

Churches Unite for National Alpha Outreach

✖ More than 600 churches nationwide are uniting to ask, Is there more to life than this?

The question, plastered on billboards, yard signs, buses and bumper stickers in more than 300 cities, is part of a national campaign inviting people to attend Alpha, a 10-week discipleship course churches began hosting this week.

Bear Grylls, host of the Discovery Channel show *Man vs. Wild*, also lends his voice to the campaign, endorsing the Alpha outreach in a commercial.

"I have seen so many people find a personal relationship with God and a quiet strength in their lives after doing the course—myself included," Grylls said. "Alpha is such a nonpressured and fun course, and it shows us how Christianity can be relevant and empowering to our lives."

Launched at the charismatic Holy Trinity Brompton church in London and popularized by its current vicar, Nicky Gumbel, in the 1990s, the Alpha course is a small-group evangelistic and discipleship tool. Participants share meals and discuss their questions about God, faith and Christianity.

Alpha reports that more than 13 million people worldwide have participated in the course, including 2 million in the U.S. According to a Barna study, half of participants make decisions for Christ or recommit their lives to Christ after attending the course.

Gerard Long, executive director of Alpha USA, attributes that response to Alpha's format, which he said allows people to be themselves. "That's how Jesus was with people," Long said. "He just loved them where they were. What we find is in doing

that, the wall, the barrier that Satan's put up ... that wall comes down. And when that wall comes down, they hear."

Maria Sachlis came to Christ through an Alpha course and now directs it at Truro Church in Fairfax, Va. Her church is one of 80 in the Washington, D.C., area that are leading Alpha courses in conjunction with the national effort.

She said before she attended an Alpha course, her experience with church had been dry and off-putting. "I had never been in an environment where I had an opportunity to explore the faith and ask questions and feel comfortable about doing it," she said.

Once involved in the New Age, Sachlis said she found the inner healing she had been searching for during the course's retreat, where participants discuss the work of the Holy Spirit.

"What was really making a difference was, I think, coming to understand what Jesus had done and what God had available to me," she said. "I was actually feeling that as we went through the course. The music was touching my heart in a way that the words weren't, and when I attended the retreat, I received a lot of healing. ... Something really was changing inside of me."

Steve Gartland, Alpha's Twin Cities regional director, said 78 churches are hosting courses in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, with some being held in locations as diverse as a Ford dealership, shopping center and sports bar.

"People are starting to expand out and get outside the church," he said. "It's exciting."

The Alpha outreach helped unite 175 churches in Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey as they worked together to advertise the course on the radio, in local shops and even in movie theaters.

“The churches that are coming on board ... have seen people’s lives changed [through Alpha] and have found this is an easy way to evangelize,” said Jacki Tase, associate director for Alpha Mid-Atlantic. “It’s nonthreatening for our postmodern culture. It gives people a place to ask questions that are on their heart.”

Long said anyone can lead an Alpha course, and the ministry offers training resources at its Web site. Alpha USA also will host its annual conference Oct. 20-21 in Orlando, Fla. Grylls will be among the speakers and will participate in an evangelistic crusade being held that week.