

British Television Network Broadcasts Alpha Course to 1 Million

Political commentator David Frost introduced the special 10-part program about Christianity to a huge audience

Alpha—the groundbreaking course introducing nonchurchgoers to Christianity—made it to the small screen in Great Britain. It was already on countless home VCRs via the course videos, but recently it also became a weekly feature on a major secular channel, ITV.

The 10-part series on Alpha was presented by world famous media figure Sir David Frost. During his career he has interviewed numerous heads of state, including many U.S. presidents. According to the New York Times, his face to face with Richard Nixon in the mid-1970s boasted the largest audience for a news interview in history.

Traditionally sharp, quick-witted and ironic, Frost seemed to warm to Alpha, which he called “a phenomenon—an extraordinary story.” He was reportedly “delighted” to have been involved in the series. “When the heavyweight political commentator Sir David Frost—the son of a Methodist minister—accepts an invitation to present a new 10-part series on Christianity, it’s time to sit up and take notice,” The Belfast Telegraph reported.

An average of 1 million viewers tuned in each Sunday night to watch a group of 10 young people make their way through the course under the gaze of TV cameras. Their overall reaction at the end was, “We’ve all changed.”

Some became committed Christians. Some said they had started a “journey” to faith. Others had simply changed some of their attitudes toward life.

Alpha leader Nicky Gumbel admitted to Charisma that initially his team had hesitations about the idea of the series because of the privacy of all the guests. “Also, I didn’t know how it would work on television,” he added. So at first, they said no to ITV.

When the company returned with their program idea six months later, national Alpha initiatives had begun. It struck Gumbel that they couldn’t really say no a second time. “Here was an opportunity for people to hear more about Alpha, and therefore it would help the churches that were running it to attract more people. So we agreed to do it.”<

While filming, it didn’t really occur to him just how many could be watching the program. He was surprised at the impact it had, as people found it easier to invite friends to courses around the country. It produced “nothing but good,” he said. Gumbel had one person in his group who was there as a result of seeing it on television. And general awareness of Alpha went up by 45 percent—with more than 7 million knowing about the course.

There were some objections to the lateness of scheduling and some lengthy gaps between programs. And as a result of Sept. 11 media coverage, there was a six-week gap that made it more difficult to achieve continuity.

“It was hard for people to follow it, but I think the amazing thing was that it was out there.”

The terrorist attacks had a direct impact on Alpha in the United States. The U.S. offices were about 100 yards away from Ground Zero. "Our people were very fortunate to get out alive," Gumbel explained. "They got out between the first tower coming down and the second."

Alpha's North American headquarters is still in New York, but offices have been established in other parts of the United States, too. There are Alpha bases in Houston and Kansas City, Mo., and another is about to open in Boston. "There are more people doing Alpha in the States than there are here," Gumbel added, "so it's overtaken the U.K."

Alpha is a rolling program of courses and conferences based at Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), London—a charismatic Anglican church—and at centers in 130 nations. A magazine for Catholics in France chose Alpha for their main cover story in a recent edition.

Last year more than 500,000 people attended Alpha courses in North America, bringing the total to about 1 million in the United States alone over five years. The number is more or less doubling each year.

HTB attracts 20-somethings characterized by their "pick and mix" approach to spirituality.

"Most of the people who come to Alpha are aged 18 to 35," Gumbel told one newspaper, "a whole New Age generation who've missed out on God."

-Clive Price in London