

# Alpha Course



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**Background:** This document is a set of ideas I've formulated about Alpha over the past several years. I was first introduced to Alpha in 2003. At that time Alpha was just breaking the three million mark for participants around the world. My first Alpha conference was at the Sunset Presbyterian church in Beaverton, OR. From that point Ron Roberts, the minister for evangelism at the Vancouver Church of Christ, his wife Joanne, Gena and I began using Alpha at the Vancouver Church of Christ. We began with two courses a year. Since then Ron has been running three courses a year, just like Alpha suggests. Since a number of Kairos planters are beginning to move towards using Alpha as a key piece of their evangelizing process I thought it might be helpful to write down what I have learned in my Alpha experiences.

**History:** Alpha began as catechism training at the Holy Trinity Brompton Church of England parish in London. In 1990 Nicky Gumbel took over the course, with fewer than 500 participants, and expanded it into a worldwide phenomenon. In 2008 there were over 33,500 courses offered in 33 countries. Over 11 million people have attended Alpha courses.

## How Alpha Runs a Course:

- 15 lessons over 10 weeks, meeting once a week, with a weekend away about week 7.
- A full supper evening for as few as one table to as many as facilities can hold. I've heard of an Alpha with 700 participants in an United Methodist Church in Kansas City.
- A complete Alpha program runs 3 courses over a year. Each course begins and ends with an invitation dinner showing the video: *Christianity: Boring, Untrue or Irrelevant?*
- Weekend away. This is a critical event, but one of the hardest to carry off well. Typically, your Christians in the course will not want to commit. It is the pre-Christians who will be keen on coming; they're developing significant relationships!
- Celebration dinner. At the completion of a course a major celebration dinner is held. Begin advertising the dinner at week 7. This is truly a celebration time, but with the purpose of Alpha participants inviting their friends to experience a small bit of what they have just experienced. They're charged up about Alpha, let them go to work! Provide everyone who comes an opportunity to sign up for the next course.

## A typical evening meeting: this is how we ran our meetings

- 5:30-5:45, gather, put on name tags and meet, supper in preparation
- 5:45-6:30, eat at various table groupings
- 6:30-6:40, move to video arena, settle people in, tell a joke, introduce the topic of the evening
- 6:40-7:30, watch the video
- 7:30-7:45, pick up dessert, coffee, tea and go to table groups
- 7:45-8:30, table group discussion
- 8:30, people pack up and go home (here's where participants can get cranky, they don't want to leave!)

You can see that this is a very intensive operation using this format. I have not done so, but I believe Alpha can be just as effective without the full meal, substituting a 15 minute dessert and drinks at the beginning and a second 15 minute bathroom break and drink refills in the mid-section. Eating together is an important part of the bonding process; so don't just throw it out.

**The Alpha joke is no joke:** When you gather people around the TV, settle them down and then begin with a joke. Do this every time; don't let it fall off. It's amazing how the joke time settles people and creates a good

atmosphere. It doesn't matter if you're a good joke teller or not. Keep at it and soon others will be bringing jokes to help you out.

**Personnel:** Organizing and preparing for Alpha is one of the keys to a successful course. Let's use a small course model that has one to two tables, with fewer than 25 people total, meeting in a home. You will need the following Alpha team:

- **Alpha director:** organizes the entire Alpha project which includes publicity, assembling and preparing the team, encouraging people to invite their friends, ordering materials etc. During the meetings the director acts as the overall facilitator who sets the tone, introduces the DVD topic, moves people from one activity to the other, etc.
- **2 table leaders** (one for each table), the director should not be a table leader. Facilitates the discussion
- **2 table helpers** (one for each table), assists the table leader to create a welcoming atmosphere in which participants can ask important questions.
- **Refreshment coordinator** (assuming a dessert and hot drink meal) who sets the menu, arranges for the food to be prepared and helps the host/hostess set up and clean up. Important point: pre-Christian participants often love to be involved in bringing food—let them!
- **Weekend away coordinator** (it's tempting for the director to take on this task, but don't do it). This person does all the logistic work: renting a facility, advertising and signing up people, organizing and purchasing food if food service is not provided, and all the other jobs that need to be done. You see why you need a weekend away coordinator?
- **Host** for the meetings, may be any of the above. Provides tables, chairs, TV and DVD player. Creates an inviting, friendly environment. If the director does not think it will lead to divorce, he or she can hold the course at his/her home, otherwise, ask someone else to host.
- Notice that you will have about as many Christians to fill these roles as you will have pre-Christians or other Christians who attend as participants.

**Preparing for a Course:** Alpha has a good 1 year calendar, but that's pretty long. The following are suggestions to get you started. You can order materials from [www.alphana.org](http://www.alphana.org).

- **Materials** you'll need to begin a course:
  - Alpha DVD set (\$179.99).
  - 2 50-pack tri-fold Mountain Top Invitations (\$7.99 ea).
  - What is Alpha? brochure for every adult in your church (.75 ea.), helps them understand what will be happening in Alpha and to decide if they want to be involved.
  - 1 How to Run the Alpha Course Director's Handbook (\$19.99).
  - 3 The Alpha Course Small Group Leader's Guide (\$3.99 ea).
  - 25 Alpha Course Manual (1 for each participant) (\$3.99 ea).
  - 1 Small Group Leaders Training DVD (\$39.99). Yes, but it. It's about as good and as easy a training tool as you'll find on the market.
  - Name tags for the first few weeks of courses.
- **Training:** Here's where you'll set the foundations for a successful course
  - Talk to your potential team members. Ask them to consider the role you are inviting them for and invite them to a "consideration dinner."
  - Consideration dinner. Share an easy, enjoyable dinner together, then assemble around the TV. Give them an overview handout, describe what each role will be expected to do (let's everyone see the big picture), what the commitment entails, why your church is doing Alpha. Then watch one of the Alpha DVDs to give them a taste. Set a 2-week time frame for them to get their answers back to you.
  - Training. Set 3 weeks of training. Divide the Alpha Training video into two parts. Run the evening just like you will run the regular Alpha courses only use the training videos as your video and discuss the video as your table discussion. The third week walk through the whole process, talk about the importance of inviting pre-Christians, pray, talk through ways to invite and pray some more.

- Invitation event. Two weeks after your training is complete run the invitation event using the video [Christianity: Boring, Untrue or Irrelevant](#). Have invitations available, course manuals for people to look through. Again, run this event very closely to the way you will run a regular course. This is the “come and check it out” event. It let’s your people have a chance to invite pre-Christians and to have a “live fire” exercise.
- Start the course. Start within 1 month of the invitation event. You want to give a little more time to invite other people, but not so much that people who came to your invitation event cool off and disappear. Keep the prayer circle tight and consistent as you prepare to begin. Let God empower the process.
- **Alpha cycle.** If you do Alpha as a one-off event, you’ll fail. There is a cycle to Alpha. It takes 3 courses to get a good feel of how to run Alpha effectively. The first course will typically run on adrenaline, but by courses 3 and 4 there is a typically a significant dip in attendance, energy and commitment to carry-on. By the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> courses you’ll find your stride and be able to make Alpha a consistent and major part of your growth engine. Understand, running two courses a year (spring and fall, let summer be a time for renewal and different, exciting events) this means 3 years of courses to get Alpha running well for you.

**Benefits:**

- Alpha is a small group hot-house. You never have to worry about how to start small groups because Alpha does it for you. We found our Alpha groups demanded to continue on together. Expect each newly formed group to last 12 to 24 months before people will begin to feel ready to expand their relationships into other groups.
- Alpha trains leaders in your church. It provides a clear path from initial participant and new Christian, to table helper, to table leader, then on to longer term small group leadership. You have proven training materials and a ready-made training ground to raise your leaders.
- Alpha can become the place in your “funnel of consideration” where people who are not yet Christians or who are returning Christians get to deliberately consider the claims of Jesus as Lord of their lives. They do this in the context of others who are also considering the meaning of Jesus in their lives. This produces a powerful, group foundation for a lifetime of discipleship.

**Resources:**

- [www.alphana.org](http://www.alphana.org)
- Alpha Converge conferences
- Regional Alpha churches, see website above.