectures.

The Alpha course advertises itself as an “opportunity for anyone to explore the Christian faith in a relaxed, non-threatening manner.” According to a recent survey by the London-based Christian Research organization, 22,000 people under the age of 34 attended London Alpha courses in the fall of 2001 alone. Contrast this fact with the age of the average church attender in the UK—between 65 and 74—and you can understand the excitement many have about Alpha’s potential for fostering church growth and renewal.

Over 5,000 Alpha courses are running in the U.S., and about one million people in American have participated. (By the way, one of the first persons to bring Alpha to the U.S. and to such prominence was Pastor Dave Housholder, Pastor Mike’s older brother.) Alpha’s smartly designed web site invites visitors to Alpha sites around the world, or to register for one of the 40 two-day training conferences held in the U.S. annually. (One of these was held at Hope in the fall of 2003).

What is so special about Alpha? As an explanation of the faith and invitation to conversion, probably not much. Nikki Gumbel says, “Our society has changed. We don’t need to change the message but we need to change the way we put it across.”

A United Methodist pastor who is using Alpha for the eighth time says, “This course is a mission, a ministry.” Alpha is a great exposure for those who are willing to be vulnerable and say, “I need to learn about what I believe.” It is the first step toward learning something deeper.

What happens:

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| 6:00 pm | A supper is served and guests eat around tables in small groups. |
| 6:45 pm | Guests are welcomed and led in praise songs. |
| 7:00 pm | Hosts and guests listen to a presentation on topics such as “Who is Jesus? Why did Jesus die? How can I be sure of my faith? Does God still heal today?” |
| 7:45 pm | Hosts and guests break into small groups of 10-12 to discuss the talk and ask questions. As the weeks progress, they study the Bible and are encouraged to pray together. |
| 8:30 pm | The evening ends promptly. |

The program calls for a weekend retreat at the end of seventh week, with a focus on the Holy Spirit. At the end of the course a celebration is shared by all.

All this is no small accomplishment, especially in suburbs where people find themselves isolated and lonely. Routines of hospitality and fellowship that are key to church and community life once included Sunday dinners, church suppers and ice cream socials, but such events are largely obsolete these days.

A second plus are the presentations. People are absorbed, entertained and hopeful. Nikki Gumbel says that at one time he thought Christianity dreary and boring, so he says, “read the Bible for yourself. Look at the life of Jesus. Consider this invitation to know Christ personally.” His goal is to issue the invitation. “Get started. Recenter your life around Jesus Christ and watch what happens.”

A third plus is the ability to prompt people to talk about faith. People are able to respond, to push or pull against the Christian offer. Even taciturn church veterans can be induced to jump into a conversation about Christ. Leaders are trained to respond calmly and patiently to even the most inflammatory or cynical comments, to care for the guests and invite everybody back.

Is there a guaranteed fourth result? Are churches that use Alpha gaining members? Yes, says Church Research, reporting that British churches that run Alpha are seeing an average growth of 15%.

“In summary, Alpha is giving people a renewed sense of our dependence upon God. We have visible testimony that God really and truly is at work today, in real life, with real people. The kingdom is being built before our very eyes and in our very midst. That is the real drama, not only when God stirs an individual in a moment of conversion, but when God incites God’s communities to continuing transformation.”

An article well done. By the way Alpha begins again this coming Tuesday, April 13, at 6:00 pm. For more information, call Barb Crist, Adult Discipleship, at 222-1520 ext 125 or email barb.crist@hopewdm.org.