

The Holy Spirit Melts Divisions In South Africa

In a racially divided community near Cape Town, a popular course on basic Christianity has brought churches together and begun a process of spiritual healing.

Tucked neatly at the foot of Karbonkelberg mountain in Hout Bay, Cape Town, South Africa, lies the small fishing village of Hangberg, home to some 8,000 people. Most of them are poor, colored, Muslim or Christian Afrikaans-speaking fishermen and their families living in low-cost flats stacked like matchboxes.

In this community, unemployment is rife. Fathers, school dropouts and gangsters linger on street corners, while mothers work in nearby factories or manage domestic chores as young children play in the narrow streets.

In the heart of the village is St. Simon of Cyrene Anglican Church, a whitewashed building overlooking Hout Bay harbor and the exclusive beachfront suburbs where young professionals build spacious homes and walk pedigree dogs. Not far from St. Simon is St. Peter's Anglican Church, a quaint stone building located on the Hout Bay main road. St. Peter's was founded more than 100 years ago as a school and church for fishermen's children.

The two churches share an unfortunate history. During the apartheid era, the cross-cultural congregation of St. Peter's

was segregated and St. Simon was launched in Hangberg.

“It was a Cinderella church, in a way,” says Jenny Frye, lay pastor at St. Peter’s. “There was always a terrible feeling of, ‘The whites get the best, and we get second best.’ It was very much an apartheid church.”

Today, the “whites only” areas have been removed and people are spilling into Hangberg and the suburbs. Many of the spiritual divisions and fearful mind-sets, however, remain. But in spite of the intricacies of South Africa’s racial relations, the Alpha course—a study of basic Christianity pioneered by a charismatic Anglican minister in England—has created opportunities for different churches and cultures to work together.

Jenny Frye, 61, and her husband John, 58, have pastored St. Peter’s since 1990 and oversee the Anglican pastorate for the Hout Bay area. They introduced Alpha to St. Peter’s and St. Simon’s in the late 1990s and have since seen people from all walks of life join together to learn about God and to encounter the Holy Spirit.

“We didn’t actually look for the cross-cultural thing,” Jenny Frye told Charisma. “But we discovered it was a by-product. [When] people are sitting together once a week, having a meal together for 10 weeks, it does something.

“We suddenly realized that friendships were being formed across the barriers. Some of the colored people realized that some of the white people knew nothing about God and that they had something to offer them. And some of the white people discovered that some of the folk at the harbor had a deep love

for Jesus. We all had something to learn.”

But breaking down racial barriers didn’t happen overnight.

“We arrived here in 1990 to find that the parish council consisted of an all-white membership and one colored person,” Frye says. “We were quite horrified. Initially, John started affirmative action, creating a parish council that had equal members: fisher folk and factory workers from the one church, and directors, architects and businessmen from the other church. Since then we have been led from one structure to another by the Holy Spirit, and at the moment the parish council is very mixed.”

Christine De Stadler, 42, grew up in the harbor area and has worked as a librarian for most of her life at the modest Hangberg library. She speaks Afrikaans as her primary language and participated in one of St. Peter’s first Alpha courses. Today she is an Alpha leader.

“Alpha has made a big difference in our church and parish life,” De Stadler says. “I have just seen people blossom. [And now] it’s not difficult for St. Simons and St. Peter’s to worship together. We learn such a lot from each other.

“When it comes to Alpha, there’s a balance. St. Simons people like singing, rejoicing and clapping hands. But the people at St. Peter’s are much quieter. On the other hand, St. Peter’s people pray, and they’re more practical. St. Simons people are more shy to pray in public. So it’s very much a building up of each other.”

Building Bridges

Hout Bay is just one example of how God is using the Alpha course to bring change and build bridges between cultures and churches in South Africa. Nicky Gumbel, pastor at Holy Trinity in Brompton, London, joined Alpha in 1990 and has been involved ever since. He pioneered the successful Alpha video series.

“The extraordinary thing is that we have seen a coming together now,” Gumbel says. “The Catholic Church, Anglican churches and Pentecostal churches are running Alpha. It’s amazing to me that they’re all saying, ‘We can do this.’”

“I think people look at the material on the Holy Spirit and say, ‘Well, we wouldn’t exactly put it this way ourselves, but there’s nothing we essentially disagree with.’ What we believe unites us is infinitely greater than what divides us. If we concentrate on the things that unite us and give that message out to the world, then hopefully we can have an impact.”

Gumbel believes Alpha’s explosive growth in South Africa and other nations is inspired and anointed by the Holy Spirit. “You can’t explain the growth except by the Holy Spirit,” he says.

“We live in an age of experiential spirituality,” Frye says. “The thing about Alpha is that we have the teaching, but we also have an encounter with the Holy Spirit, and that is what makes it such an amazing course.”

“There’s a lack of knowledge about the Holy Spirit, so there’s a need for people to learn,” De Stadler adds. “It’s wonderful to see how the person is changed from the inside out,

especially when they encounter the Holy Spirit.”

Mike Crommelin, national coordinator for Alpha in South Africa and minister of Goodwood Methodist Church in Cape Town, says that the Alpha course’s Holy Spirit weekend is a time to meet and experience God.

“We do teaching on who the Holy Spirit is, what He does and how one can be filled with the Holy Spirit. I think everyone has heard questions like, ‘What is tongues?’ or, ‘Do I have to speak in tongues?’ We try to explain all of this and remove anything that might be a barrier to them experiencing God.”

Gumbel believes there are several other features resulting in Alpha’s success in different churches and denominations. “Any local church can run it,” he says. “It’s based on relationships, people asking their friends.

“This is a very natural form of evangelism. People have a meal, talk, drink coffee and get into small groups. They have time to think things through. They have the opportunity to experience Christian community.”

Encountering the Spirit

Crommelin launched Alpha in South Africa in January 1994 at Trinity Methodist Church in Bloemfontein. This was the first time Alpha had been taken outside the United Kingdom.

"We had an amazing move of God's Spirit," he remembers. "Our congregation grew from 1,200 to 3,200 people, and we had over 2,000 people do Alpha.

"Our evening service grew from 30 to 900 people. We had drug addicts coming off drugs without going through rehab, and we had a number of colored people joining us."

Crommelin believes that Alpha has built bridges in many ways.

"In the little town of Dewetsdorp, most people speak Afrikaans," he says. "There is a handful of English speakers and a divided Christian community. It's a racially and religiously segregated town.

"Alpha brought people from all these communities together and built such a bond in that town. The last thing I heard, they were taking Alpha into the schools for black pupils."

There are also testimonies of healings on the Holy Spirit weekends. Crommelin tells the story of a 48-year-old man named Bert, who had four strokes and was left with impaired speech.

"He got remarried to his ex-wife earlier this year and felt strongly that he wanted to make his vows without this impaired speech," Crommelin says. "He went on the Holy Spirit weekend and was filled with the Holy Spirit. A person prayed that God would reverse the effects of the strokes, and today he can speak perfectly.

"The limp he was walking with is also gone. He now has full use of his left arm that was paralyzed, and his short-term

memory has been restored.”

Crommelin says Alpha also has impacted prisons and street shelters. “The prison population and South Africa’s crime rate are huge. In Drakenstein Prison in Paarl, Cape Town, gang leaders have come to know Jesus.

“There was this one guy who was on death row until the law was changed. [Today he’s serving a life sentence.] He gave his life to Jesus and now wants to spend the rest of his life telling people about Him.”

And that’s Crommelin’s goal: telling as many people as possible about Jesus. That’s why the Alpha manual has been translated into three African languages: Afrikaans, Xhosa and Zulu. Crommelin intends to have four African languages on video by 2001.

“In South Africa, the Holy Spirit is getting down to the people’s level, especially cross-culturally, bringing people together to worship and sing and talk,” De Stadler says. “This is just the beginning. As Alpha, anointed by the Holy Spirit, continues to build bridges between churches and cultures, it is expected to transform communities like Hout Bay [as well as] cities and provinces in South Africa and beyond.” *

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